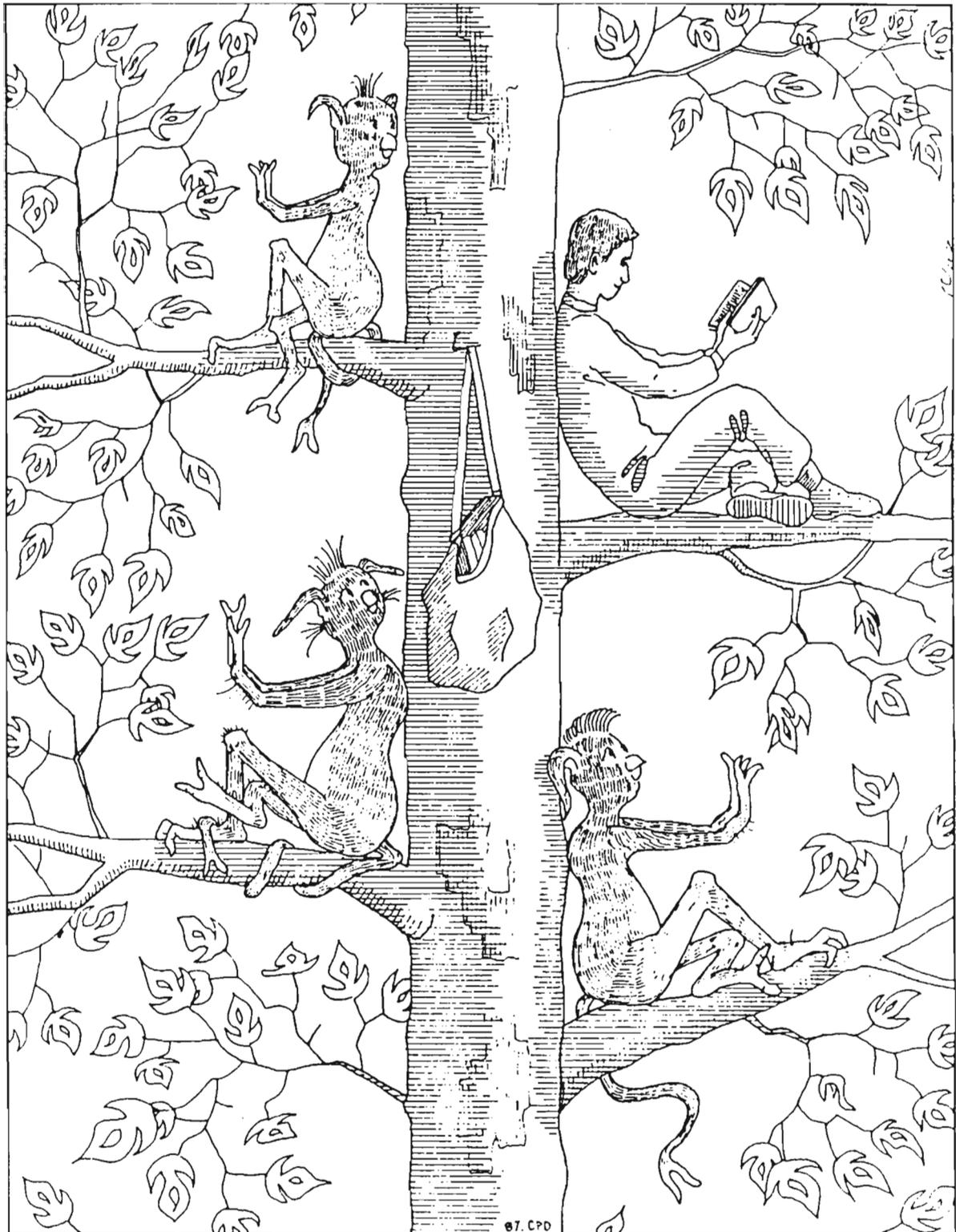


Paperback Inferno 71

The Review of paperback SF

April/May 1988



A British Science Fiction Association magazine 50p.

PAPERBACK INFERNO

Paperback Purgatory

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Contributions of artwork especially interior
art, fillers and logos are especially welcome.
Please write to the editorial address above.

My discussion of books in the last editorial
brought some response - must do it more often.
KEN LAKE wrote "I can't see what's bothering
you. 'Fastseller' and 'bestseller' lists
merely report the facts of the mass market's
impulse buying - take a look at the bestseller
monthly lists of Andromeda Bookshop and you'll
find that even a specialist SF/etc. organis-
ation sells far more of what you and most fen
would regard as crud than 'serious' SF. Lists
have nothing to do with quality: reviews by
informed readers are invaluable in leading
keen buyers to the paperbacks they will enjoy
- and there, you are doing a grand job..."

If the mass market doesn't buy, that's
because the publishers devote their efforts
to plugging and publicising the crud they
know will sell to the majority of uninformed
readers."

((I wouldn't really disagree, except that
large sales doesn't mean 'bad' as much as it
doesn't mean 'good'; there are some good
writers among the top sellers, particularly
in the crime and thriller fields. Yet it
appears that only mediocre SF sells in compar-
able quantities and the 'good, commercial'
stuff is as absent from the sales charts as
the more 'literary' range of the spectrum.))

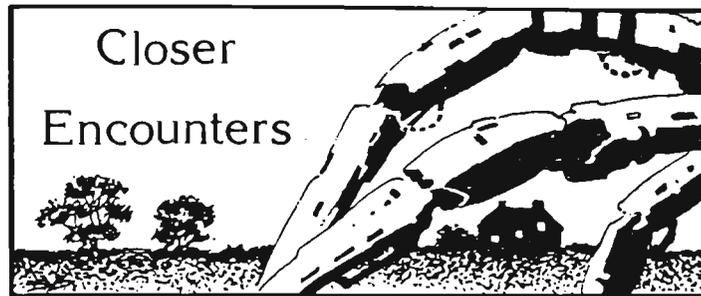
PHIL NICHOLS takes a slightly different
stance on the subject: "It's tempting to blame
publishers for failing to push the 'quality'
authors, favouring instead the derivative
works that come their way. But then when I
pass the SF shelf in Smith's, say, I can't
help noticing a mass of books by, for example,
Philip K. Dick. It seems to me that Grafton
must believe in Dick on some level to main-
tain a healthy stock list of his books. The
problem, I suppose, is that the support they
give is a kind of subsistence level support;
not the kind of massive campaign one might
see to promote a Stephen King or John "e
Carre."

Talking of Philip K. Dick, JOHN BRUNNER
writes with a correction to last issue's re-
view of THE PRESERVING MACHINE: "Alan Fraser
says that Philip Dick 'wrote comparatively
few short stories.' Compared to whom, I wond-
er? In the Underwood-Miller edition they fill
five good-sized volumes!"

And talking of filling good-sized volumes,
NICHOLAS MAHONEY writes a long but extremely
interesting letter-of-comment concerning my
reading speed((very fast)), the editorials -
"maybe a little short" - and the reviews - a
review-by-review 'reader's analysis' of PI 70
which is impossible to summarise but I found
it very useful to read. The main point seems
to be that some books could do with longer re-
views and others need virtually ignoring. A
fair comment: it all comes down to number of
books received (considerably more than when I
first started, by the way) and the space I
have to fit in reviews of them

first started, by the way) and the space avail-
able. What do other people think?

You don't, of course, have to be PI re-
viewers or well-known authors to respond to
PI. This editorial is, of course, a thinly-
disguised hint that I want to bring the 'Con-
tact' column back. Let's here from you!



Alfred Bester - - TIGER! TIGER! (Penguin,
1987, 249pp, £3.95)

(Reviewed by Paul Kincaid)

Despite the efforts of Gollancz and Penguin to persuade us otherwise, science fiction is really remarkably short of genuine classics. Most of the Classic Science Fiction lists are simply reprints of books that are good but hardly worthy of the status implied by the title. There are perhaps half a dozen books of classic stature, and here is one of that rare company.

TIGER! TIGER! has perhaps had more effect upon science fiction in the last thirty years than any other book. Bester dared typographical experiment ten years before it became a commonplace in the New Wave. He laid the stylistic and thematic groundwork that has been claimed as new by the cyberpunks. He predated those who like to associate SF with the mainstream of literature by paying overt homage to THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO. And in countless other ways, less obvious but no less real, he has probably had more of an influence upon more science fiction writers than anyone else in the genre.

Coming to it again after however many years, it retains all the freshness and excitement I remember from first acquaintance. The careful way in which all the social repercussions of jaunting are worked out still rings true, not something one can often say about SF of that vintage. The characters behave in ways that seem real, there are no heroes and likewise no villains but a lot of flawed people acting as their character dictates. There is action and adventure enough to keep anyone turning the page, but enough hidden depths for each re-reading to disclose new treasures.

TIGER! TIGER! stands head and shoulders above just about everything else that has been written in the name of science fiction. A pure and unadulterated delight of a book.

A LEGEND IS BORN

Legend - Arrow Books new SF imprint, has started from a favourable position compared to other new labels in that Arrow already have a strong SF/Fantasy backlist, from which to draw on in a strong series of original publications and reprints over the next year.

Legend's aim is simple. Century Hutchinson, who control Arrow, want 'to contest for the market leadership in all major sections of the fiction market'. The identification of SF /Fantasy under the 'Legend' label reflects the parent company's interest in identifying genre markets and accurate targeting of their books to the right groups of readers. Already, Arrow's crime novels are appearing under the

'Mysterious Press' imprint. Not the least strength of Arrow's marketing department seems to be the ability to come up with names which reflect the nature of their markets without being too specific. 'Legend' conjures up all kinds of imagery without tying the imprint too closely to one branch of Fantastic literature. It's a pity they chose to make an absurdly inflated claim for their launch title, but more on that later...

Plans for Legend involve the paperback release of some of the most popular American SF writers - Greg Bear, Orson Scott Card, and Harry Turtledove are among authors whose books should be on the stands right now - and a gradual release of the Arrow, Hamlyn, and Century backlists into the new format. As Deborah Beale, Legend's SF editor, points out, every 5 - 10 years a new generation of SF readers appears, and it makes commercial sense to repackage in a more stylish form books which have 'lasted' to appeal to this new readership.

What kind of books fit the Legend ideal? Well, I'm beginning to get the same answer from any publishers to whom I pose this question: an emphasis on literary values - good writing in the SF field - and commercial viability: upmarket 'quality' and sheer great entertainment. If there's a trend, it seems to be the breaking down of the barriers between SF and Fantasy: something which Terry Broome notes below with respect to Orson Scott Card's WYRMS.

Perhaps it's better to go back to the plan for future publication. There are several titles by Marion Zimmer Bradley due for reissue, as well as books by Tanith Lee and David Gemmell. Best news to me is that John Brunner's STAND ON ZANZIBAR is scheduled for April reissue. Far too little of Brunner's SF is in print and it's certainly time for this 'new generation of SF readers' to discover his futuristic SF. It will be interesting to re-read it in the context of the late '80s.

Mary Gentle's GOLDEN WITCHBREED will be reissued in August to tie in with the paperback publication of the sequel, ANCIENT LIGHT; and for later in the year, Legend plan to move in to hardback publishing. Fans of space opera aren't forgotten: two more 'Dumarest' titles from E.C. Tubb are promised for the summer, and the 'Venture' series will continue with titles from David Drake, Timothy Zahn, and Richard C. Meredith.

Arrow seem committed to SF - they report good sales of the genre over the last couple of years - and Legend is a sign of this commitment. There really does seem to be something for everyone in the forthcoming list. If Legend continue introducing the currently fashionable American writers in conjunction with reviving for the 'new SF generation' British writers like John Brunner, they'll have done a major service to today's SF.

Greg Bear - - BLOOD MUSIC (Legend, 1988, 262pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

Launching a new imprint with 'the greatest SF novel of our times' which so manifestly isn't doesn't seem the best of starts, but I hope you can see from what's written above that there's a lot of good to come from Legend. Ironically, the imprint's second book is, although it shares some of the same flaws as EON one which I have no hesitation in suggesting you read. Read it alongside EON: they are two sides of a coin, microcosm and macrocosm. While EON deals with infinite spaces, BLOOD MUSIC operates - literally - on the cellular level and has, I think, a much more interesting and original science fictional theme.

Vergil Ulam, a researcher who is brilliant and nerdy in equal amounts is working on a biologically engineered 'chip' and also - against company guidelines - taking his research further to develop intelligent cells. Ordered to destroy his experiments, he is eventually fired, but smuggles his culture out of the labs the only way he can - by injecting it into his own body. Ulam's reaction to and relationship with these 'noocytes' as they explore and adapt his body is entirely fascinating and really does approach the Clarkeian astonishment and awe at scientific development and the quantum leaps in imagination and metaphysics that are necessary to deal with it. Ulam - ambitious, but 'he had never been good at guaging the consequences of his actions' - is precisely the sort of naive genius who would set an 'intelligent plague' loose, and the consequences of Ulam's actions are in truth so far beyond what anyone could imagine that the story goes beyond 'disaster novel' cliches, transcending even the potential Shakespearian tragedy implied by Ulam's character and actions.

The territory the book does cross into is hard to describe without giving too much of the plot away, particularly as here we come into some of the book's weak areas. A couple of minor characters suddenly replace Ulam as the central figures, which gives a dislocated feel to the story. As the 'disease' spreads through a quarantined USA, it is impossible to reject a parallel with AIDS, which in the context of this story seems inappropriate. As we meet a few 'unaltered' Americans in a semi-nightmarish reality totally changed by the presence of countless trillions of intelligent cell-clusters in the biomass, we have to decide whether we are seeing apotheosis or tragedy. And this depends, I suppose, on your own stance: I have held both opinions at different times since reading the book. More damning is what underlies the progress to the conclusion, which is powerful and brings the events of the rest of the book to a logical conclusion but - while the second half of the book contains much fascinating speculation, what is actually happening in the plot reads suspiciously like an expansion of a short story to novel-length.

Yet at the same time, there are parts of BLOOD MUSIC which are almost perfect: the communication between the noocytes and their human 'hosts' (almost as if we had learned to communicate with the Milky Way) is as genuinely astonishing as anything in Clarke or Stapledon. There is a far greater sense of the infinite possibilities of space and time in this novel than in EON. On this evidence, Bear is still more of an ideas man than a novelist, but at least he is having those ideas. He's been called 'flashy' and I think that's true, but BLOOD MUSIC's flashes are, occasionally, those of brilliance.

Orson Scott Card - - WYRMS (Legend, 1988, 263 pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Terry Broome)

First, the bad things: the 'Nebula Award Winner 1985/1986' slogan on the cover refers to the author, not the book, there are prophecies mentioning saviours, the baddy lives in a cavern near the top of a mountain, and a pubescent girl called Patience (who frequently passes herself off as a boy) is in possession of a magical symbol of power (actually a crystal which contains all the memories of all the brains from which it comes and is a part). And yet another rape scene where the victim is possessed so that she was 'shuddering and writhing in ecstasy beneath him' p. 244. Why do I sometimes get this impression women are put into fantasies just to be raped. And if the woman is the central character, then the whole plot revolves around the prospect and implications of that rape: hardly an improvement.

The plot: colonists from Earth have all-but wiped out the dominant intelligent life-forms on Imakulata, the giant worm-like wyrms. Unfortunately, one of the wyrms has possessed a starship-captain and mated with him. From this union were born the goblin-like geblings and the Unwyrms. The Unwyrms has vowed to wipe out humankind by mating with Patience, King-in-exile of the humans (described confusingly by the back-cover blurb as 'a dangerous assassin, a dauntless leader - and a mere girl'), and spawn a new breed of animal which will quickly come to dominate the planet in humankind's stead. The Unwyrms' mechanisations have already brought about the downfall of technological achievement on the planet, so the story is basically fantasy, with SF trimmings.

So much for the formula. How about the execution?

WYRMS is a well-written novel of its type. It is unusually inventive and there is some interesting philosophical debate, albeit occasionally suspect.

The ending is refreshingly honest, and does Card credit.

I enjoyed it. Just.

OVERVIEW:

'SCREAMING AND WILD-EYED
THROUGH FAMILIAR STREETS'

Dave Wood looks at

THE HOLE IN THE ZERO
by M.K. Joseph
(Gollancz 1968)

Station Gamma Seventeen is a low, sprawling, grey slate, thatched cottage set in a garden banked high with wild flowers. Two framed samplers hang on an inside wall, carefully crewel-stitched in coloured wools, with ornamental borders of flowers. They say 'Chaos is Hell' and 'Hell is Dull'.

We are somewhere on the edge of reality. Beyond this point there is nothing.

'No space?'

'Not that either. Take away what you think of - it's not there - no probability, no possibility. So anything is probable, anything is possible. No time - all time. No space - all space. Nothing everything.'

The book is a series of interconnected surreal episodes in which M.K. Joseph makes use of traditional SF subject matter as a springboard for a complex exploration of the four major characters involved - Kraag the industrialist, his daughter Helena, her fiance Hyperion Merganser and Seth Paradine, Warden of Gamma Seventeen.

Kraag and company are on a day trip to the outer reaches of the universe and their visit to Gamma Seventeen precipitates a series of events culminating with the station encountering a random probability, some kind of temporal. They fall through this 'hole in the zero' and end up in randomness, becoming the helpless victims of an ordered chaos in which 'everything and nothing has both happened and not happened.'

Example: Martin Ironbender 11212 dreaming dreams of really driving his car slips from robot control to manual and finds himself in danger of hitting a young Seth Paradine. Ironbender 112121 hits and kills Seth 1. Ironbender 112122 pushes the emergency button and misses Seth 2. Seth 221121 becomes a geology student. Seth 2211211 goes on to high academic success becoming either a celebrity or a traitor whereas Seth 2211212 drops out and becomes an oil prospector and either dies poor and in great misery or reaps an immense fortune.

Joseph splits time line after alternative time line. His characters meet, don't meet, criss-crossing across a dazzling interplay of

ideas, written with an impudence missing from so many stories of this kind.

What Joseph succeeds in doing is out-vogting Van Vogt both in imagination and in the level of writing. He continually tickles the literary palate and in many cases in a few lines says something that a minor writer might take as the theme of a complete work.

For example in one paragraph the marketing of an elixir of everlasting life results in a cumulative overload of an infinite number of time lines,

the time-nodes fused and shorted out in soundless millennial arcs of chronokinetic energy; doppelgangers ran screaming and wild eyed through all the familiar streets. The entire matrix collapsed, became rigidly non-linear.

Each reading of the book has a curious and powerful effect giving at least this reader a different remembrance of the narrative flow almost as if Joseph's loop of eternity is actually a play within the closed book just waiting to re-enchant me.

One final puzzle: Joseph like Bester, Dick and the Cyberpunks has us 'running screaming and wild-eyed through the familiar streets'. What I can't understand is why Joseph who did it so beautifully is so neglected. Perhaps Gollancz will reprint it in their 'classic' series? Twenty years seems a long time for this book to lie dormant.

R E V I E W S

Ellen Kushner - - - - - --SWORDSPPOINT
(Unwin, 1987, 269pp, £3.95)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

I tend to be uneasy when I start fantasies which feature people with names like Richard, Alec, and Lady Mary Halliday, particularly as so much of this book could be a historical novel anyway, rather than one set in an imaginary world. But on the other hand I'm a helpless devotee of the amoral intrigue found in the plays of Webster and Tournour, and SWORDSPPOINT captures brilliantly that tone of High Aristocratic decadence and manipulative conspiracy.

SWORDSPPOINT's world is similar to 17th-century London, but more so to that imaginative re-creation of the city's mores and morals found in the writers I've just mentioned. Richard St. Vier is a swordsman - part mercenary, part entertainer - who is on hire to the aristocrats of the Hill to settle by proxy their feuds and duels. Noted as the most skilful of his exotic and dangerous profession, St. Vier lives with his mysterious lover Alec, a scholar, in the seedy Riverside, and the two are caught in a web of half-understood intrigue as the nobility weave their own plots and counterplots among themselves. The non-historical, fantasy setting (fantasy only in the sense that this is not 'our' world: Kushner writes more in the mode of Peake than Tolkien) adds, in the end, a brittle elegance to the ritual dance of blackmail, bluff and violence. Ellen Kushner's witty and tense writing underlines the almost sensual delight in arbitrary reversals which is the pattern for this kind of story. SWORDSPPOINT's artificiality is its own excuse, and its dark pleasure.

Garry Kilworth - - - - - --WITCHWATER COUNTRY
(Grafton, 1987, 236pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by K.V. Bailey)

This is a novel which explores interfaces between the inner imaginative worlds of childhood and the subtly intrusive, but soon unrelentingly invasive, outer world of the adult. Garry Kilworth refines his explorations to inter-relate the organic and the inorganic, the willed and the contingent, the living and the dying. His setting is the marshland between Stour and Thames. His time is mid-century, when, on the still primitive rural fringes of an extending technology, peasant ways and superstitions survive, while the Great War and its times have become folk-memories.

His characters, though strongly individual, personalise aspects of this spatio-temporal arena of the boy Titch's growing up: the crippled grandfather, ever recounting his leg-pulling war-wound stories; the 'hero-figure' uncle, ambivalently representing the wide world's wisdom and wickedness; Jackie, dark, vital, cruel nymph of a harsh peasant past; blonde, freckled Jenny, antithetical to her, and 'aspiring middle class' - these and others are the shapers of his young life. Those others include the emerging, unseen, 'unreal' denizens of the unconscious: the pond-bottom witches; the drowned, lost body of legendary Amy Johnson; and, but terrifyingly real, a crazy, lone beachcomber of the mudflats. The story climaxes in the great tide of 1953, after which 'the Witchwater Country had a new face', and Titch 'was sent by his parents to be turned into a city gentleman'. (It is a novel frequently in resonance with GREAT EXPECTATIONS.)

The narrative is neither science fiction nor (title notwithstanding) fantasy, though that 'planetary' sensitivity common to certain works of both genres pervades it, peaking in the many marvellous portrayals of seasonal change over land and water; and the description of the estuary catcrackers is allusively, even overtly, science-fictional. If there is an autobiographical element in Titch, the text may be significant in its indicating that both Wells and Bradbury once coloured an adolescent imagination, while M.R. James' revenants and Coleridge's mariner incessantly haunted it.

Not a bit of it. The books are, unusually, better than I remembered — and far from being twee, are hard, solid and painful, as well as being (as remembered) warm and, in places, joyful. I hope their republication means that Avon will also be reissuing Zenna Henderson's other collections, *The Anything Box* and *Holding Wonder* — and that if there are any of her stories yet uncollected, that someone will one day gather them together.

The People are people, humans who fled their planet which was about to break up, and who came to Earth in the 19th century. The People are *people*, with all the strengths and frailties of any other people, indistinguishable from Earth people except for their Psi abilities: telepathy, flying, healing, sorting (through other people's thoughts), seeing the future; though like ordinary people they don't all have the same gifts and talents.

J. Neil Schulman - - - - - ALONGSIDE NIGHT
(Avon, 1987, 240pp)

(Reviewed by K.V. Bailey)

Described as 'A Novel of America's Last and First Days', and originally published in 1979, this was, and has remained through recurring world and national financial crises, topical 'prophecy'. It is the fictionalising of a scenario for hyperinflationary politics.

Schulman depicts a United States in which the dollar has lost most of its value, gold and the Eurofranc replacing it in acceptability. The libertarian free market Left has gone underground. The story's protagonist, Elliot Vreeland, student son of Nobel-laureate Martin Vreeland, is brought from 'above ground' by way of a series of stratagems, clues and contacts, first to 'Aurora', then to 'Auld Lang Syne', successive conspiratorial headquarters, where he is recruited as an anarchical activist. Assisted by his girlfriend Lorimer, herself in personal revolt against her revolting father (who is director of the F.B.I.), Elliot returns to pursue a kidnap-frustrating, blackmail-challenging mission through the mugger and looter infested streets of New York. Its success makes viable a raid on 'Utopia', the F.B.I.'s Appalachian secret prison, the two seventeen year olds being infiltrated as saboteurs. They get their man out, but at the expense of a self-destruct generated carnage, an atrocity which helps turn the tide in favour of the 'Agorist' revolutionaries and aids their establishing an anti-statist regime — though the actual mode of achieving this has certainly something of the flavour of 'with one bound Jack was free'.

The juvenile protagonists, the passwords, the code-names, disguises and clandestine rendezvous, create a fictive atmosphere pitched between Sexton Blake and James Bond. It makes more for lively reading than for credibility: at least in matters of action and character. As for the theoretical/political assumptions and settings, they are seriously intended and request the reader's sober consideration. Beyond the picaresque narrative a didactic purpose is explicitly stated, for it would seem that the author is as much concerned to warn and prescribe as to entertain — though entertain he does, in high gear throughout.

Both books are linked collections of short stories, originally published as far back as 1952. Some are set in the present day, others in the 19th century, and one on the People's home planet, telling why and how they leave. Zenna Henderson uses a story-telling technique — the tales are told by the People to people — which makes the reader feel s/he is being told each story personally.

Henderson excels at setting characters in situations of conflict, either against natural disaster, or outsiders, or between each other. Her People are no saints; they get angry and depressed, they are spiteful and greedy and selfish and proud; they also develop in character within the stories and from one story to another.

Okay, sometimes some of them are a little too good to be true — kind, thoughtful, understanding, mature, sensible, unflappable. But the dark side of humanity is well-portayed. I will not quickly forget the Christian fundamentalists who take *Exodus 22*'s literally — "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" — who tie up and burn a family because they saw them flying and floating rocks around; or the small town where the People force themselves to shuffle, so they are never tempted to lift their feet from the ground, to lift; a schoolgirl writes in an essay:

"They found a baby under a bush. The man hit it with the wood part of his gun. He hit it and hit it and hit it. I hit scorpins like that.

"They caught us and put us in a pen. They built a fire all around us. Fly 'they said' fly and save yourselves. We flew because it hurt. They shot us.

"Monster 'they yelled' evil monsters. People can't fly. People can't move things. People are the same. You aren't people. Die die die."

Then blackly, traced and retraced until the paper split:

"If anyone finds out we are not of earth we will die.

"Keep your feet on the ground."

Twee? God, no.

Zenna Henderson - - - - - PILGRIMAGE
(Avon, 1961/1963. 255pp. \$3.50)
- - - - - THE PEOPLE: NO DIFFERENT FLESH
(Avon, 1966/1968. 221pp. £3.50)

(Reviewed by David V Barrett)

The fond memories I had of Zenna Henderson's two People books, last read maybe 15 years ago, when I was much younger, led me to think they might prove a little twee on rereading.

Eric Frank Russell - - - - -SENTINELS FROM SPACE
(Methuen, 1987, 227pp, £2.95)

- - - - -THREE TO CONQUER
(Methuen, 1987, 211pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

There's a kind of story which you can only refer to as the 'cracking good yarn'. They're not necessarily written by the best writers,

real, constant pain; Lona Kelvin may be physically intact, but is in equal, mental, pain. They find that, at first, they so perfectly fulfill each other's needs that the gargantuan Chalk can be safely ignored. However, as so often, familiarity breeds contempt and the two begin to fall out.

What Silverberg does best here is to capture the two with remarkable brevity: each character is crisply delineated in a single chapter, each a perfect vignette. Perhaps as a result, the human interest of this Sturgeon-esque tale threatens to cave in under the weight of a largely irrelevant travelogue in the later chapters, but overall this is one to stick in the memory for a long time to come.

Brian Aldiss - - - - -NON-STOP
(Grafton, 1987, 269pp, £2.95)

Reviewed by Terry Broome

NON-STOP was Aldiss' first novel, originally published in 1958. An excellent exploration of the generation-starship theme, it shows few of the signs of inexperience most beginner-novelists display in abundance.

The characters begin as parodies of stereotypes, but gradually become more believable, if still simplistic (though they avoid being wooden). Even still, the increasing maturity of the central character, Roy Complain and the people he meets as he travels from his tribal, jungle homeland of Quarters to the sterile surroundings of Forwards, shows an awareness by Aldiss, of the need not only to take his protagonist physically from A to B, but in his personal development, too. And that is something few authors ever learn.

Complain is persuaded to join the tribal priest (who wishes to take control of the ship) on a mission to Forwards. At first he does not believe he is on a ship, but as he matures and becomes more educated, his childhood beliefs are constantly challenged and revealed for the half-truths and superstitions that they are. Complain's quest becomes more than just an escape from his past, a breaking away from his roots and a search for adventure, it becomes a quest for truth, for self-identity and for a new way of life. The change going on around him is perfectly reflected in the change going on within him. So we not only have a generation-starship tale concerning the descendants of a ship which has undergone some catastrophe, but a personal tale of conceptual breakthrough as Complain's ideas of the world he lives in and the nature of what he is are turned and turned again.

The book ends with a two-pronged twist and a satisfyingly cataclysmic climax - a solid, delightful sf quest-and-discovery novel. No deep explorations of the human psyche that were to concern Aldiss as he matured as a writer, but still heartily recommended.

Anne McCaffrey - - - - -NERILKA'S STORY
AND THE COELURA
(Bantam, 1987, 192pp, £1.95)

(Reviewed by John Newsinger)

Anne McCaffrey's Dragon stories are romantic novels set in a feudal society that happens to be established on another planet. There are many such novels but none of them actually celebrates feudalism in the way that she does. Her endorsement of feudal social relations and values is wholehearted, she writes with genuine conviction, almost as if she were

chronicling the lives and loves of a real social class rather than of a fictional one. Here, for example, the young Lady Nerilka is inspecting the work of her father's household:

I checked on the laundry and linen stores, and suggested to the Wash Aunt that today, being sunny and not too chill, was an excellent day to do a major wash. She was a good person, but tended to procrastinate out of mistaken notion that her drudges were overworked.

Both the fictional character and the writer evidently share the belief that the servant class are irredeemably stupid and naturally lazy. Such attitudes inform much of her work and this volume is no exception.

There are two novellas under review here, one a longish Pern story and the other a well written but insubstantial tale of high fashion and high politics set elsewhere. The Pern story concerns the domestic exploits of Lady Nerilka during the great plague and of how she finds a place for herself as the wife of the master of Ruatha Hold. She finds personal fulfilment in his arms: 'I keep telling him I am happiest pregnant'. McCaffrey is without doubt the genre's answer to Barbara Cartland. Not my cup of klah I'm afraid, but if you like McCaffrey then this volume is a must.

George Alec Effinger - - - - -THE NICK OF TIME
(NEL, 1987, 244pp, £2.50)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

'A deeply meaningful excursion through the space-time continuum,' the front cover promises us; 'a unique blend of wit, philosophical speculation and cosmic slapstick' says the blurb inside.

Slapstick I'll grant; about the rest I prefer not to say. I can, however, just imagine that skilled and serious writer Effinger leaning back in his chair one day and saying 'Hey, wouldn't it be a great wheeze if I were to....'

And so we get what purports to be a series of parodies - of NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR, of THE THREE MUSKETEERS, of CHANGEWAR - which turn out on paper to be merely a parody of parodies with far too much of that damn Wizard Of Oz for seasoning.

There are silly chapter headings like 'Reporting for work in someone else's novel'; there is a consistent and wearying reiteration of comments about Our Hero's dumbness; there's the reiterated theme of the New York World's Fair 1939, and there's a 'home timeline' where everyone eats candies and where the real ruler of the world is The Man From Mars (geddit?).

Meanwhile we move from an initially interesting plot to a mishmash of under-developed ideas - which probably wouldn't have been able to carry any development anyway. On page 227 there's a real competition based on calculations on pages 221/3 - don't worry, you don't have to buy the book, or even read it, to have a go.

We are, mercifully, spared one of those Afterwords in which the author thanks all his friends for their help - this one is all down to Effinger, as, regrettably, is THE BIRD OF TIME, the upcoming sequel to this book. The cover design is simplistic and poorly drawn; the contents are the same. Perhaps the only memorable quote is this: 'She tempts me with unfinished smiles, but I am strong and brave and trust no one, because this is a dream and even my best friends have screwed me up in dreams.'

Read this book, and you'll know just what he means.

James White - - - - - STAR HEALER
(Orbit, 1987, 217pp, £2.50)

(Reviewed by Terry Broome)

Dr Conway, Senior Physician in charge of the ambulance-ship, Rhabwar, finds that his empathic assistant, Prilicia, has been promoted to his position. Conway, fearing the worst, goes to see O'Mara, Sector General's Chief Psychologist. To his surprise, O'Mara sends him on 'holiday' to the planet Goglesk, to consider a possible promotion of his own. He immediately gets into trouble on Goglesk, trouble which eventually helps him back at Sector General, the gigantic hospital in space which treats all kinds of weird and wonderful aliens.

Conway is a perpetual worrier, so when he's not got something real to worry about, he worries about not being very good at his job. Yet he is an outstanding surgeon with brains enough to keep the infamous Chief Psychologist on his toes.

White's gentle sense of humour pervades the novel, and I found myself smiling knowingly at Conway and his anxieties. If there is a fault with the two Sector General books I've read to date, it is that there isn't a nasty character anywhere - they are either victims of their past (in evolutionary terms) or too good to be true (even the aggressive ones). These are books I wouldn't mind reading in hospital, for White's characters are the kind of people I'd like to have treating me after an operation. Unlike White's hospital-station, with its unlimited funding and gentle staff, the reality isn't quite as cosy. But perhaps that's why I enjoy these books so much.

Rudy Rucker - - - - - SOFTWARE
(Avon, 1987, 167pp, \$2.95)

(Reviewed by John Newsinger)

Re-reading the 'Cyberpunk Classic...That Started It All' (or so the blurb on the front cover claims) was a disappointing experience. I had not realised I was in the presence of a classic the first time I read it and I'm afraid that despite considerable effort on my part the realisation has escaped me once again.

Not that this is a bad book. Just that it is a slight, lightweight, mildly amusing piece of fun that is quickly forgotten. The same cannot be said for a more authentic classic, Gibson's NEUROMANCER, that actually affected the way I looked at the world for a while at least, and still occasionally peers out from odd corners. In contrast, SOFTWARE is a somewhat limp hippy satire....but opinions differ.

What is all the fuss about then? What marks SOFTWARE out as special? After some thought I will attempt an answer, although, remember, this is from an unappreciative reader. What the book offers is glib, jokey, social and cultural criticism of aspects of American society, but without any real depth (so no risk of drowning!). The pheezer take-over of Florida is a good example with its vision of the Beatles generation grown old. Similarly, the struggle that is taking place on the Moon between the boppers provides an entertaining little excursion into the political field: anarchy versus totalitarianism. But that is all it is, an entertaining little excursion. The book is without any sense of danger. It is iconoclastic, but without breaking anything. This, I presume, is its attraction.

R.A. MacAvoy - - - - - TEA WITH THE BLACK DRAGON
(Bantam, 1987, 166pp, £1.95)

- - - - - TWISTING THE ROPE
(Bantam, 1987, 242pp, £2.50)

(Reviewed by Laurence Scotford)

TEA WITH THE BLACK DRAGON and its sequel have, for me, once again raised the ugly old problem of novel classification. Both of these books have quite clearly been marketed as contemporary fantasy, yet if they owe a single genre anything at all, it is the thriller. True, the central character in each book is apparently an ancient Chinese black dragon, and also true, both books have been endowed with a certain mysticism, but where these 'fantastic' elements occur they have more relevance to character than to plot.

Indeed it is MacAvoy's characters that make these books worth reading. As the events in both books become unravelled so do the cast, and in the second book especially, their relationships. And because the characters are so well drawn, the rather bland and occasionally incoherent plots are easily forgiven. Another good reason for making an effort with these books is their sensitivity. I suspect that what American reviewers have mistaken for 'fantasy' is actually MacAvoy's excellent metaphor and its application to describing the way that people react to themselves and others.

I will not spoil either of these books by slavishly regurgitating their plots, save to say that the first concerns a computer fraud, and the sequel, the unaccountable murder of a musician and the disappearance of a child. Both of these are investigated by Mayland Long (or Oolong in his Chinese form) and his friend, Elizabeth Macnamara. If you enjoy fantasy, then try these, although my final word is don't be disappointed when you find you are reading an originally written thriller!

Sheri S. Tepper - - - - - BLOOD HERITAGE
(Corgi, 1986, 240pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Steven Tew)

In BLOOD HERITAGE Badger Ettison discovers that his 'dead' wife is not dead at all, but has taken hiding with a weird group of succubus worshippers because she is being pursued by the family demon (her father, the careless thing, has allowed it to escape from its imprisonment). Enlisting the help of a woman with second sight, a Professor of Fine Arts, and some witches, Badger sets out to trap the demon. 'Badger', by the way, is a contraction of Bad Roger, which strikes me as rather twee.

I have never read a horror novel before, and cannot say that the experience of reading this is going to change my habits. In many respects it is quite a well written novel with well drawn characters, a good plot, and competent handling of suspense. But tales of demonic possession seem to be all too common, if the cinema is anything to go by, and even for someone who does not read horror novels, mere competence doesn't attract my attention.

I found the book entertaining, but I must confess that I wasn't horrified especially - I am almost inclined to think that the author did not intend it to be quite the 'chilling novel of horror' that the publisher claims it to be. But that is not so much an indictment of the book's success, so much as an admission of my lack of sympathy with this genre.

Vernor Vinge - - THE PEACE WAR (Pan, 1987,
317pp, £2.95)

MAROONED IN REALTIME (Pan,
1987, 270pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Nicholas Mahoney)

THE PEACE WAR struck me as a rather uneventful novel for its length, probably due to my having read the sequel first, thereby destroying the conceptual breakthrough aspect of finding out what bobbles are (YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED). The book is set many years after a brief war in which all the major military installations were 'bobbled' i.e. giant spheres with mirror surfaces enclosed them. The perpetrators of this were the 'Peace Authority' who have continued to maintain pre-eminence in bobble technology and thus an anti-technological status quo since. A worldwide network of 'back-yard' scientists have long plotted to throw off these shackles and their hand acquires its crucial ace in the shape of the progeny of the aging genius who originally invented the bobble. Between them, they invent the weapon they need to make a fight of it, the 'portable bobber'. An interesting and suspenseful conflict then ensues.

MAROONED IN REALTIME is by no means a conventional sequel. It is set literally millions of years after the first book, though there are a couple of characters from it!

At the outset, mankind is in danger of extinction, down to about 300 people. The bobble has been found to be a field in which no time passes, hence the characters have flitted effortlessly through time to this point, though not always by their own choice.

Most of mankind disappeared in about 2250 leaving behind only those who had bobbed into the future. The conflicting theories to explain this become a major plot counter later on when the complex intrigues start. First of all, there is perhaps the most bizarre murder in fiction. A key character is marooned in realtime and, in the absence of rejuvenation technology, dies decades later. She leaves behind a few cold 'leads' including a multi-million word diary.

There are only a handful of suspects since only one of the so-called 'high-techs' could have committed the crime. What we have then is a locked room mystery with no locked room.

The 'high techs' are those who bobbed out of civilisation the latest. The 'low-techs' can be divided into three groups: a bunch of Peace Authority people from Book 1, a clan from New Mexico, and the rest from hither and thither. From these is drawn our protagonist, the only living policeman. His job is to solve the mystery. Concurrent with this is the fight for control of the human race. Will they go on to create their own singularity or become extinct? The reader is left guessing to the end.

THE PEACE WAR is a good read, but MAROONED IN REALTIME sends the mind off on all kinds of sidetracks. Both are recommended.

more flamboyant SF writers cram their stories with 'impossible assumptions', many of which are shared, e.g. time travel and esp. Damon Knight refers to this practice as the Kitchen Sink Technique' (IN SEARCH OF WONDER, Advent, 1967, p. 154).

Garry Kilworth has never been particularly noted for this kind of 'wild' writing but, here, he has pulled out all the stops. THEATRE OF TIMESMITHS may not have the compulsive readability of - say - van Vogt's THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER, but it is ten times better written. The characters are at least half-way believable, and the background material is seamlessly integrated with the plot.

'Morag MacKenzie was a mind-prostitute who gave erotic thought-stimulation, without giving her body. Those who yearned for other escapades visited the Timesmiths, within whose hands time could be moulded like clay as they spun dream-visions. But Morag has her own dreams, of a world outside the ice-walls, a world of space and freedom, and she is determined to find it' (back-cover blurb).

That's enough plot to be going on with... Kilworth has a keen eye for the odd detail that can be used to good effect, dramatically. For example, 'Morag, though tall was a slim woman and she felt the cold (of the icy grave-side). A lock of her dark hair had escaped the hood of her toga and was frozen hard against her forehead. She did not move it in case skin came away. It was best to leave it until she could thaw it out. (p. 2)

The only off-putting thing about THEATRE OF TIMESMITHS is, for me, First City itself, the purpose of which - no, I mustn't give too much away. In any case, the Big Secret is revealed on p. 126, although everybody should have figured it out long before then.

Frederic Brown - - WHAT MAD UNIVERSE? (Grafton, 1987, 239pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Christopher Ogden)

An author who can write humorous short stories successfully cannot always be guaranteed to do the same in the novel form. To my mind, Robert Sheckley's MINDSWAP was a bit of a let-down (although I did enjoy THE STATUS CIVILISATION)

It was interesting, therefore, to receive this comic novel from Frederic Brown, an author who is best known in SF for his humorous - sometimes darkly so - short stories, and whose work may well have had an influence on the aforementioned Sheckley.

WHAT MAD UNIVERSE? does Keith Winton, editor of 'Startling Stories' magazine in 1954, find himself in after being on the receiving end of a massive electrical discharge? It is a realm taken straight from the pages of his pulps, replete with Bug-Eyed Monsters, Arcturian invaders, sewing-machine-powered spaceships, the obligatory interstellar war and, perhaps most disconcertingly, our hero's doppelganger, for this mad universe has its own Keith Winton.

This is obviously written as a parody of pulp fiction but, not being familiar with the subject material, it's difficult to judge how well it succeeds on this level. However, it is a pleasant read, especially if you can appreciate the gentler style of comedy as typified by the works of Simon Brett or Roy Clarke. Of course, if you are a devotee of pulp fiction, you will probably see more in this novel than I ever will!

One final point of interest - bearing in mind that this is an American novel - is the use of the slang term 'copper' for 'policeman'. Does anybody know when the emasculated form of the word came into common usage?

Garry Kilworth - - THEATRE OF TIMESMITHS
(Unwin, 1987, 185pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Graham Andrews)

H.G. Wells claimed that he owed part of his success to the fact that he restricted himself to one impossible assumption per story/novel: 'Nothing remains interesting where anything may happen' (Preface to SEVEN FAMOUS NOVELS by H.G. Wells, Knopf, 1934, p. viii) - a precept that has been more honoured in the breach than in the observance, even by Wells himself. The

Colin Greenland - - THE HOUR OF THE THIN OX
(Unwin, 1987, 186pp,
£2.95)

(Reviewed by Maureen Porter)

I want very much to like this novel. The language is clear and precise, the description and imagery effective, and yet several re-readings have not dispelled any of the reservations in my mind.

The narrative begins broadly, unfolding the lives of Jillian Curram and Ky varan through an unwieldy montage of literary snapshots. We see the gradual development of war between their countries, the disintegration of their own lives. All the signs suggest that they will eventually meet, on the territory of the Belanesi, whom each, in their own way, wishes to save. The meeting never occurs, Ky varan dies moments before Jillian arrives, and this failure pinpoints the moment where the nature of the novel shifts, from the broad to the increasingly narrow, dwindling away into a series of guerilla skirmishes and half-explained happenings.

Throughout, there is a sense of a much greater work lying behind the bare bones of the published novel, and a feeling of frustration as the reader wonders about precisely what is missing, and whether it would provide the answers to such puzzles as the whereabouts of Jillian's absent father. The lack of firm direction in the latter part of the story is also extremely annoying, and the reader too easily becomes irritated with the company's aimless wanderings and lack of a plan.

However, whilst this is not as satisfactory a read as one might hope for, I wouldn't dismiss it entirely out of hand. There are plenty of ideas, even if not all come to fruition, and the sheer beauty of the writing can persuade me to overlook the faults more easily than I might with another novel. Worth reading, but don't bother if you like everything neatly resolved at the end.

Ben Bova - - VOYAGERS II: THE ALIEN WITHIN
(Methuen, 1987, 344pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Christopher Ogden)

'Keith Stoner, astronaut; a man barely alive. Gentlemen, we can revive him. We have the technology...'

And so, eighteen years after entering a state of suspended animation aboard the alien spaceship first described in the original VOYAGERS, Keith Stoner follows in the footsteps of Rip Van Winkle and Buck Rogers and awakes into a future America. He is not alone however, because during his long sleep his mind has been invaded by an alien presence from the spaceship. And so while Stoner decides to set a warring world to rights, the alien tags along as a dispassionate observer. Meanwhile, the president of Vanguard Industries - whose Corporation was responsible for recovering the alien ship, and whose wife is in love with Stoner - is keen to obtain the secrets which he believes to be locked in Stoner's mind. And, naturally, the Russians are also interested.

VOYAGERS II is like many other books of its type - such as the lesser works of Isaac Asimov or James Hogan - in that whilst it is well detailed and competently written, it is somehow bland and lifeless, as well as being overly long, as if the prevalent trend in contemporary fiction.

This may be a must for devotees of Bova's books - especially anybody who actually enjoyed the original VOYAGERS - but contains little of interest to the casual reader.

Jack Vance - - FANTASMS AND MAGICS (Grafton,
1987, 192pp, £2.50)

(Reviewed by Graham Andrews)

FANTASMS AND MAGICS (subtitled 'A Science Fantasy Adventure') is an abridged version of the 1969 Macmillan collection EIGHT FANTASMS AND MAGICS (subtitled 'A Science Fiction Adventure'). The two omissions may not be 'sinful', but they are - in my opinion - regrettable: 'Telek' (Astounding, Jan. 1952), a near-classic story about telekinesis, and 'Cil', an episode from THE EYES OF THE OVERWORLD (Ace Books, 1969).

Never mind. The half-dozen 'survivors' prove that Jack Vance can write creditable short stories, when he makes the effort - which is all too seldom, these days. (In fact, some of his best novellas, e.g. THE DRAGON MASTERS, THE LAST CASTLE, and THE HOUSES OF ISZM, are book-length only by courtesy of large print and wide margins).

To me, these stories make up the literary equivalent of a stained-glass window, with only a few structural flaws to mar the symmetry. Vance has tried to impose a retroactive 'thematic unity' upon the volume: 'Strange things happen. Almost everyone has had some sort of brush with the paranormal...' (Foreword, p.8). In other words, psionics - which makes the exclusion of 'Telek' all the more regrettable.

'When the Five Moons Rise' (Cosmos, March 1954), in which an interplanetary lighthouse keeper - yes, lighthouse keeper - is plagued by psychedelic visions (?) and the strangely similar 'Noise' (Startling Stories, August, 1952) may both be described as space operettas, but they are enlivened by some striking Vancian imagery. 'The Men Return' (Infinity, July, 1957) is a sprightly ten-pager concerning the last rational human being on an Earth turned 'non-causal'. Vance himself says that '...it toys with a somewhat recondite (and perhaps not wholly defensible) physical concept'. Pick the bones out of that, if you can.

Anyone who has read the collection/novel THE DYING EARTH (Hillman, 1950) will recognise 'Guyal of Sferre', a picaresque fable about the Museum of Man. For those people who haven't read it: 'the time is the remote future... Misanthropic creatures wander the forests: grues, leucomorphs, deodands. The power of the magicians has waned; those still extant spend their energies in plots against each other' (p.139).

'The New Prime' ('Brain of the Galaxy', Worlds Beyond, February 1954) is an amnesiac-makes-good (well, sort of) story featuring the selection of a psionic 'Lord of Two Billion Suns'. It suffers from too much galumphing over-explanation, e.g. "...the test has gauged each candidate for the exact qualities essential to the optimum conduct of office," (pp.133-4).

Nearly half of this collection is given over to the novella 'The Miracle Workers' (Astounding, July, 1958), while the blurbs are completely given over to it. The descendants of starship captains, marooned on the planet Pangborn, vie with each other for supremacy - aided by their 'jinxmen', who possess psionic abilities indistinguishable from magic. 'Spellbinding' stuff, indeed.

These stories are set firmly in the 'fifties, if only because of their preoccupation with psionics - either implicitly, as in 'When the Five Moons Rise', or explicitly, as in 'The Miracle Workers'. But Vance had more fun with the then-fashionable 'psience' than most other writers of the period. In his own words: 'The stories... were not conceived as argumentative vehicles, but simply reflect my own fascination with the vast and wonderful reaches of the unknown'.

Jack Vance - - - - - TO LIVE FOREVER
(Grafton, 1987, 253pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by John Newsinger)

The world has been reduced to barbarism by the Malthusian Chaos and the Big Starve with only a few enclaves of civilization surviving. One of these, the Reach of Clarges has over the years developed a meritocratic form of social organization designed to ration immortality: only by means of excellence in their chosen field of endeavour, by gaining 'slope' do individuals rise up through the caste system until, if they are good enough, they become Amaranth and achieve eternal life and youth. For the great mass of the population, the failures, there is a terminal visit from the Assassins when they have reached their allocated span.

This frenetic world where striving to excel is literally a matter of life and death is already beginning to come apart. More and more people are suffering nervous breakdowns and unrest and dissatisfaction is spreading. Then the social order comes under attack from a Monster, Gavin Waylock, a renegade Amaranth, excluded from the ranks of the immortal but determined to force his way back in no matter what the cost.

First published in 1956, TO LIVE FOREVER shows its age. Its concerns are inevitably dated and it is written in a rather laborious measured style that lacks urgency. Nevertheless, the book has its attractions. Vance manages to endow the story with a certain grandeur, with a sense of moral purpose, that kept this reader interested right through to the rather abrupt and unsatisfactory ending.

Of course, the notion that humankind's only hope lies in the conquest of space had more credibility in the 1950s than it has today, but while Vance's solution might seem naive, his portrayal of the social order in the Reach of Clarges is worth a look at.

Tom Deitz - - - - - FIRESHAPER'S DOOM
(Avon, 1987, 306pp, \$3.50)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

Calling Tom Deitz a male Barbara Hambly may sound trite, but it's actually quite a good description of the effects of his books; conventional fantasy themes enlivened by that superior spark of imagination and creativity.

WINDMASTER'S BANE was one of my discoveries of last year, an excellent first novel of the intersection between the worlds of Faery and an American teenager. FIRESHAPER'S DOOM takes up David Sullivan and his family and friends once more, as the Windmaster's sister engineers his escape from the bonds he was placed in at the end of BANE and Morwyn, mother of a Sidhe lad killed in the previous conflict, uses David as a pawn in her revenge.

But there are conspiracies within conspiracies, with the possibility of a final battle between Men and the Faery realm hinted at several times. Unfortunately, the hints of a fusion of Celtic-Amerindian myth dropped in WINDMASTER'S BANE aren't followed up in FIRESHAPER'S DOOM; instead, we have a bunch of rather stage-Irish tinkers and although the climax is effectively handled, there is a certain detective-story slickness about the whole thing: a clever but artificial solution to a seemingly dangerous mystery. However, Deitz keeps his focus upon David and his growing into adulthood, and his complex cosmology - worlds within worlds, worlds between worlds, linked by the Silver Tracks -

is equally to the fore. This makes a readable and engrossing story, with characters you can care about.

More books in the series are promised, so Deitz will no doubt be exploring more aspects of his worlds. I hope he continues upon the track he set out on rather than digressing into an ordinary fantasy-adventure mode. FIRESHAPER'S DOOM is good, even though like most sequels it suffers from comparison with an outstanding original. I'm still looking forward to the next one.

L. Sprague de Camp - - - - - THE GOBLIN TOWER
(Grafton, 1987, 320pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Steven Tew)

THE GOBLIN TOWER begins in the kingdom of Xylar, where, every five years, the incumbent king is decapitated, his head thrown to the crowd and the catcher crowned as the new king. Ignoring the vexing issue of why there should be a crowd to throw a head to, de Camp proceeds to tell how a wizard helps King Jorian to escape his fate in return for recovering the Kist of Avlen which contains ancient manuscripts of long forgotten spells. Although the adventuring, tale-telling and versifying that follows is in the usual sword and sorcery mould, I found the story entertaining, not least from the way in which de Camp injects humour into the tale. Instead of sublime Good v Evil struggles, the in-fighting of the wizards and the politics of the imaginary world are mirrors of the hypocrisy, double-dealing, and grey morality of our own world. Not something I would give a second glance at on the shelves of W.H. Smith, but an enjoyable read nonetheless.

Robert L. Forward - - - - - STARQUAKE
(New English Library, 1988, 339pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

In 1980, Dr Forward wrote DRAGON'S EGG, and I corresponded with him over this and other matters; in 1984, THE FLIGHT OF THE DRAGONFLY appeared, on a totally different subject but still straight hard-core technological and scientific SF in the Hal Clement mould, leaving me a little less satisfied because the plotting seemed muddled.

STARQUAKE is the sequel to his first book - and, unlike most sequels, it surpasses it in every way. The writing is tauter, the plotting more assured, and the amount of super-scientific background less. Naturally, the two major plot factors remain the same - the humans are in orbit around a star which actually has inhabitants (not a mistype - it's a rather special sort of star, and very special inhabitants) who live at a speed millions of times as fast as ours.

The first book was expository - discovery, development, that sort of thing. STARQUAKE is explosive - disaster strikes, and everyone is involved in trying, one way or another, to save the humans. But it's a lot more than a disaster novel, for this time the motivations and emotions of the aliens are better explored, the results of their cultural development better applied to the problems the book poses, and all in all I found this a rewarding as well as a gripping story.

I am not going to reveal any more of the plot, but I must warn the intending buyers of two important points. First, they cannot get into this without the somewhat more challenging task of absorbing DRAGON'S EGG; secondly, they will run up against one

auctorial stylistic trick which I found infuriating.

In view of the temporal disparity between the two races, mere fractions of a second really matter. Your 'place in time' for each chapter, which may mean a space of a second spread over several pages, is indicated solely by a time readout, like this: 06:53:21 GMT TUESDAY 21 JUNE 2050. The entire book takes precisely one day human time, but unless you keep flipping back you may find it hard to figure out the timescale at all. I would have preferred a less scientific, more human indication like 'three seconds later,' as I had to work out that timegap each time anyway.

Compared to much that passes for SF these days, Dr Forward's two-part story is first class, its alien civilisation persuasive and fascinating, its plotting and characterisation above the SF average, and the deep technical appendix well over the heads of many of us. I'm sure.



Piers Anthony - - VALE OF THE VOLE (Avon, 1987, 324pp, £3.95)

The start of a new Xanth trilogy: not as many puns as usual and the best one is used twice. (Andy Sawyer)

Richard Ford - - THE CHILDREN OF ASHGAROTH (Grafton, 1988, 444pp, £3.50)

Best-selling but turgid and over-serious conclusion to the FARADAWN trilogy; not so much sub-Tolkien as sub-Marc Bolan, except that Bolan's wonderful meanderings were fun. Ford writes with a Message and his characters are called stuff like Snargg, Nebbeth and Perry-foot. Terrible. (Andy Sawyer)

Craig Shaw Gardner - - THE LOST BOYS (Bantam, 1988, 220pp, £1.95)

Novelisation of youth/vampire exploitation movie about the sharpest, deadliest gang on the Californian beaches, and Michael, who discovers their secret almost too late. Wonderful sleaze from the Frog Brothers, juvenile vampire hunters whose horror-comix warnings help younger brother Sam deal with the problem. Not too hot on plot. (Andy Sawyer)

Stephen Laws - - SPECTRE (Sphere, 1988, 254pp, £3.50)

Who or what is killing the members of the Byker Chapter? And why are their images fading from the photograph? The answer is perhaps slightly too conventional in horror-story terms, but getting there is marked by Laws' vivid plotting and memorable picture of a group of friends haunted by the 'good old days' of their youth. Could Stephen Laws be the Ramsey Campbell of Tyneside? Watch for his next. (Andy Sawyer)

Brian Lumley - - THE BURROWERS BENEATH (Grafton, 1988, 207pp, £2.50)

Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos is further explored in this patchy novel. Its rational approach to Lovecraft's pantheon (concentrating on the science-fictional rather than religious interpretations of the Great Old Ones) contrasts oddly with attempts to capture the Master's hallucinatory terror. Recommended to Mythos

completists; others better check out their attitudes to Lovecraft before deciding to buy it. (Andy Sawyer)

Anne Maxwell - - FIRE DANCER (Orbit, 1987, 203pp, £2.50)

A fire-wielding woman, looking for a mate to continue her race, has plenty of fiery embraces with a furry man whilst trying to escape (as part of a variety act) from slave-lords of the planet Loo. (Terry Broome)

Ed Naha - - ROBOCOP (Corgi, 1988, 189pp, (£1.95)

Novelisation of the film about a cyborg cop in near-future Detroit; a cross between Judge Dredd and Marvel's Deathlok of a few years back. Plenty of violent action but - when the focus is on the resurrected Murphy - some moving moments. Unoriginal, but worth a look. (Andy Sawyer)

John Russo - - INHUMAN (Grafton, 1987, 223pp, £2.50)

An old woman babbles 'snakes are coming to kill us.' A gang of terrorists in a hijacked plane suffer brain-damage when the cabin is depressurised and the reptilian urges of the primitive brain are let loose. Gory cover, taut and well-written contents with more than just violence. (Andy Sawyer)

Susan Schwartz - - THE WOMAN OF FLOWERS (Pan, 1987, 294pp, £2.95)

Continues the alternative-history of BYZANTIUM'S CROWN, 1000 years after Antony and Cleopatra defeated Octavian and founded an empire centred on Byzantium. In the first volume Marris regained the usurped throne; now the focus is on Alexa, his sister and co-heir, who fled north and west to Celtic Prydain. There's a clever use of 'alternative' Arthurian legend (no Roman influence, of course, to form quite the Arthur we know). Altogether a good mix of history, allohistory and a touch of sword-and-sorcery: occasionally sentimental, but vivid. A fine story. (Andy Sawyer)

Guy N. Smith - - CRABS: THE HUMAN SACRIFICE (N.E.L., 1988, 171pp, £1.95)

Smith's famous man-eating crabs meet loony animal rights activists. Result: bloodshed and kinky sex. Rather more of the former. (Andy Sawyer)

Jon Sutherland & Simon Farrell - - THE CITY OF SHADOWS 1 & 2 (Magnet, 1987, £1.95@)

Double(volume)-handed game book in which one player is the Prince and another the Thief. Usual format, but allows for some character and exercise for the imagination. We enjoyed it! (Andy Sawyer)

Chet Williamson - - SOULSTORM (Headline, 1987, 311pp, £2.95)

A standard haunted house tale told with a few imaginative flourishes and a fast-paced narrative. Fairly entertaining pulp horror. (Colin Bird)

Jonathan Wylie - - THE MAGE-BORN CHILD (Corgi, 1988, 350pp, £2.95)

Conclusion of 'Servants of Ark' trilogy set in an island world similar to Earthsea: readable, but poorly structured. The first part detailing the story of Yve and her dragon-familiar from another dimension is much better than the final-battle-against-Dark-Lord conclusion. If you've read and enjoyed the first two, you'll like this. (Andy Sawyer)

"Upon the rack in print"

ANALOG and ISAAC ASIMOV'S
SF MAGAZINE, MARCH 1988

Reviewed by Edward James

Only two new issues had reached me by the deadline so this is, for once, going to be a short review. Indeed, so little of note appeared in *Analog* that I am tempted to leave it to one side altogether. However, duty... The lead story was Ben Bova's "Water Rite", a very straightforward yarn of an environmental hit force, acting against a Libyan plan to drain the Saharan aquifer. Politics: basic; suspense: nil. It was, however, more readable than the other two longer stories, by Paul Ash and Elizabeth Moon. The best fiction was actually the two shortest stories: a neat little robot tale from J.O. Jeppson, just to show that it isn't only husband Isaac who can do it; and Tobias Grace (who?) with "The Collector's Guide", in which a canny Earthman primitive on a long-lost colony planet manages to put one across a succession of alien antique collectors. It sounds silly (and, indeed, *is* silly), but nevertheless it is wittily told, and had one or two striking images.

The longest *Asimov's* story was another in the line of Harry Turtledove's alternative history stories (see previous reviews), and one of the least successful. His sim v. North American pioneer stories were interesting and thought-provoking; here he is just manipulating his sims to make some obvious points about medical research on animals in the AIDS-ridden '80s — the only link with the earlier stories is a character who purports to be the great-great-granddaughter of a previous protagonist. But this issue does contain some good stories. There is a haunting short from Jane Yolen, "The Quiet Monk", about the visit of a mysterious stranger to the abbey of Glastonbury in 1191. He reveals himself to be Lancelot, and conducts the excavation which led to the discovery of the skeletons of Arthur and Guinevere. (In fact, of course, this discovery was a publicity stunt designed to recover the abbey's fortunes after a disastrous fire; later in the Middle Ages the Glastonbury monks managed to 'discover' the bodies of most of the saints of Britain, and had to move on to higher inventions, like that of Joseph of Arimathea. End of pedantic aside.) Melanie Tem offers a very delicately written story of the eerie relationship between mother and daughter, in "Chameleon". Thomas Wylde's "The Cage of Pain" is an effective and original variation on the old one about the implantation of electronic inhibitors in a criminal's brain. Finally, the cover story (the cover is simple and stylised but, graphically, rather striking): Jack McDevitt's "Sunrise". Set in the same deftly painted, high-class but perfectly conventional space opera universe as his "Dutchman" (February 1987), with a world, plausibly and temporarily, inhabited by just two people, it has a character you begin to believe in, some real suspense, and a good old-fashioned moral dilemma. No great advance on Golden Age sf, save in its craftsmanship, perhaps, but McDevitt is surely someone worth watching.

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, November 1987.

(Reviewed by Richmond Hunt)

Alice Sheldon/James Tiptree is sadly no longer with us. From private comments now published in various obituaries it seems she did not easily become such an outstanding lady but had to battle to overcome what she felt were the inherent frustrations and pessimism of

Life. Her best fiction contained that highly personal element of estrangement, despair, and yearning to understand the human condition. All this brings us to 'In Midst of Life', Tiptree's last story. It concerns Amory Guildford, a man who finds life to be at an end even before he is dead. He suffers an overpowering loss of purpose, commits suicide, then goes on to discover an afterlife where you may find enlightenment you may just find more uncertainty and fear. Considering the circumstances of Sheldon's own demise Amory is certainly the author, thinly disguised; both people whose lives have lost meaning, who see little point in going on. The story is not a Tiptree classic, but Alice Sheldon has given us one last look into her soul and left us her tragic, yet strangely optimistic epitaph.

Ursula K. LeGuin also contributes to this month's stranger-in-a-strange-land syndrome, with the novelet 'Buffalo Gals Won't You Come Out Tonight'. All is not fully explained, but a young girl, sole survivor of a plane crash, appears to find herself living with the gods or spirits of the American Indians. They are beings/people with the habits, mannerisms and, when required, shapes of the wild animals. These 'old' people are mutable, immortal, and perplexing, although perhaps more so to British readers than Americans.

In the end we find out if 'Gal' returns to her own kind or joins Coyote, Horse and the others, becoming the resident archetype of her 'new' people. Another excellent story from LeGuin, making sense of the Barclay Shaw cover, right down to the misalignment of Gal's eyes.

The other novelet in this issue is 'Conspiracy of Noise' by Paul Di Filippo, a relatively new writer. Howie, something of a professional drop-out, obtains a job as a messenger for a company which deals in information. Any information, regardless of source, truth or importance. But all communications, no matter how trivial or trivialised, are manipulative and United Illuminating has its own goals encoded in Howie's messages and the story itself.

There are four shorter works: Christopher Gilbert comes up with a new way to strain a relationship until it breaks in 'Love at the 99th Percentile'; 'Master of the Sun, by Martha Soukup, concerns a jilted lassy bioengineer and her pheromonal revenge on an experience womaniser; and 'Lunch at Etienne's' by Nancy Etchemendy chronicles a regular engagement kept, despite the end of civilisation, by a woman retreated into a world of her own.

Lastly, there's James Patrick Kelly's 'Daemon', a fiction (?) hard to categorise. No dislocations for the cast of this story; a writer called J.P. Kelly and his old friend meeting at an SF convention. No, the frustrations are mainly left for the poor reader, who can't see any SF, and little fantasy. Kelly has presumably slipped this into the magazine on his name and one small 'fantastic' scene. It's satisfactory but unfortunately fits uneasily with the rest of the contents.

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, December 1987.

(Reviewed by Richmond Hunt)

It is a sad fact of life that authors produce brilliant novels and stories only on an occasional basis. Everyone who has achieved acclaim for this or that 'outstanding work of fiction' has also written a turkey, or at least several pieces of stunning mediocrity. But what about the magazine editor? Is he prone to similar lapses? He has hundreds of authors to choose from. Surely he can weed out the poorer stories and print the best, gently prodding the underachievers with a rejection slip.

Well, even an editor can have an off day,

or find himself with nothing of excellence on his hands. December's F&SF is an indicator that Edward Ferman is in such a predicament, and I find myself unable to enthuse about much of its contents.

'Extras' by Robert Charles Wilson is the only story with any great substance. It is a contemporary tale in which two people are tempted by the glamour of Hollywood to judge their own mundane lives. Illusions are shattered. Illusions are retained. No one wins, although the wisest manage to break even in this little game of life.

Kenneth W. Ledbetter's 'The Canyons of Ariel' is the story of the first contact with (justifiably) photophobic aliens. An unstable crew member jeopardises the mission, but proves eventually to be a useful channel for communication. This is only Ledbetter's third published story, and his style, though improving, is still too old-fashioned to instill the tale with much life.

In 'Another Dead Grandfather', George Effinger wonders what is to transpire if the past is generally immutable, but locally and temporarily variable. Time travellers can change anything, but nothing really alters in the long run. Effinger uses this premise to solve The Grandfather Paradox, and to show us a psychopathic time traveller on 'holiday', sadiistically interfering with the lives of people in her past.

According to John Shirley there is a new diversion for the rich. Heaven is a real place and a machine has been invented which allows you to holiday in this new dimension. The tale is 'Ticket to Heaven', but unfortunately for the ordinary people, due to sympathetic 'magic' our Earth becomes more like hell the more tourists who jump across. I wonder why all this seemed so relevant?

The rest of the contents this month are 'The Cobbler' by Roger Robert Lovin - a battle of wits between a professional thief and a shoemaker of mythological origins; 'Obsolete Skill' (Charles Sheffield); 'In Videao Veritas' (Larry Tritten); and 'Delivery' (Michael Shea). All I can say of the last three is that they suffer from incomprehensibility. Each fails to have a satisfying or logical conclusion, mainly due to their lack of necessary background detail. What's even worse when the fiction is disappointing is to discover that two of the regular columns - 'Harlan Ellison's Watching' and Algis Budrys on books - are missing. Luckily it's only a temporary fault, but they have both carried over from their fiction their own entertaining and informative styles, and are badly needed to keep the F&SF devotee functioning for another month.

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, January 1988

(Reviewed by Richmond Hunt)

'And Lo! in the first month there shalt be historical fiction, yea much thereof.'

Thus spake the great editor whilst shuffling off to his newly acquired local council seat. Some of this history comes to us in the standard SF guise of alternative worlds, some as colourful background, and some via time-tripping protagonists.

Let's start with the duds and work up. The shorter fiction this month is mainly inconsequential. First there is 'The Highest Authority of All', a very silly story involving an appeal to end a Superpower disagreement by consulting the wisest man on Earth, who turns out to be... Judge Wapner. WHO? You may well ask! I suspect this is a fictional American TV character, but here, as has happened before, we British are lost while the natives

roll about at some cultural in-joke.

Complimenting this is Reginald Bretnor's silly fantasy 'Wedding Present'. Pratchett, De Camp, Morressy, and indeed Bretnor himself have all demonstrated over the years the potential for comedy inherent in the fantasy genre; trouble is there's also plenty of scope to mess up the humour. Bretnor's piece, a mildly pornographic *I Dream Of Jeannie*, is such a mess. Perhaps we're all a bit too touchy about our sex lives, but I doubt many will find this amusing.

But on to the better fiction. 'Blues and the Abstract Truth', by Dann and Malzberg, is a slight but chilling tale of a man who loses twenty years in the middle of his life. The story is a comment on those moments of frisson (and I use the word fully aware of its French derivation 'shiver') we all have where we wonder what has happened to our lives between NOW and, say, ten years ago, when we had such wonderful aspirations. Frightening thoughts!

At least Pat Cadigan has been working on something of substance at the same time as the limp vignette 'Headset' (which has just appeared in OMNI): a novelet entitled 'Two'. It's really a study in relationships between an emotionally cold young gambler and the even younger girl who is able to communicate telepathically with him. Of course he exploits her to improve the odds when he plays cards. She complies because she needs the stimulation of the contact. In the end someone has to crack, but I'll leave you to guess who, and to find out how, finally, this becomes a ghost story of sorts.

And that just leaves us with the true history lessons: Bradley Denton's 'The Hero of the Night' concerns Crispus Attucks, the first martyr of the American War of Independence. For no logical reason he finds himself released again and again from one death to another as he travels down through the centuries

guesting with innocents or protestors doomed to die. Much as I am suspicious of such inexplicable plot devices, in this case the reasons are unimportant to the story. Denton's intention is to show us something of pain and conscience rather than get bogged down in unnecessary detail.

And talking of pain and conscience we come to Turtledove's excellent 'The Last Article'. Just suppose that Operation Sea Lion (or some equivalent in alternate history) had been successful, that America had stayed at home in splendid isolationism, and that Hitler's armies had continued to spread across the world, arriving in, say, India. Whom would they have found themselves fighting? Auchinleck, who is quickly dispensed with, and... Gandhi; a more unusual opponent. I shall not spoil for you what may well turn out to be one of the year's best novelets; just report that Gandhi v General Model and the Third Reich is a thought provoking contest.

Last, we have Dean Whitlock's 'Miriam, Messiah', billed as a twist on the Marian tradition 'that may not have occurred to many theologians'. The reason, as far as I can see, is that this 'twist' is so full of logical and motivational holes that it resembles a holy water sprinkler. The writing is good and the story full of well realised detail, but the underlying idea is flawed; shoddy theology indeed. If you assume God can work some miracles - and hence has inconceivable power over and beyond the normal physical universe - why, in Whitlock's worldview too, can't he manage to work others? Why can't he foresee all actions, and why should God think that immaculate conception is, on its own, a truly irrefutable sign of Mary's deity?

I mean, come on, none of her neighbours do. They come to other conclusions!

Jack Vance - - STAR KING (Grafton, 1988, 204 pp, £2.50)

(Reviewed by Brian Magorrian)

STAR KING is the first of a five-novel series which first saw the light of day back in 1964. The plot tells of the interstellar search by Kirth Gersen for the first of the five aliens who killed his family when he was a child. Kirth's grandfather brings him up to have only one goal in life - to kill the aliens, known as 'Star Kings' or 'Demon Princes'. The search is made difficult by the fact that these

aliens disguise themselves as humans. I found the book an enjoyable and easy read - but not so easy as to warrant its inclusion on the 'train journey' stand. The characters' names sounded realistic, there was a nice use of style with all the background information to Vance's universe being introduced at the beginning as 'extracts from books'. As usual with hard-SF books there is a slight lack of characterisation - Kirth's first discovery of girls, for example, being a touch on the unbelievable side. Although the series gets off to a good start I'm a bit doubtful as to whether there's enough plot to last the five-volume course.

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