Paperback Inferno 78

The Review of paperback SF

June/July 1989

A British Science Fiction Association magazine

50p.

Issue 78, June/July 1989

A publication of the British Science Fiction Association, edited by Andy Sawyer.

ISSN 0260 - 0595

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Printed by PDC Copyprint, 11 Jeffries Passage, Guildford, Surrey, GU1 4AF.

Production Assistant: Phil Nichols

Membership of the BSFA costs £10 per year and is available from JOANNE RAINE, 33 Thornville Road, Hartlepool, Cleveland TS26 8EW.

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Paperback Purgatory

Over the last three issues of *PI*, we've reviewed nearly 200 books, roughly half science fiction titles and half fantasy and related categories such as horror.

Actually I've used my own subjective decision when making this distinction: a 'graphic novel' with an SF element I've *called* SF, even though some fans would call this 'media' and sneer. That's their problem. Sometimes the distinction's fine anyway. Is Brian Aldiss' MALACIA TAPESTRY a fantasy or an 'alternative-history' SF (and exactly *what* is the difference?) or 'just' a novel which is unclassifiable? Nevertheless, much of what is reviewed in *PI* isn't genre SF.

This isn't something I should worry about. (Not that I do!) To me, SF and fantasy are both aspects of 'the imaginative' and anything which can exercise that faculty is to be welcomed. What I wanted to examine was how far we'd examined good or bad examples of both: how far *PI* came over as an expression of enthusiasm and/or criticism.

I started thinking about this because it's received wisdom that we are living in the midst of a torrent of fantasy of dubious quality. Certain publishers, once responsible for SF of considerable quality, now seem to be producing nothing but role-playing game spin-offs. As I unpack parcels of books sent for review in *PI*, I notice plenty of swords, halflings, mages, and maps, but surely that can't be *all* that people are reading? Does science fiction still exist?

I decided, then, to tabulate how many books of fantasy or science fiction were reviewed over recent issues, and see what the results were - good review (broadly positive about the book), bad review (broadly negative), or neutral (where reviewer emphasised merit and fault in equal quantities, or gave the impression that the book was so bland that even on the longest train journey you'd be better off staring out of the window than reading it).

The most surprising thing was how unsurprising the result was. I was looking for something dramatic, like a bias to one genre, or a preponderance of negative reviews. In fact - although we reviewed 10% more fantasy than SF, SF had the edge (just) over fantasy when it came to good reviews. Should we review so much fantasy? This question has recently been aired in *Vector*: it's certainly arguable that Fantasy has more in the way of 'classics' than SF, perhaps because it can call upon a broader range. I can think of very few SF novels which compare with the classics of fantasy from Eddison to Borges, but the search keeps on... To me, a truly satisfying and original work of science fiction is rarer, but thus more to be treasured, than one of fantasy, and SF has one more positive characteristic, which I'll go into in a minute.

It slightly surprised me that SF *and* fantasy books were slammed by reviewers in virtually equal numbers. It surprised me more that reviewers were positive about three times as many books than received bad reviews: not that we *shouldn't* present a positive image about the books we receive, but sometimes you

can't help feeling that Sturgeon's Law (90% of SF is crap: 90% of *everything* is crap) is one of the more optimistic statements made about books. And isn't it supposed to be true that reviewers and critics do nothing but tear things to shreds?

It was, however, interesting that almost as many books as were judged negatively had the reviewer coming down on no particular side or seeming to say, 'Here is another book just like all the rest'. And twice as many of *these* books were fantasy than SF, many of them the kind of series fantasy in which a young woman Meets Her Destiny in a vaguely Celtic world, or role-players find themselves (gosh!) *in the world of their game*. According to *PI* reviewers, more fantasy was just plain wishy-washy than bad.

This may reflect a lack of sympathy with fantasy among *PI* reviewers, but I don't think so. Many SF readers are also enthusiastic readers of fantasy. The truth is - what we all 'know' anyway - that a lot of fantasy is just plain boring.

But - and this is really the point - *is* this fantasy anyway? Isn't it more that there's a certain kind of story which appeals because it's just like all the rest and is memorable less for originality or impact but more for being competently handled? It's dressed as fantasy because fantasy sells (for whatever reason: see former *PI* editor Joseph Nicholas' letter in *Interzone* 29 for one idea why escapist fantasy should be so popular) but if and when SF imagery gets the upper hand, why, it's back to rocketships and rayguns again. And if neither happens to be fashionable, there's always spy thrillers.

What *is* the generic similarity between novels such as John Crowley's LITTLE, BIG, E.R. Eddison's MISTRESS OF MISTRESSES, and the lastest TSR spin-off from Penguin? Precious little, I'd say. Do readers of one kind really read the other? There's more of a link between the extremes of the SF field because - even though the levels of achievement might be different - SF writers are often using the same language in a way Crowley and Eddison, and the TSR workshop, patently aren't. The alien might be a metaphor for the dark side of the human soul. It might actually be an alien. It might be a lightly disguised (fill in your own most-hated racial or political stereotype). But it's still an alien to the reader and I think that most SF readers would be able to judge on which level they were reading. Goodness knows that much SF is cliched and embarrassingly bad and dependent on a small stock of images which were out of date thirty years ago, but it's still possible to write a good novel involving robots and aliens from outer space in a way which I don't think it is if you're reliant on the imagery of some of these fantasy novels. It would be beneficial to everyone concerned if they realised that the one novel worth reading featuring elves, halflings, dwarves and a Dark Lord has already been written.

But then again, wouldn't it be depressing if all we had were novels 'worth reading'? If the alternative were to draw *horizontal* lines instead of vertical lines, separating so-called levels of quality rather than apparent genres, then I think confusion would be even more rife. I've identified one kind of mediocre fiction which gets short shrift from *PI* reviewers. I've not addressed whether it's always the good books which get the good reviews and the bad ones which are torn apart. That's not a question which editor or reviewer can adequately answer anyway.

That one's for the reader to decide.

Rachel Pollack - - - - - - - UNQUENCHABLE FIRE
(Legend, 1989, 390pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Steven Tew)

UNQUENCHABLE FIRE has won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for the best novel of 1988; with respect, I don't know why, since (a) I've read few of the other novels, and so can't compare, and (b) I'd have thought, perhaps naively, that an award with such a title might have gone to something in a more traditional SFnal line. That dispensed with, I'll get on with my thoughts about the novel, all the while wishing I was well read enough to appreciate awards...

UNQUENCHABLE FIRE is set in Poughkeepsie, near New York, and in the city itself. It is an America of pizza diners and art galleries, of the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine. It is also an America of rituals and mystical occurrences, of Malignant and Devoted Ones; and America where all possible dreams are catalogued and the National Oneiric Registration Agency will interpret them. An America transformed by the True Revolution led by the Founders, whose spritual heritage is administered by the Tellers. Contemporary Tellers, however, do not have the same powers of vitality of the original founders, and the world has become rather self-satisfied and in a bit of a rut. Nowhere more so than Poughkeepsie, whose minor Tellers are a bit of a disappointment. Hence great excitement when Allan Lightstorm, one of the premier Tellers comes to town for the Day of Truth recitation. Jennie Mazdan, however, fails to attend (a great shock to her neighbours who revile her for letting the side down); she is, literally, seduced by a dream, and finds herself mysteriously pregnant. Her offspring's role as an immaculate conception is to revitalise the True Revolution. The main plot follows Jennie's pregnancy; initially she rebels against her body and will being used, and attempts to abort the foetus. This fails due to the intervention of the 'Agency'. There is little else to the plot, which is interspersed with excerpts from the Lives of the Founders and from a parallel telling of Lightstorm's story. These, I must confess, I found rather heavy going, rather like those interminable histories in Tolkien, not my cup of tea. However, the main story is fascinating, more in its telling and detailed background than in its not highly original plot. The characters are vivid and real, and I especially enjoyed the description of Jennie's neighbours, who are shocked and outraged by her behaviour in a way which perfectly encapsulates the small-mindedness of the small town complacent moral watchdog. In fact, Pollack's discourse on morality is an interesting feature, and part of the novel's success; it represents the notions of 'Good' and 'Evil' by the Malignant Ones and the Devoted Ones, which are ultimately perceived as human projections upon a Universe they can make little of.

A book that can take more than one reading.

OFF ON A COMET!

Arthur C. Clarke - - - - - 2061: ODYSSEY THREE
(Grafton, 1988, 302pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Phil Nichols)

Arthur C. Clarke writes that 2061 is 'not a linear sequel to 2010', but a variation on the same theme; which is to say that repetition of ideas from the previous work is to be expected, and that errors of continuity are to be excused. In fact, apart from the further use of the familiar elements from the original 2001 - Hal, Floyd, Bowman, Discovery, Monoliths - there is little thematic continuity in this third instalment of the twenty-first century ODYSSEY. Questions of evolution and human relationships, at the heart of 2001 and 2010 respectively, are here displaced by an Astounding Story harking back to Clarke's earlier SF.

2001 charts the evolution of man from the African plains to the rarefied environment of space. In typical Clarke fashion, a mystical presence acts as the spur of each step, culminating in the re-birth of astronaut Dave Bowman as a Star-Child. Master of the world, the Star-Child is not quite sure what to do next. But he will think of something.

2001 deals constantly with evolution, man's place in the cosmos, the struggle for survival. Hal vs Bowman - man vs machine - is the final struggle permitting the race to move one step closer to godhood.

2010 makes many attempts to enrich these themes, dealing further with evolution, repeating patterns in nature, and the desperate need to communicate - not only between species, but amongst ourselves. We are told that

> No animal with even elementary powers of reasoning would have allowed itself to become a victim of its own instincts, attracted like a moth to a candle until it risked destruction.
> [chapter 13]

This line, delivered in an entirely unrelated context, gives another interpretation of the behaviour of the men and man-apes of 2001, their overwhelming urge to touch the monolith. Does it describe Moon-Watcher? Dave Bowman?

Especially telling is the comparison of Europa with the early Earth: Clarke describes Europan life as having reached a dead end, just as the man-apes of 2001 have stagnated. Until the appearance of the monolith, that is; in each case, an evolutionary leap is triggered.

And then there is Chandra's concept of ahisma (non-violence) which enables him to cooperate successfully with Hal. Ahisma would have obviated the Bowman/Hal struggle of 2001. How might this have changed evolutionary history? Stagnation again? For all its faults - its over-reliance on the latest scientific data relating to Jupiter and its moons, its sometimes soap-opera handling of characterisation, its unfocused plot-line - 2010 is still a worthwhile re-evaluation of its famous predecessor.

But 2061 is something else entirely. It is packed with trite, childish elements and devices. Some are merely cheeky, the early part of the book seeming to be something of a game, with Clarke teasing us with political extrapolation, possibly even daring Hollywood to *attempt* to film *this* one (Floyd, our chief protagonist is now 103!).

The pleasure trip to Halley's comet during its next return is part of this game, but hints at the childishness to follow, although it contains the one truly wondrous scene of the novel, where Floyd throws a snowball into space. Yet far from stepping farther into the future, Clarke dips into his past, for we are here back in the territory of his 1960 story 'Into The Comet'. Later, THE FOUNTAINS OF PARADISE is alluded to; a half-hearted attempt at Asimovian assimilation of earlier works into one grand scheme?

The Tycho monolith standing in the UN Plaza I can take with the humour intended, as I can the references to Margaret M'Bala's book which puts Greek myth in a space-age setting. But when the ship's steward, Rosie, pulls a gun on the captain and hijacks the whole lot to Europa to get her hands on a mountainous diamond for the might of South Africa...

This kind of plotting - again meant to be merely cheeky, since this turns out *not* to be a major plot point, but rather an excuse to get our heroes to the forbidden moon Europa; a McGuffin, you could say - to me simply devalues the series as a whole. Of course, this is saying nothing new, since one-shot ideas belatedly stretched out to trilogy length and beyond frequently end up this way. But I am disappointed that Clarke could allow himself to forget the profundity of his original work; could allow the mythic to turn into Boy's Own Adventure; could allow his Star-Child to become the simple ghostly figure that Bowman is portrayed as in 2061. If this book is to be believed, the Star-Child did *not* 'think of something'; *his* step up the evolutionary ladder is mere punctuated equilibrium, a step from one stasis to another. And worse, Floyd and Hal are now elevated(?) to this same level, which completely negates the struggle at the heart of 2001.

The book is perhaps to be read precisely as a retelling of Greek myth, but focusing here on the incredible events making up the ODYSSEY, rather than on the mythic resonances struck by 2001. But Clarke's reference on page 226 to Ernest Shackleton gives the game away: the whole thing is one gigantic Edwardian adventure. And my god, it's full of s***.

Paul Davies - - - - - - - THE COSMIC BLUEPRINT
(Unwin, 1989, 224pp, £5.95)

(Reviewed by Dave Langford)

Once upon a time SF crackled with wish-fulfilment: free power, unlimited techno-logical expansion, and loud snapping noises as mere physical laws were foolish enough to impede the Indomitable Human Spirit. Later it turned out that real-world constraints made for better stories - since they offered, out there in the vacuum of space, something for the human spirit to push against. (As in TAU ZERO, where the hated barriers of relativity are used as a staircase going endlessly up.) Then the more pessimistic aspects of current scientific philosophy started to have their effect, in particular that gloomy arrow of entropy which through epochs of dissipation points only to a final chucking-out time. After which, if you'll let me oversimplify wildly, everybody buggered off to read fantasy instead.

Paul Davies' book is a synopsis of more recent changes in the mood of scientific thought. No real synthesis has been reached, mostly because all the new insights involve nested levels of fascinating complexity; but these days there's a cheerier arrow of time in the air, an arrow pointing in the direction of higher organisation.

The book's predecessors include Ilya Prigogine's ORDER OUT OF CHAOS, a knotty work with several examples of high-level patterns emerging from unstable chemical systems; James Gleick's CHAOS, a pop-science survey of fractals, turbulence, strange attractors and other currently 'sexy' notions (OK and well illustrated, but larded with facile

journalese. You know, 'For all his wild mop of hair, crazed eyes and addiction to monkey brains, Popplestein seemed just a normal Californian. Little did colleagues know that secretly he was thinking about... chaos!'); and finally Douglas Hofstadter's efforts (GODEL, ESCHER, BACH and METAMAGICAL THEMAS) to model complicated systems and show that the trendy holistic and execrated reductionist viewpoints are complementary.

What was the more pessimistic world-view missing out? It was in its way a product of wishful thinking about how complex the universe is. Eugene Wigner wrote a famous paper called 'On the Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics' and marvelled that so much of nature could be modelled on simple functions. Unfortunately this was largely a side-effect of the unspoken scientific consensus that physics is deterministic if you ignore those horrid quantum effects (Davies gives an elegant mathematical example which even on paper is guaranteed to 'go unpredictable'), that nonlinear equations are a bit beyond the pale (all too much natural behaviour proves to be nonlinear) and that to study nonequilibrium systems is to make life needlessly complex. The word to delete is 'needlessly'.

In the famous words of sociology, we are all nonequilibrium systems. Likewise the Earth, the Sun, and (from start to entropic finish) the universe. As Prigogine showed, a million gloomily intuitive rules about entropy and decay fail to apply on the local scale once you take that 'needlessly complex' view of things. There is much more here than I can cover; despite the dry expository style I was left with a frothy feeling of wanting to go away and write SF stories. Optimistic ones. Try it.

Only in one area does the book fall down badly. Although by now we've all seen too many pictures of the Mandelbrot set, there's plenty more scope for attractive illustrations. The author must feel a sick envy of Gleick's beautifully produced book: it looks as though Davies provided *very* rough sketches as guides for an illustrator, and Unwin gleefully decided to save a few bob by using the roughs, thus enabling them to keep the paperback price down to... well, actually, £5.95.

Reviews

Brian W. Aldiss - - - - - - - - - - - - - -RUINS
(Arena, 1988, 95pp, £2.50)

(Reviewed by Graham Andrews)

RUINS might well have been subtitled THE MAN WHO WASN'T ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER... Hugh Billing is a musician/composer who cobbled together one mega-hit song (the aptly titled 'Side Show') back in the Swingeing Sixties, and has been resting on his royalties ever since. However: 'Forty-four was an uncertain age for Billing. He recognized it as the age when men take to drink, divorce or homeopathy; but for Billing life had always contained the uncertain' (p.15).

The death of Billing's mother brings him back to London, where he is haunted by old memories, present dreams (one recurring dream, in particular), and fears for an all too problematical future. RUINS can be seen as a HISTORY OF MR POLLY for the nineteen-eighties, especially in the final section, *Restorations*. But - although Billing does settle down with a soul-mate (*bed*-mate, rather) - it's a far cry from the Potwell Inn. Aldiss has written one of the best novellas in the Hutchinson series - if not *the* best.

What do you mean - 'It isn't science fiction!'? Listen: there's a recurring dream ('inner space'), plus references to OF ANALYTICAL PSYCHOLOGY ('Being complete... is the main thing in life') and THE PSYCHE AND DREAM JOURNEYINGS ('Anima dreams can be memorably vivid...'). It's just like *Interzone*, only better. And - well - it's by Brian W. Aldiss.

Brian Aldiss - - - - - - - - - - - CRYPTOZOIC!
(VGSF, 1989, 187pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

Originally published in 1967 as AN AGE in the Sphere Science Fiction series; this edition does not even reset the text - some of the typos are corrected and can be spotted by lighter type, but otherwise it's a straight reprint. The title change occurred years ago and is still as meaningless as ever; at least AN AGE had some weight and class about it.

Probably the least effective of all Aldiss' novels, the choice of the book for incorporation into the Classics series surprises me. The concepts in the first section seem dated, the melodrama forced, the tortured internal thoughts of the artist protagonist weak and the whole plot unlikely.

Bush is a time traveller, but only through mind projection into earlier stages of our Earth from which he remains totally divorced, drawing his air from the 'future'. How he washes, eats and carries his supplies is never explained adequately, leaving the reader initially struggling to accept the various plot devices - such as mankind's inability to 'mind' any nearer to our own time than the Bronze Age.

The second section immediately destroys this basic device, throwing Bush and others into Victorian England where for no discernible reason he rushes to Buckingham Palace where, out of all the billions of days and locations in the past, he contacts the other characters for more derring-do, treachery, turncoating and suchlike. At this point, beings out of the remote future - obviously possessing superior technology - intervene.

They do so simply to tell everyone that really the Universe runs backwards, that effect precedes cause, death comes before birth; we have all been misunderstanding, distorting all we perceive. Not only is this strange argument badly set out - it's not even necessary to the plot, and in fact forms a completely separate and easily discarded part of the book, the more so since this closes with a return to the manipulation of Bush's father and yet more confusion in what appears to be a parallel Universe.

When I first read AN AGE, serialised in the pages of *New Worlds*, I found it disjointed and inconclusive; nothing in this latest re-reading has given me cause to change that perception. Aldiss has written some marvellous novels and short stories - let's hope Gollancz add them to this curiously uneven series soon.

Alan Ryan (ed.) - - - - - - - -PENGUIN BOOK OF VAMPIRE STORIES
(Penguin, 1988, 621pp, £4.95)

Barbara Hambly - - - - - - - - -IMMORTAL BLOOD
(Unwin, 1988, 306pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

The Vampire story is one of the great 19th/20th century myths: a ready symbol for sexuality, venereal diseases, romantic alienation or psychopathic disorder, and one which still remains powerful (cf. Brian Stableford's fine new novel THE EMPIRE OF FEAR and the fact that virtually every second children's book I pick up seems to be about some kind of vampire). Ryan presents a chronological survey, starting with Lord Byron's famous fragment and ending with atmospheric and imaginative modern treatments of the myth by Robert Aickman, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and Suzy McKee Charnas to name just three of the best. Byron apart, early essays in vampirism were often by people to whom 'literature' came with difficulty but melodrama and out-and-out fleshcreeping was second nature, and this is why the most interesting stories among the thirty-two here present are John Polidori's 'The Vampyre' (1819) and the Victorian serial 'Varney The Vampyre'. Rymer's pantomime crudities would have won him no prizes even among 19th century penny dreadfuls, but the extracts Ryan reprints are far more effective than the higher-toned but tedious tosh written by Byron's erstwhile hanger-on. Where Richard Matheson's 'Drink My Blood' stands in the canon of Great Writing is anyone's guess, but it terrified me when I was nine and its line-by-line, laconic-to-the-point-of-catatonia narrative about Jules, who wanted to be a vampire, is still as frightening an example of pulp psychopathy as I've ever read. If you like vampire stories, there should be plenty here to amuse you.

I do tend to believe that the best length for such stories is novel or at least novella length, where the basic idea can be explored and developed. So we have the immortal DRACULA, and also I AM LEGEND, INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE, FEVRE DREAM and the above-mentioned Stableford novel. Hambly's IMMORTAL BLOOD isn't quite in their 'classic' mould, but like anything by her it's supremely readable and has what the sub-genre always needs, a neat 'angle' in which the hero is hired by the vampires of turn-of-the-century London to track down the mysterious killer who is leaving them dead in their coffins. Hambly balances with considerable skill the 'supernatural' and 'scientific' explanation of vampirism and she manages to undercut effectively the traditional Edwardian gentleman-hero, the patronising reaction of the male of the time to 'female intellectuals' and both the demonic and romantic image of the vampire while never straying far from the conventions of the world of John Buchan's thrillers.

Clifford D. Simak - - -BROTHER & OTHER STORIES
(Methuen, 1988, 165pp, £2.95)

(Reviewed by Graham Andrews)

The late Clifford D. Simak (1904-88) wrote several classic sf novels: CITY, WAY STATION, TIME IS THE SIMPLEST THING, THE WEREWOLF PRINCIPLE - the list goes on and on. But, like most Golden Age authors, he also produced umpteen short stories, novelettes, and novellas, many of which had not yet appeared in single-author collections.

'Brother' (*F&SF*, 1977) is a kind of Simakian SUMMING UP. In just twenty-three pages, it presents 'an unconscious self-portrait of the author', as Francis Lyall so perceptibly states in his introduction (p. 3). Edward Lambert has remained on his Wisconsin farm, while his more adventurous twin brother, Phil, has gone to be a spaceman. Phil returns at irregular intervals until, one clement evening, he comes home for what turns out to be the last time. And he is not alone... I find 'Brother' to be Simak's most *personal* short story, and one of his most accomplished.

The remaining, almost-as-good stories are 'Over the River and Through the Woods' (*Amazing*, May 1965), 'Auk House' (STELLAR NO. 3, 1977), and 'Kindergarten' (*Galaxy*, July 1953) - the only story to have been featured in previous Simak collections. Severn House (the original publishers) and Francis Lyall are to be commended for showcasing Simak's shorter fiction in a more durable form than self-destructing pulp magazines.

Alan Dean Foster - - - - - - - INTO THE OUT OF
(NEL, 1989, 376pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Lynne Bispham)

This book is a horror-fantasy adventure pure and simple, with no pretensions to be anything else.

The Shetani - evil spirits - are entering our world from the region known as the Out Of in ever increasing numbers. The Maasai of East Africa know that the breach in the wall between reality and the Out Of must be sealed before the Shetani overrun the Earth and destroy mankind. Olkeloki, a Maasai elder, travels to America in search of the two *ilmeet* (foreigners) needed to assist him in the magic ritual that will seal the breach. The remainder of the book describes their journey to East Africa and the Out Of, and the Shetanis' efforts to stop them.

The plot rolls along competently enough (with one glaring inconsistency), and Foster has obviously done his homework as far as Africa and the Maasai are concerned, but ultimately the book fails to thrill or horrify. The graphic descriptions of the Shetani leave too little to the reader's imagination, and there is never any doubt that the heroes will save the world. A book for the undiscerning horror addict who has run out of Stephen Kings.

Stuart Gordon - - - - - - - - THE HIDDEN WORLD
(Orbit, 1988, 352pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Lynne Bispham)

Sequels are rarely as good as their predecessors. In places THE HIDDEN WORLD, the second Book of the Watchers, matches the high standard of ARCHON, the first book in the series, but other parts of the novel work less well.

At the end of ARCHON, Sam Joyce was snatched four thousand years into the past by the terrible Red Woman, Tiy, who now sends him against her enemy, Azazel the Beast. Sam's daughter Chrissa has now found refuge amongst the Cathars of thirteenth century France, and from them learns how she too may fight Azazel. Gordon successfully blends metaphysical fantasy with known historical facts about the siege of Montsegur in 1241 to create a convincing portrayal of the Cathars. Unfortunately, Sam's sojourn in pre-history is less convincing, despite the many Biblical and mythological allusions. Unfortunately also, the merging of the novel's different time strands does become repetitive and confusing - anyone who has not read the previous book is likely to be hopelessly lost somewhere between pre-history and 1999!

However, the Story of the Watchers does advance in this book and Gordon's richly textured prose carries the reader through the intricacies of the plot. My verdict: read this book, but read ARCHON first.

Roger Zelazny &
Neil Randall - - - - - -ROGER ZELAZNY'S VISUAL GUIDE TO CASTLE AMBER
(Avon, 1989, 222pp, $8.95)

(Reviewed by Ian Sales)

It seems that trundling behind every money-spinning SF or Fantasy series there is a little wagon - a band-wagon: witness the countless Middle Earth 'sourcebooks', The Atlas of Pern, The Pliocene Companion, The Atlas/Artwork/etc. of Dragonlance, The Dune Encyclopedia, etc., etc. And now the Chronicles of Amber have just leapt aboard.

Like any person I have somewhat ambivalent feelings to these sourcebooks: they always seem to smack of cashing in on a good thing, yet to fans of the particular series... as a fan of the Dune books, for example, I think the Dune Encyclopedia is excellent.

ZELAZNY'S VISUAL GUIDE describes itself as essential, 'the one book every Amber devotee must own'. I don't think it is. Most of the book describes a tour given by Flora, Corwin's half-sister (there are useful family trees in the GUIDE to help clarify the confusing Amber relationships). It is copiously illustrated with cut-away views of the castle and floor plans of various rooms.

Background, yes. But no insights. And this I think is the main fault of ZELAZNY'S GUIDE. It's a guided tour of a castle. Nothing more; nothing less. So here is an illustration of Merlin's room, showing his large oriental rug - so what? It's all in the books - in prose considerably better than the illustrations are.

Another point: when reading a book we all form mental images of the characters from the author's description (at least I do). Seeing someone else's interpretation of a character can ruin a novel for me. The same is true, of course, for films based on books. The accompanying thumbnail sketches only reiterate information found in the Chronicles.

Background, yes. But no insights. This just about sums up ROGER ZELAZNY'S GUIDE TO CASTLE AMBER. By the way, on reading Neil Randall's introduction I get the impression that this book should have been more accurately titled as 'A Visual Guide To Roger Zelazny's CASTLE AMBER'.

Ramsey Campbell - - - - - - - - -THE INFLUENCE
(Legend, 1989, 296pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Colin Bird)

Alison and Derek Faraday had gratefully accepted the invitation to live in Aunt Queenie's spacious suburban house, even if Queenie was an overbearing matriarch towards them and their small daughter, Rowan. Derek was finding work hard to come by and he hoped that Alison's ailing aunt might bequeath them the coastal home to ease their financial crises. When she finally dies the family gathers for the funeral and Alison's sister is shocked to find Queenie being buried with a locket of Rowan's hair. 'You never should have given her anything of Rowan's', she warns.

Derek and Alison set about repairing and decorating the house to make it saleable whilst Rowan finds herself a playmate. But Alison's sister suspects that Rowan's mysterious playmate is Aunt Queenie, returned to life, and her plans are to usurp Rowan's body for her own evil designs. The family are soon involved in a struggle with Queenie's influence from beyond the grave.

Anyone who thinks the above summary put this book into the cliched territory of EXORCIST-type novels fails to account for this author's many talents. His atmospheric prose weaves a heady web in which his three-dimensional characters are soon caught. The sheer narrative skill and Campbell's telling plot construction propels the reader towards a tense and satisfying conclusion. You care about what happens to these people and that is why Campbell's subtle horror can be much more disturbing than most other writers in this genre.

A chilling and beautifully resonant book which can be recommended heartily to anyone, not just horror fans.

Greg Bear - - - - - - - - - - - THE SERPENT MAGE
(Legend, 1988, 346pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Alan Fraser)

THE SERPENT MAGE is the second half of the story begun in Bear's THE INFINITY CONCERTO (also Legend, 1988). Although *PI* reviewed Bear's EON, HEGIRA, and BLOOD MUSIC in 1988, THE INFINITY CONCERTO wasn't reviewed here. Tom Jones reviewed both books in their previous incarnations as Century large format paperbacks at £5.95 each in *Vector* 144. Although you could read THE INFINITY CONCERTO on its own, it will be difficult to follow THE SERPENT MAGE if you haven't read the first book.

In that first book sixteen year old Michael (not Reginald) Perrin was an apparently normal modern-day Californian boy living in Los Angeles in the Beverly Hills area. He was given the key to a gate to other worlds by the Hollywood film score composer, Arno Waltiri, who also composed a disturbing piece called 'The Infinity Concerto'. After Waltiri's death, Michael passed through the gate in the deserted house of a mysterious David Clarkham, and into a strange world ruled by the powerful Sidhe. Michael, though a human, was given Sidhe training, and became the vehicle through which the Sidhe defeated the evil Clarkham, who here called himself the Isomage, and was trying to control the Sidhe world. At the end of the book, Michael was returned to Earth, only to find that he'd been gone for five years.

In THE SERPENT MAGE Michael tries to return to a normal life, but strange things keep happening to him. The magic that created the Realm of the Sidhe is failing, and the Sidhe are forced to migrate to Earth. Worse still, David Clarkham was not killed when his palace was destroyed, and returns with the aim of taking control of the Earth, and ruling both humans and Sidhe. In THE INFINITY CONCERTO Michael was just a pawn in the game, and the reason for many things that happened to him were unexplained: in THE SERPENT MAGE Michael's true heritage is revealed, and he has the chance to face Clarkham as equals and save the world for both humans and Sidhe. First, however, he must acquire the power of the Serpent Mage, who possesses all the knowledge of this world.

It would be wrong to call this a fantasy classic, because very little of the background of Celtic and other myth that Bear uses could be called particularly original, although he does give us a new slant on the Garden of Eden story, by explaining the Serpent Mage's role in those events. I also found the opinions on the quality of Hollywood sound track music interesting, as Perrin arranges with a UCLA graduate student to put on a performance of Waltiri's 'The Infinity Concerto'. However, a major plot fault is that Michael Perrin becomes too powerful too quickly in this book for the ending to be really in doubt, thus taking away the element of danger that gave THE INFINITY CONCERTO so much suspense. Nevertheless, I have to confess that I found these books engrossing, and carried them about with me, reading at every available opportunity until I'd finished them both.

These books date from 1984 and 1986 respectively, so probably predate Bear's EON, which I enjoyed very much, even though it wasn't 'the greatest SF novel ever written'

that Legend claimed for it. Although you can't read THE SERPENT MAGE on its own, if you have read THE INFINITY CONCERTO, and enjoyed it, you will find this book to be extremely entertaining, despite the slight criticisms given above. I recommend it to *PI* readers.

Mick Farren - - - - - - - - - THEIR MASTER'S WAR
(Sphere, 1988, 295pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Nik Morton)

Expatriate Englishman Mick Farren has tackled the American militaristic SF and succeeded. There are many faults with the book, but it is still far better than some of the American types in this sub-genre. Briefly, the story is about Harkaan, a warrior abducted by an alien race and inducted into their interplanetary forces. Hark is brainwashed, taught most of what is necessary to function as a soldier, and then let loose with other similarly abducted troops. After many bloody battles, he and some of his remnants rebel against the Therem, their masters. The similarities to the Vietnam conflict are glaring, from the fragging of officers to the mutilation of captives, from the battlecries 'Incoming!' to denote an incipient shell-burst to the comradeship under fire.

All the information necessary to make the adjustment to their new situation has already been placed in their memories, they learn; then (for the benefit of the reader) lots of other details (which could as easily have been placed in memory) are imparted too... This is a little sloppy. So is the persistent joining of words - *overmen*, *topman*, *longtimers*, *messdecks*, *thickset*, *throughwatch*, *nextday*, *jumptuned*, *semidarkness*, and *companionways* all on one page (p. 37). (Whatever happened to the hyphen?)

Also involved are the women in a recreation space-port. Here, a secret society has evolved, shades of the Bene Gesserit of DUNE. The most original aspect of the book is the battle armour they wear: 'You see, my children, these suits are living beings.' Yes, it's that melodramatic. The suits are symbiotic, giving to and taking from their 'owners'; the sexual connotations are touched upon, too...

This is a fast paced, easy read which should appeal to anyone who likes militaristic SF. I don't, unless the characters transcend the carnage - I felt that Mick Farren's didn't - partly because he used too many character-viewpoints without imbuing any with adequate depth; ergo, I didn't particularly care whether any survived or not.

Jack McDevitt - - - - - - - -THE HERCULES TEXT
(Sphere, 1988, 307pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Martyn Taylor)

There is a civilisation so keen to make contact that they build a galactic semaphore using an x-ray pulsar. Luckily the boys at Goddard just happen to be looking in the right direction when the flags start flapping in Hercules. By even greater good fortune they manage to assemble a team which decodes the alien message in no time flat and then...

The secrets of the universe are revealed to pantingly eager Mankind, only the nasty military blow it and the guys in white coats only just manage to save us all.

If that sounds dismissive the reason is that McDevitt takes his good idea and clothes it in a story of almost stunning unoriginality populated by characters pushed around the plot at the author's whim. Does McDevitt expect me to believe that the American authorities would allow anyone near the data without a security clearance higher than the President, let alone the cowboys at Goddard! Suspension of disbelief does not stretch that far.

Not that the story is without its virtues. It reads well (is that all..!), with pace and excitement. The characters manage to allow flashes of humanity to show through the squeaky clean gloss paint. Then there is the central conceit, the pulsar and the Hercules Text. That isn't exactly new either, but somehow McDevitt manages to make it seem new minted.

Melissa Scott - - - - - - -SILENCE IN SOLITUDE
(VGSF, 1989, 316pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Alan Fraser)

SILENCE IN SOLITUDE is the sequel to Melissa Scott's FIVE-TWELFTHS OF HEAVEN, which was panned by Martyn Taylor in *PI75* as 'literary muzak'. I can see why: BSFA readers have come to expect nonsexist, nonracist, and non-militarist SF. Therefore, a tale of a woman struggling to succeed in a 'man's profession', or in this case two 'men's professions', is guaranteed to turn them off. In this book, our heroine Silence Leigh, who wants to be a starship pilot and a mage, has to contend with an exaggerated fundamentalist Islamic-type culture where women are so restricted they have to veil themselves just to *read a book* written by a man. When Silence rescues an aristocratic hostage from a harem, the girl has to be formally introduced to her male rescuers while her kidnappers are in hot pursuit, otherwise her honour will be compromised, and the rescue made pointless.

On the plus side, I found the concept of space travel made possible by using 'the music of the spheres', and being an arcane form of magic quite fascinating.

Where the book falls down in my opinion, is that Ms Scott doesn't use her well designed backgrounds and potentially exciting plot to any great advantage. Her writing doesn't yet have that edge that brings suspense into the story, and keeps the reader turning the pages. Furthermore, if you do reach the end, you find that, like E.C. Tubb's Dumarest, Silence Leigh isn't going to reach that 'long-lost Earth' in this book either!

Ian McDonald - - - - - - - - - DESOLATION ROAD
(Bantam, 1989, 355pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

This quirky, meandering, idiosyncratic book purports to disguise metaphysical ponderings under the cover of a story. It is in fact a series of virtually disconnected chapters, with wordplay galore, and I confess reminded me of nothing more deep or obscure than that old *Reader's Digest* feature, 'Picturesque Speech and Patter'.

Sketching the plot is pointless: the plot is what you make of it, as are all the characters and the words the author puts in their mouths. And that is, I fear, the basic problem: they do not live, because they are all so heavily painted over with their creator's ideas and images.

O.K. so the book may be said to have something of Lafferty and something of Bradbury about it, but I'm afraid that for me this is no real recommendation. If you're into pious mysticism, you may get more out of it than I did.

F.M. Busby - - - - - - - - - - - - - YOUNG RISSA
(Orbit, 1988, 177pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Ian Sales)

YOUNG RISSA: old book. The copyright for this novel is 1976. So where has it been for twelve years? Why mention this? I hear you ask.

The sad fact is that this book shows its age. Despite its modern packaging, impressive cover (Jim Burns?) and the words 'Volume One

of the Rissa Kerguelen saga' (sequelitis being especially rampant these last few years), this novel's whole outlook is dated.

The plot concerns the early years of Rissa Kerguelen: how her parents were killed and she was placed in Total Welfare (i.e., government slavery), how she won enough money in a lottery to buy her freedom and escape off-earth, and how she ingratiated herself with the citizens of Number One, capital of the Hidden Worlds and very much opposed to Earth's totalitarian government.

Along the way she is raped several times (the narrative at these points carrying about as much emotion as there is in eating a bag of crisps), learns every skill that a character that has to survive a long and adventure-packed 'saga' could conceivably need, and makes lots of new friends - some by being nice to them, others by sleeping with them. However, she receives no pleasure from this last act because - yes, you've guessed it: Rissa has a sexual hang-up!

YOUNG RISSA should have been titled YOUNG FRIDAY or YOUNG TYPICAL HEINLEIN HEROINE. It is the Heinleinesque black-and-white morality that dates this book. For instance, Bran Tegare, the only marginally interesting character in the novel, starts out as a monster and outlaw but, because he's really on the 'good' side, turns out to be just another misunderstood and much-aligned nice guy. Other trade-marks include 'being nice to people means they'll be nice to you', or, 'I have slept with you, ergo I trust you with my life', or even, 'bad guys always get their just deserts' (i.e., the crap beaten out of them and a painful death). These all spoiled it for me.

YOUNG RISSA is not a good book. It remains to be seen if the rest of the 'saga' is any better.

Lois McMaster Bujold - - - - - -ETHAN OF ATHOS
(Headline, 1989, 237pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

Silly title, poor cover artwork, which may deter you from enjoying a superb book. A homosexual planet, with sons raised in vitro and women regarded as 'uterine replicants with legs' who spread insanity with their medusa glances - a madness that possessed men and made them into slaves.

Our hero, an obstetrician, has to break with all conditioning, go out into the Universe and mingle with these women. Yes, it's written as farce - you don't live the story, but it's superbly crafted, a joy to read. Nice to have a woman as the weak male's strong right arm, too - though I suppose it's only to be expected that nearly all the nasties are men, the only female baddie being certifiably loony.

I've not previously sampled Ms Bujold's work, and wish she had a better eye for a gripping title. But if her other books equal this one for taut plotting, baroque adventure and a mind-numbing concatenation of coincidences leading to an oddly touching homosexual climax, the loss is mine.

Samuel R. Delany - - - - - THE JEWELS OF APTOR
(VGSF, 1988, 221pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Graham Andrews)

'Was their leader a mistress of science or a witch of mutants?' ran the blurb on the first edition of Delany's debut novel, THE JEWELS OF APTOR (Ace Double F-173, 1962, c/w SECOND ENDING by James White). It's a model of the blurb-writer's art, though I doubt if Delany appreciated such shotgun subtlety. But he must have been livid at the, ahem, 'abridgement' perpetrated by Ace, which meant a thirty per cent cut and a drastic mangling of the original syntax. Ace made amends for this act of barbarity when they published the 'official' version in 1968 (Gollancz brought out the British edition at much the same time).

Now Gollancz have added THE JEWELS OF APTOR to their list of mass-market paperbacks, and an attractive little package it is, too, with a calmly fantastic cover illustration by Mick Posen. I've taken the opportunity to examine both versions of this novel, and - believe me - the first Ace edition had been gutted by the editorial equivalent of Jack the Ripper. (Those people who don't believe me can buy their own b****y drinks).

The well knit story itself remains the same, however, and there is none of the semiotic semolina that has besplattered so much of Delany's later work, especially in the (otherwise readable) NEVERONYA books. Anyone who really enjoys reading something like 'Appendix A: THE TALE OF PLAGUES AND CARNIVALS, or Some Informal Remarks toward the Modular Calculus, Part Five' may *not* write to me c/o *Paperback Inferno*. Oh, I'd almost forgotten... APTOR's central situation is neatly encapsulated by Gollancz's very own blurb:

> 'When four companions journey to Aptor on the orders of the white goddess, Argo, their mission seems clear; they must seize the jewel from the dark god, Hama, return it to Argo and so defeat the malevolent forces that threaten their island.'

Dean R. Koontz - - - - - - - - - - - - LIGHTNING
(Headline, 1989, 439pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Colin Bird)

The publishers notes accompanying this book proclaim that Mr Koontz has sold over forty-five million books worldwide and each new book seems to replace its predecessor on the bestseller list. Some years ago Koontz was a prolific and almost exclusively SF author but his recent works have featured a blend of horror and thriller elements mixed together in a Gothic melting pot. LIGHTNING adds a hefty dose of science fiction into the Koontz bestseller brew.

LIGHTNING is the story of Laura Shane, a successful author who, at various times in her life, has been 'assisted' by a mysterious guardian. After Laura is again saved from a near fatal road accident her guardian is attacked by another stranger and she begins to realise that somebody is using time travel to guide her career and to prevent her from being harmed. After a series of shootouts in which the author unconvincingly becomes an Uzi wielding Rambo figure she realises that not all of the time travellers are great fans of her books.

The time travelling theme is extremely muddled in this book and it is not helped by long explanations from the characters who gleefully exchange cries of 'paradox' every few pages but consistently fail to provide a rationale for the mechanics. The central flaw in the book must be the failure to provide a reason for Laura Shane to be important enough to warrant the whole plot revolving around her. Hands up who thought she would become World President and unite mankind? Well, she doesn't. Instead her guardian is a rebel who focuses his attention on Laura because he reads her books in the future and fell in love with her! I tip my reviewer's cap, however, to this author's ability to squeeze the maximum tension from a flawed premise and to retain a breathless pace right up to the final page.

Samuel R. Delany - - NEVERYONA (Grafton, 1988, 544pp, £4.50)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

"'To the proper hearer,' Noreema said, 'Precisely what seems confusing will be the exciting part.'" NEVERYONA follows TALES OF NEVERYON and we come across glimpses, direct and indirect, of the same characters and artifacts: Gorgik the liberator, dragonriders, the astrolobe, Old Venn, the inventor of so many of those actual and symbolic incarnations of the means of production.

It is also the story of young Pryn, who leaves home on a dragon and follows the tale of Queen Olin southwards to the sunken city of Neveryona.

Like TALES, it is a book of meaning to be teased out of the text, and I use those words deliberately: some readers might feel teased by Delany's semiotic dance, others might view the novel as a text (textbook?) and find the metacritical incursions into what could be a conventional Heroic Fantasy plot wearisome. It is more 'theoretical' than the previous book. Those who enjoyed the philosophical elements of TALES will probably get most out of this, and I suspect that the single-viewpoint, linear, quest-structure of the novel (as opposed to the previous book's looser organisation) doesn't really work. But it is genuinely part of a larger and more complex whole, which in turn is one of the very few really thought-provoking works written within the Heroic Fantasy genre.

Carol Emshwiller - - CARMEN DOG (Women's Press, 1988, 148pp, £4.95)

(Reviewed by Sue Thomason)

This feminist satire explores the similarities in the patriarchal view of women and animals, particularly pets, as sub-species of "mankind". All over the world, human women are changing into animals, and female animals into humans (well, everyone knows that Women Are Closer To Nature...). Pooch, a pedigree golden setter bitch, finds herself becoming an attractive human woman with a dog's conditioning. Her ambition (eventually achieved) is to become an opera singer, and the plot development is suitably operatic; wildly improbable coincidence and melodramatic encounters/reflections abound. The animals/women are heroically noble and/or savage; the men are merely dumb beasts. Recommended for feminist opera buffs and dog lovers.

Octavia Butler - - KINDRED (Women's Press, 1988, 264pp, £4.95)

(Reviewed by Sue Thomason)

This powerful, violent and disturbing novel uses a variation of the well-known time travellers' "grandfather paradox" as a vehicle for social comment. Dana is a (contemporary) young Black American woman, happily married to a young white American antiracist man. One day she is jerked from her here-and-now apartment and finds herself rescuing a child from drowning. The child's name is Rufus. The date is about 1810. The place is Maryland.

Dana soon realises that Rufus is her ancestor, and that every time his life is seriously threatened, she is yanked out of here-and-now to rescue him. She feels that unless she preserves his life, she will not come to be born in her own time and will therefore never return there. In any case, she can only return in an extreme state of fear, when her own life is threatened.

The further complication? Rufus is white, the child of a slave-owning family, eventually growing up into a slave-owner himself. During Dana's increasingly extended stays in the past, she is seen as a slave; the only role that society allows her. Her physical and mental health are systematically destroyed by the brutal treatment she receives as a matter of course. The institution of slavery and the racist society of the American slave states are vividly and horrifically presented...

Racism and slavery both still exist. I feel that this book will spur many of its readers to action against such inhumanity. That's a GOOD task for a book to fulfil. Read it.

Dave Duncan - - A ROSE RED CITY (Legend, 1989, 230pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Brian Magorrian)

In the rose-red city of Mera live people rescued from all ages and places. With a cartoon-character resilience no-one suffers any long-term harm during the fights which are the favourite pastime of Mera's residents. And they're immortal.

Sounds a good life - and it is apart from the dangerous rescue missions they're sent on from time to time by 'The mighty Oracle'. When they go 'outside' to rescue people then the vengeful demons held at bay by Mera's power start closing in...

This book tells of one such rescue mission. But why do people need rescuing, and what is the nature of these demons? It was the way that these questions were slowly answered that I found interesting. Never mind the characterisation - this is a good action novel sitting firmly on the fence between the SF and fantasy genres. There's bound to be a sequel as there are lots of half-answered questions, and any number of possible variations on the rescue missions.

Richard Matheson - - THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN (Sphere, 1988, 217pp)

(Reviewed by Nicholas Mahoney)

I have fond memories of being scared out of my skin by the film version of this book. I was completely unprepared for a book that would send me to sleep countless times.

Scott Carey is shrinking at a rate of a seventh of an inch per day. Therefore he loses one inch in height per week. Matheson choses to concentrate on the very last week in which Scott is menaced by a spider and lack of food and water. This must make up about half the book. These sections are boring and pepetitive. The flashbacks to his time of slow but sure shrinkage are more interesting and often gripping. The fear Scott feals at being bullied by a group of loutish teenagers in the dead of night is particularly well evoked. However, for every interesting passage there seems to be two boring ones Thank goodness Matheson had the chance to improve on the novel with a screenplay.

Diana Wynne Jones - - A TALE OF TIME CITY (Methuen Teens, 1989, 285pp, £1.99)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

A TALE OF TIME CITY is more science-fictional than her usual books, but Diana Wynne Jones still presents the reader with a vividly convoluted, almost slapstick plot, and a fresh look at the imagery which surrounds it.

This time, we have the 'Time Patrol' idea

with the old trope of an 'Eternal City' keeping a watchful eye on the timestream dusted off and thoroughly enlivened with DWJ's own brand of fantasy and humour.

Twelve year old Vivian Smith, evacuated from wartime London to the West Country, is abducted by two children who believe she might be the long-lost consort of Faber John, founder of Time City. Vivian, Jonathan and Sam end up shuttling through the eons in search of the four caskets which keep Time City stably on course in its procession through history. Somebody, somewhere is interfering: Time City is crumbling and the start of World War Two is receding, causing dangerous instability throughout the coming years.

Full of inventive detail, from time-ghosts to butter-pies, A TALE OF TIME CITY is a heady but successful mix of SF and fantasy, tension and comedy from a writer whose presence is always welcome.

George Scithers & Darrell Schweitzer (eds) - - ANOTHER ROUND AT THE SPACEPORT BAR (Avon, 1989, 248pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Brian Magorrian)

This anthology is a follow-up from TALES FROM THE SPACEPORT BAR which, the blurb tells us, was on the Locus list of the Year's Best Anthologies. Not all the 18 stories printed are based in bars - some more famous authors get in with dinner parties and the like. I guess stories based in bars are reasonably easy to write, providing a place for meeting strangers, and alchohol to befuddle scepticism.

Although none of the stories made me think "Wow!" there were a few good 'uns. Draco's Tavern makes a welcome appearance in Larry Niven's 'The Subject Is Closed'. Darrell Schweitzer's ghost/horror tale 'Pennies From Hell took the old adage "if you look after the pennies..." one step further into madness and doom.

Of the other stories in this collection, I only actually disliked three, and my dislike of these may have been due more to who wrote them (Asimov and Heinlein) than any actual merit.

Jenny Randles - - ABDUCTION (Headline, 1989, 240pp, £2.99)

Timothy Good - - ABOVE TOP SECRET (Grafton, 1989, 591pp, £5.99)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

It is not my normal policy to review UFOlogy in PI, but ABDUCTION took my interest for an intriguing attempt to keep Whitley 'COMMUNION' Streiber at arms length and its second chapter on 'Abductions and Science Fiction' with its references to Ian Watson's MIRACLE VISITORS, "the only sincere fictional attempt to understand...abduction". Altogether quite a readable, occasionally chilling, account from a writer who believes people who report kidnap/contact experiences of a UFO kind have undergone something strange but appears to be undogmatic about what it is.

In contrast, Timothy Good has produced a detailed but ultimately disappointing account of UFO reports and reproductions of US Intelligence reports which may or may not be authentic and which may or may not be deliberate disinformation. His evidence that a lot of government high-ups take the phenomenon very seriously proves little because the fact that they're government high-ups suggests they're probably incapable of rational thought anyway and (more charitably) there's every difference between taking the security implications of UFO reports seriously and being convinced that we are visited by aliens every couple of months.

Michael P. Kube-McDowell - - EMPEREY (Legend, 1988, 325pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Nicholas Mahoney)

After two highly readable books, EMPRISE and ENIGMA, I was hoping for an equally good finale. In the event, EMPEREY is less good. It has far more cardboard politicking, far more space operatic weaponry on show and a shallowly characterised protagonist. On the other hand, some of the expectations the other books raised were fulfilled. The nature of the alien threat of the Mizari is withheld till the end. This is where there is most disagreement between the characters and the tension between them is certainly strong enough for the reader to be getting involved and taking sides. The unpredictable factor of Merritt Thackery, protagonist of ENIGMA, is also a well-handled plot device.

In the final analysis, however, I would only recommend this to those who have already enjoyed the first two books in the series.

John James - - - - - - - - MEN WENT TO CATTRAETH (Bantam, 1988, 240pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Jessica Yates)

In the Dark Ages between the departure of the Romans and the conversion of the Saxons to Christianity, a poem known as the *Gododdin*, set in North Britain, was composed in Welsh by the poet Aneirin. It celebrated the great defeat of Cattraeth, which deserves to be as well known as Maldon or Thermopylae. In John James' superbly written reconstruction (originally published in 1969) it has a chance.

Aneirin, here the narrator, tells the story from two viewpoints: the immediate past, as the events unfold; and looking back on the campaign years later, after writing the *Gododdin*, his tribute to the individual warriors. As a bard he did not have to fight, but he took up arms (James suggests) through unrequited love for Bradwen, who also went to the battle with her lover Owain, the leader. The three hundred picked men who set out from Eiddin (Edinburgh), furnished with arms and food by the King Mynydog, believed it was their destiny to rid North Britain of the Saxons. It might have been, if they hadn't indulged in a drunken orgy after their first victory, so that the Saxons beat them in a surprise night attack.

This book really gives you the feel of Dark Age warfare; how the weapons and armour were made; the fact that the army had to take a flock of sheep with them as part of their provisions; and the physical details of battle-wounds. It's full of irony, like the way Aneirin sneers at the Saxons' way of life and predicts that the Roman way will win - but the reader knows who won in the end. Aneirin looks back at the battle of Cattraeth (the present Catterick bridge, north of York) from the vantage point of a new Roman Britain whose security is guaranteed by the successful campaigns of Arthur, whom Aneirin knew as a boy. 'And after Arthur, Mordred will lead the household.' (And we know what will happen...)

The book's title translates the poem's refrain 'Gwyr a aeth gatraeth'; however, the publisher's blurb is wrong to say that it is the 'concluding volume of John James's splendid mythological fantasy trilogy'. Although published, as were the earlier Tandem paperbacks, in the same format as VOTAN and NOT FOR ALL THE GOLD IN IRELAND, this novel is not a fantasy, save for the inclusion of Arthur as a boy - but it is still worth attention, and will probably find more discerning readers among SF fandom than among mainstream literary elites.

Charles Platt - - - - - - - - - - - -FREE ZONE
(Avon, 1988, 233pp, $3.50)

(Reviewed by Charles Stross)

A bemusing morsel, fit to be devoured at a single gulp. EVERY MAJOR SCIENCE FICTION THEME IN ONE VOLUME! shouts the blurb, and it's very nearly true - the only one I could spot that has been missed is the hoary old galactic empire. Free Zone is a segment of LA which, in 1999, is being run as a kind of anarchist republic by the redoubtable Dusty McCullough. Unfortunately various forces are conspiring against her freedom-loving folks, including: the Nazis from Mars, talking killer dogs, the evil Mayor, giant ants, something unspeakable rising from the depths of the Pacific Ocean to reclaim its domain, and many more hideous nasties. I almost overloaded on *deja vu* reading this, which I attribute to having previously read EARTHDOOM!

FREE ZONE is very much an SF-oriented version of EARTHDOOM!, told from a trans-Atlantic perpective. The concept is almost identical, as is the manner in which chaos multiplies imperceptibly towards a hysterical climax. It certainly raised a few smiles; Platt has a surer touch with humour than many another failed comic, and the sheer exuberance with which he heaps trial upon tribulation for his hapless heroes is captivating. On the other hand, there's a subtext of violence, sexism and racism running beneath the surface. Or am I reading too much into it? Never mind. If you like your monsters manic, this is a book for you to take on that train journey.

L. Neil Smith - - - - - - - - -TAFLAK LYSANDRA
(Avon, 1988, 230pp, $3.50)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

The strange title is our Heroine's name, as meaningless a name for a book as you can imagine. She wears spectacles - but cover illustrator Richard Hescox can't hack that. We're in the PROBABILITY BROACH universe, on the planet of Majesty, where the human and primate (and killer whale, for that matter) settlers are called 'natives' in quotes, the *real* natives being a very odd bunch indeed. But when we learn that our heroine's (adopted) father is 'the only intelligent coyote in the Galactic Confederacy', shown on the cover wearing a servo-mech arm (yes, he got that bit right), all else pales into insignificance, ably aided by Smith's self-parodying sophomore crosstalk and a meandering plot that's only there to give him something to hang his juvenile humour on. It's all a bit of a pain, including his weird belief that killing people is perfectly normal and proper. Will the man ever grow up?

Allan Asherman - -THE STAR TREK INTERVIEW BOOK
(Titan, 1988, 278pp, £5.95)

(Reviewed by Terry Broome)

Die-hard *Trek* fans won't be disappointed with this book, but does it offer anything to the less fanatical viewer? It does contain some interesting details, among them the original idea for Spock and the first choice for the captain - though it certainly isn't a 'wealth' of information as the blurb proclaims.

There are thirty-eight interviews in all, with the cast, crew, writers, producers, directors and a composer, as well as six pages of b/w plates. It is, unfortunately, poorly edited, with much of the material being contentless and many of the subjects repeating themselves and each other.

Asherman is too soft with his subjects, rarely daring to ask anything but the most cosy questions, giving the book the impression of collective mediocrity. The best interviews are those with Nimoy (the only one not interviewed by Asherman, and it shows) and Harve Bennett (executive producer/co-writer of the film *Star Trek II*) - the former for the insights into his personal life, the latter for a convincing, but flawed attack on critics and 'dogmatic' fans.

In parts, it is a fascinating book, but there's so much back-slapping that several of the interviews appear shallow and insincere. Read it, but think twice before buying it.

Storm Constantine - - - - -THE BEWITCHMENTS OF LOVE AND HATE
(Futura, 1988, 411pp, £4.50)

(Reviewed by Helen McNabb)

When a book, or a series, becomes a cult it is hard to look at it objectively. The first Wraeththu book I read with enjoyment. The second I came to with the sense of reluctance which comes when you are perversely determined to swim against the tide. (I won't like this one because it's too popular.) It has happened to other cults, the books are condemned almost because they are *Star Trek/Hitchhiker*/whatever rather than for inherent faults. It is not an edifying practice, nor a fair or intelligent one, but it undoubtedly happens. The Wraeththu are now a cult and this book will sell in vast numbers to the people hooked on it, which is fair enough. Nevertheless I initially felt that being an objective reviewer would be harder than usual, until I began to read. It *is* as good as the first book, it is a continuation which tells more about the world and the Wraeththu themselves, it is well written, the characterisation is good, the plotting well thought out and always in control. In short it is a good book.

It does not pick up where the last one ended (you do not need to read these in order). Instead of Pel as the protagonist we move continents and characters to a minor character in the first novel, who is the protagonist in this. Swift grows from childhood to adulthood in the opposition camp, the very folk that Pel is set on destroying. Into this claustrophobic community comes Cal - returned from the dead so to speak, enabling us to see more of his mysterious past, but not to understand him, not fully. It is a real continuation of the first book and if you enjoyed that you will enjoy this. I did, anyway.

Fred Saberhagen - - - - - - -BROTHER BERSERKER
(VGSF, 1989, 233pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

This is 1967-era space opera, one of a series of connected novels and shorts around the theme of the Berserkers, described by John Clute as 'huge sentient war-machines savagely inimical to all forms of organic life,' and their ongoing conflict with mankind.

This time we go into the Past to fight, as the Berserkers seek to destroy key figures in the history of the planet Sirgol. Knock out enough of them, the Berserkers figure, and the whole civilisation will cease to exist without the need to tackle it head on in real time.

Naturally, 'Time Operations' fights back. It's all very simply told, in stark black and white terms, suitable for easy reading and light entertainment if you happen to like that sort of thing.

The Berserker novels have made Saberhagen a great deal of money; if you're in the mood just lie back and enjoy this one. But please don't try to take it seriously. And since the ending is, as expected, left inconclusive, watch out for yet another book to follow.

Marion Zimmer Bradley - -SWORD AND SORCERESS 3
(Headline, 1988, 285pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Lynne Bispham)

Third collection of Sword and Sorcery stories edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley, in which women are the protagonists. There are some poor stories in SWORD AND SORCERESS 3, as in most anthologies, but the majority of the twenty tales in this book are very readable; several, such as Terry Tafoya's 'Tupilak', which is set among the Innuit, are excellent, and prove that S&S does not have to be un-original. An unusual setting, in this case the ancient Roman Mediterranean, gives originality to Dorothy J. Heydt's 'The Song and the Flute', as does the African setting of Charles R. Saunder's 'Marwe's Forest' - both stories feature heroines who have appeared in previous volumes of SWORD AND SORCERESS. Diana L. Paxson successfully draws on Norse mythology for 'The Mist on the Moor', while 'Sword Sworn' by Mercedes Lackey stands out simply because it is so well written.

Admittedly there are four stories in this book that just do not 'work' (two are anec-dotes rather than stories, two have clumsy and unconvincing plots), but the good stories outnumber the bad, and the best stories could even win the much-maligned S&S genre some converts.

C.J. Cherryh - - - - - - -WAVE WITHOUT A SHORE
(VGSF, 1988, 247pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Lynne Bispham)

What is reality? On the planet Freedom each human colonist's individual Reality excludes anything or anyone they find unacceptable - literally. Humans simply do not see Freedom's indigenes, the ahnit, whose Reality is different to theirs. Herrin Law, Freedom's greatest mind, determines to shape the planet with his art, his Reality, but this brings him into conflict with Freedom's First Citizen, Waden Jenks, who seeks to impose his violent Reality on the planet.

The novel starts slowly, but once it gathers momentum it is an intriguing read. There is one splendid scene when both human and ahnit gather before Law's magnum opus, and his art forces them to share the same Reality with dire consequences. The ahnit are wonder-fully alien, but Law comes to see that they have much to teach Freedom's humans. Law himself, isolated from his fellows because none of them are able to comprehend his genius, is a surprisingly sympathetic hero. As readers we experience his Reality so that the intrusion of another's perspective is as shocking for us as it is for him.

This is not the best novel C.J. Cherryh has ever written, but it is worth reading for the ideas it contains.

K.W. Jeter - - - - - - - - - - - - -DEATH ARMS
(Grafton, 1989, 239pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Terry Broome)

Jeter's 'thematic trilogy', DR ADDER, THE GLASS HAMMER and DEATH ARMS all have a post-catastrophe L.A. setting, feature a father/son, God/messiah duality, and according to reviews of THE GLASS HAMMER (the only one of the three I haven't read), all favour mentor, Philip K. Dick's anti-authority paranoia. They deal with depravity, hypocrisy and corruption, in which the media feature so heavily that I wondered if Jeter was trying to make his readers aware of their own possible wryerism.

In DR ADDER, Limmit - the son of Adder's enemy, Mox - gives Adder a lethal weapon called a 'death arm', but to kill Mox, Adder must fight him in an altered state of consciousness. In DEATH ARMS, Legger, like the protagonists of the other two books, is a country boy who goes to seek his fortune in L.A. He is immediately embroiled in a conspiracy to manoeuvre him into taking on the role of his dead father, a former assassin, and 'helped' by three 'wild talents', people with idiosyncratic psi powers - among them a reanimator. Legger *becomes* the death arm, in more than one sense of the term. *His* altered state may be groaningly unlikely, but this final image of an innocent turned gruesome killer in a world which has no room for innocents, a figurative Horseman of the Apocalypse, is horrifying.

The humour - and there is plenty of it - is jet black. In many ways DEATH ARMS is funnier and grimmer than DR ADDER, it is more cinematographic, and of course it is much fresher. At the same time, it feels less substantial, but what clearly would have been a grand book with better characterisation is still an excellent action-thriller, with several wonderfully bizarre, funny and horrifying ideas, perhaps a little too neatly packaged.

Loren J. MacGregor - - - - - - - - - - THE NET
(Orbit, 1989, 225pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Craig Marnock)

The New Ace Specials series published many excellent first novels, Shepard's GREEN EYES and Gibson's NEUROMANCER among them. Sadly, THE NET is not in the same class.

The plot of the novel is a venerable and well tried one, though this doesn't stop it from being rather silly.

Jason Horiuchi, head of one of the galaxy's two competing corporate dynasties, prefers to travel around her commercial empire in a private ship rather than administrate it from an office. She adds spice to her peregrinations by stealing rare and valuable gemstones - a fact that Alecko Papandreou, heir to the rival dynasty, exploits to propose a wager between them. If Jason can steal a certain ruby from Alecko's museum, Papandreou will withdraw from business areas in which they conflict with Horuichi; if she fails, of course, then Horuichi must withdraw.

From this initial premise, the plot builds in a familiar and moderately satisfying manner to the expected twist-conclusion. In fact the whole thing reads like small scale post-cyberpunk space opera.

Onto this organic plot, MacGregor attempts to impose structure by means of the 'Net', a cybernetic mind-linking device which allows a ship's crew to function as a gestalt entity. Unfortunately his inexperience shows and he can't quite bring it off. The novel suffers from this, being less satisfying than it might otherwise have been.

Very much a first novel, then, but one which succeeds within that remit.

James P. Blaylock - - - - - - - - THE ELFIN SHIP
(Grafton, 1988, 379pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by K.V. Bailey)

The title of its last chapter is 'Three Men and a Dog'. The three have this in common with the three (to say nothing of the dog) of Jerome K. Jerome's classic: they eat and drink a lot, have adventures on a river, and return home. The river, however, is not tame Thames but the mythic Oriel; their goal not Oxford but the court of an elf-like fisherman king; and there are even echoes of a much wilder river:

> The hooting and gonging and shrieking and laughing was not so much ahead of them on the raft as all around them - in the woods along the invisible shore.

Conrad's HEART OF DARKNESS? No: it is Blaylock's craft river-winding through perilous Goblin Wood.

Such analogies identify river as path of quest and return. That structure underlies the pleasant absurdities of Blaylock's story. His chief protagonist, Jonathan (Cheeser) Bing, has the simple mission to take cheeses from Twombly Town to Seaside, bringing back honey cakes. En route he, Professor Wurzle and young Dooly acquire tasks that have to do with recovering magic rings and a watch with the power to freeze action. Using this, the evil dwarf Salznak and his goblins have devastated the land. Its restoration is effected by the river-borne three, helped by a variety of elvish types with such names as Squire Myrkle, Bufo and Twickenham, together with a kind of mock-Gandalf named Miles and Dooly's incredible Grandpa, Theophile Escargot.

This comic sub-Hobbitry may alienate some; but once into it the picaresque vigour, the surrealistic quirkiness, the sly allusions and near parodies are compelling. Escargot with his getaway submarine is treasurable; the siege of Hightower must be the most uproarious in all fantasy; and the valley described is a threatened Cockaigne quite as seductive as Geoff Taylor's splendid panoramic cover suggests.

Sheri S. Tepper - - - - - - - - THE ENIGMA SCORE
(Corgi, 1989, 384pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Craig Marnock)

Sheri S. Tepper is a storyteller in a traditional sense, with all the virtues that implies. I have read several of her previous novels, and like them I found this to be a well constructed, engrossing and enjoyable book.

The setting is the recently colonised planet of Jubal whose landscape is dominated by the giant crystalline Presences which shatter murderously if approached too closely. Access by them is made possible by the songs of the Tripsingers, soothing melodies which appear to calm them.

One such Tripsinger, Tasmin Ferrence, becomes caught up in the corrupt, complex, and often confusing politics which surround the Presences and the question of their sentience. The code of the Planetary Exploitation Council is such that planets with indigenous sentient life-forms must be abandoned, and a commission is set up to rule upon the Presences. However, local government and big business have a vested interest in the Presences being declared non-sentient, so that they can destroy them and open up the interior of the planet. It falls to the Tripsingers to attempt to communicate with the Presences and save them from destruction.

The all too human story of Tasmin Ferrence is well woven into this background, providing a focus for the action in the midst of the Byzantine plotting of all the various factions.

A well written and enjoyable story.

Isaac Asimov - - - - - - - -FANTASTIC VOYAGE II: DESTINATION BRAIN
(Grafton, 1988, 480pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Steven Tew)

The worst thing about FANTASTIC VOYAGE II: DESTINATION BRAIN, with the possible exception of its title, is the constant dribbling of banal aphorisms attributed to the father of one of its characters. However, despite its title, it is not a sequel, or even a prequel, to the original film novelisation, and we can at least be thankful that it is not another addition to the Spaghetti Junction connections Asimov has latterly been engineering between the interminable *Foundation* and *Robot* series. Its characters and setting are new.

Morrison, an American neurologist with cranky ideas, is kidnapped by the Soviets, who wish to use his expertise to extract some vital information on their miniaturisation programme from the comatose brain of one of their scientists - by miniaturising a submarine and entering a brain cell (how else?). Even in the 'Good New Days' of 21st Century East-West amicability the kidnapping would be enough to cause a few tense moments in the Corridors of Power if it weren't for the fact that the CIA want him to do a little spying for them. He makes little headway with that, but he does make a discovery of his own, so helping Uncle Sam to gain his own technological monopoly. 20th Century Balance of Terror becomes 21st Century Balance of Scientific Knowledge. If you're interested in the details, read the book. But you may be better off settling for a couple of pints and a bag of crisps down the pub.

Stephen Laws - - - - - - - - - - - - - -THE WYRM
(Sphere, 1989, 301pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Colin Bird)

In a Northumbrian village called Shillingham there lies an ancient gibbet and when proposals are put forward to move it to make way for a new road the villagers eagerly await an influx of cash-laden tourists. But the village eccentric, old Frank Warwick, knows that the gibbet marks the burial site of an evil force bent on rending man asunder and generally doing what evil forces do when the pubs are closed. The Wyrm turns out to be a vampiric being previously entombed by the villagers back in 1620. It is promptly uncovered by the clumsy attempts to remove the gibbet and sets about seeking revenge upon the offspring of the villagers who foiled its earlier reign.

Laws has a simple and concise storytelling ability and his strengths are best revealed in the first third of the book, as he sets the scene of rural unease with considerable aplomb. The leading characters are not over mannered and their pasts are carefully revealed to provide a base for their subsequent actions. There are some risible moments amongst the mayhem which tilt the balance towards the implausible and amorphous clouds of pure evil are considerably less interesting than more rigorously defined supernatural beings. Laws also loses grip somewhat in the middle section of the narrative where several characters are involved, the constant cutting from one scene to another tends to fragment the tension that the author has so successfully mounted.

All caveats aside, however, THE WYRM is an involving horror novel and an enjoyable read.

Michael Scott Rohan - - -THE HAMMER OF THE SUN
(Orbit, 1988, 509pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Laurence Scotford)

This is the final volume in Rohan's *The Winter of the World* trilogy. It is also the best. The three volumes taken as a whole have been an encouraging sign that there is still life left in the archetypal fantasy trilogy, given a talented and original author to exploit the form, and Rohan fits that role well.

The story is set at the end of the ice age, but rather than being a passive threat, the ice is seen as a conscious and malevolent force manipulating and suppressing mankind for its own evil purposes. The chief weapon in combating the advance of the ice is smith-craft. Not the barren art of today but a mystical and magical skill wielded by mastersmiths, the greatest of these being Elof Valantor.

Having won a brief respite for men against the ice, and the love of Kara, a minor power in THE FORGE IN THE FOREST, in this subsequent volume Elof, afraid of losing Kara, attempts to bind her to him by crafting for her anklets with the virtue of bonding. This only succeeds in frightening her to the extent that she leaves him and returns to her former service with the ice. Elof, in desperation, leaves his homeland and goes in search of her, and it is in the course of this search that he shapes not only his own destiny but that of the whole world.

I can highly recommend this trilogy to anyone looking for some refreshing and original reading amidst the plethora of mediocrity that seems to be pervading the fantasy genre at the moment. It will be interesting to see what other gems emerge from Rohan in the future. Hopefully he will not be tempted to ride on the success of these books and spoil them with interminable sequels.

Ben Bova - - - - - - - - - -VENGEANCE OF ORION
(Methuen, 1988, 342pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by John Newsinger)

When I was in my early teens it is, I suppose, quite possible that this book would have gripped and excited me. An advanced race of superbeings from the distant future are manipulating the human past and passing themselves off as gods in the process. One of their agents, Orion the hunter, who they have used throughout history, is growing rebellious however.

Orion is ordered to ensure a Trojan victory over the Achaians but defies his creator, Apollo. Then, together with Helen of Troy, he flees overland to Egypt, helping to bring down the walls of Jericho en route. Once he arrives in Egypt he becomes involved in palace intrigue and murder.

Bova takes us on an exhausting tour of antiquity, accompanied by considerable mayhem and the occasional night of passion with the most beautiful woman in the world. Unfortunately his writing is resolutely pedestrian and the plot is absolutely predictable. I really had to struggle through this book and got nothing whatsoever out of the chore. This is one author I shall be giving a miss!

Robert Leeson - - - - - - - - - SLAMBASH WANGS OF A COMPO GORMER
(Lions Teen Tracks, 1987, 288pp, £2.25)

(Reviewed by Helen McNabb)

I *think* this is meant to be a partial send-up of some of the D&D games, but as I've never played any I'm not entirely sure. If it is, then it may be funny for the people who have. As it is - I had to work very hard to get to the end of the book. It is a juvenile, and again it *might* be funny to teenage boys who are into making up languages which consist of nothing but rhyming words. Or it might not.

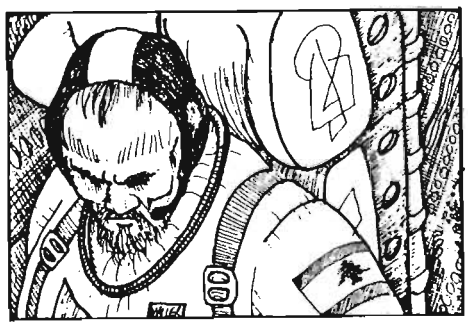
For me - well, thumbs down. I found the made up language irritating in the extreme (far worse than most others because it was so cute) and incomprehensible so the pages of talk written in it I merely skipped over. I may have lost some of the plot by doing this. The book is not all bad, the hero is not the muscle-bound bully (the muscle-bound bullies get their comeuppance at the end) but a vague, bookish non-achiever whose friend (a girl) is the one with the get up and go. Some conventions are overturned quite neatly, the story is not without humour, but - it didn't work for me. That is not to say it won't work well for someone else, it may appeal strongly to the market it is (after all) aimed at, but as I'm not a teenage boy into games playing I'm not sure whether it hits the target or sails past and falls flat on the floor. Of limited appeal at best, it is certainly not a book to set the world alight.

John Rowe Townsend - - - - KING CREATURE, COME
(Swallow, 1988, 187pp, £2.25)

(Reviewed by Steven Tew)

Set on Earth at a time in a future in which our world has been taken over by a race of decadent superbeings whose preoccupations are mainly with music, mathematics, and the Dimension Game (which makes chess look as demanding as ludo), this tale is told from the point of view of a teenage alien called Vector. Vector forsakes the luxuries of civilisation in order to be cast out of the alien precinct into the squalor of the ordinary world, in which the Earth people - 'Creatures' - await the overthrow of their masters by the King Creature. And all to be with his girlfriend, Harmony. While the aliens - 'Persons' - play their games, the Guards, who quisling-like underpin the system, plan their own take-over. The people, of course, get the worst end of this power play, but they do get their own back in the end.

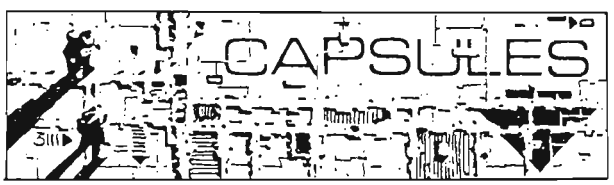
KING CREATURE, COME is obviously aimed at the teenage market, and has its share of adolescent problems, discovery of self, girls and all that jazz. I scoff not, for these themes are handled with insight. It also tackles broader issues, such as the political and social ramifications of Imperialist behaviour, the use of poverty and deprivation as a means of keeping power, etc. While some aspects of the book take some suspension of disbelief (the Persons seem to rule little more than one of the Home Counties, for example), this is an intelligent and thought-provoking book, and worth a read.



Spider Robinson - - - - CALLAHAN'S CRAZY CROSSTIME BAR (Legend, 1989, 351pp, £3.50)

Reviewed by Edward James

It is clear from the cover that the artist thinks this is yet another TALES FROM THE SPACEPORT BAR (as edited by Scithers and Schweitzer, NEL 1988): BEMS and assembled weirdos abound. But no, it's not quite like that. Callahan's Bar, as readers of the original magazine stories (or of the three US collections from which this is assembled) will know, is on Long Island, and most of its regulars are perfectly ordinary unhappy Terrans, like the narrator -- "an incipient alcoholic who is comfortable only here in this room with psychological cripples like yourself" (as the very last visiting alien unkindly and correctly puts it on p.335, shortly before Callahan's Bar disappears in a nuclear explosion). Callahan's is where you come if you are male, enjoy male company, and heavy drinking, need sympathetic and humane listeners, and delight in telling tall tales laced with appalling puns. The twelve stories themselves, written between 1977 and 1986, almost all have a sfnal element -- an alien, a mutant dog, a telepath, a time-traveller -- but that element is (deliberately) hackneyed and unoriginal (unlike the sf in Arthur C. Clarke's equally lightweight TALES FROM THE WHITE HART). Most of each story is taken up with the shaggy dog stories, sfnal in-jokes, punning badinage and maudlin' bonhomie of the regulars. I can hardly recommend it to any serious sf reader. (But I really rather enjoyed it myself. Some of those puns were *awful*.)



Marc Alexander - - ANCIENT DREAMS (Headline, 1988, 338pp, £3.50)

This one is every bit as bad as the title, cover and blurb make out, its only virtue being that it is easy to read while half asleep. Tortured sentence structure, flowery verbosity and cliche-ridden phrase, imagery and plot characterise the stupendously inept, pretentious rehashings of familiar 'fairy' tales. (Terry Broome)

Poul & Karen Anderson - - DAHUT (Grafton, 1989, 493pp, £3.99)

The King's daughter now bears the crescent mark which makes her a Queen of Ys - and his wife. Third volume of the Dark Ages historical fantasy series. (Andy Sawyer)

Scott Baker - - DRINK THE FIRE FROM THE FLAMES (Legend, 1988, 343pp, £3.50)

Not half as bad as the title, cover and blurb make out, but still heavy with fatalism, this one's about Moth's BETRAYAL of his friends and family to AVENGE his friends and family. (Terry Broome)

Scott Baker - - FIREDANCE (Legend, 1989, 380pp, £3.50)

Repeats both the plot of the first volume, DRINK THE FIRE FROM THE FLAMES, in the story of Rafti, the firedance of the title, and in extending Moth's story, repeats itself throughout. Better written than many multi-volume fantasies, with some intriguing moral dilemmas, it is still oddly two-dimensional. (Terry Broome)

Damien Broderick - - STRIPED HOLES (Avon, 1988, 180pp, $2.95)

A thoroughly disappointing comedy aimed at the American market as if there were a barn door to aim at. I derived scant enjoyment. (Nicholas Mahoney)

Louise Cooper - - INFANTA (Unwin, 1989, 318pp, £3.50)

Third volume of Indigo's quest to vanquish the demons she let loose from the Tower of Regrets, the predominant element here is water: the previous book, INFERNO, apparently centred around fire. When you've noted that, you've noted all: although Louise Cooper combines her emblems with some skill, there is virtually no suspense. The identity of the demon becomes obvious very early in the book, and we spend the rest of the time waiting for the heroine to catch on. (Andy Sawyer)

Peter David - - STRIKE ZONE (Titan, 1989, 275pp, £2.95)

The Kreel, stumbling across a planetary cache of super-weapons, challenge their ancient enemies, the mighty Klingons. This is 'Star Trek: The Next Generation', and Captain Picard and the Enterprise (with boy genius Wesley Crusher who has problems of his own) are summoned to mediate. Fairly ingenious action-packed juvenile romp, with the usual moral messages. (Norman Beswick)

Ann Downer - - THE SPELLKEY (Orbit, 1989, 240pp, £2.99)

A reluctant novice is detailed to take a young witch to a far-away monastery. If they get there on time, fine, if not... well, these are mock-medieval times. Of course there are plots and conspiracies galore going on behind the scenes, and where there is magic there must be MAGIC, and the Philosopher's Stone, in this case The Spellkey. This isn't a bad book, nicely turned out and quite sprightly. It is even imaginative in places. It did not, however, keep me up until dawn, or make me fear for the fabric of the universe which I dimly recall I may well have done when I read all this for the first time. (Martyn Taylor)

Diane Duane - - MY ENEMY, MY ALLY (Titan, 1989, 309pp, £2.95)

Romulans begin genetic theft on kidnapped Vulcans, and Romulan Commander Ael t'Rilaillieu switches allegiance to work secretly with her old enemy, Captain Kirk of the Enterprise. As always, the goodies triumph in the end, but the best parts of this novel happen in between the action: the four-dimensional chess, the personality and culture clashes, the Romulan language, and the wide variety of gentlebeings who all, whatever their shape, use speech for communication. (Norman Beswick)

William R. Fortschen & Greg Morrison - - THE CRYSTAL WARRIORS (Avon, 1988, 308pp, $3.50)

Drawn through from World War Two to a world in which their latent paranormal powers make them sorcerers, U.S. airmen and Japanese soldiers must overcome their national rivalries in a greater conflict which involves actual gods. Action-packed science fantasy, but nothing more. (Andy Sawyer)

Craig Shaw Gardner - - A NIGHT IN THE NETHER-HELLS (Headline, 1989, 200pp, £2.99)

The final book in Gardner's trilogy of funny fantasy which started with A MALADY OF MAGICKS. Although I chuckled immensely during one chapter, I thought that Gardner was concentrating more in this book on looking after his characters and bringing the whole story to a happy ending (which he does), than on the fun. Perhaps for this type of book to really suceed, the characters must be completely expendable! (Alan Fraser)

Ray Garton - - CRUCIFAX (Futura, 1989, 387pp, £3.50)

Ray Garton has written an excellent contemporary horror novel, bringing the Pied Piper story up to date. A chilling read that held my interest right up to the end. It is that good, I have ordered his other novel. Don't be put off by the cover. A very enjoyable book. (John Newsinger)

Charles L. Grant - - THE ORCHARD (Futura, 1989, 287pp, £2.99)

Not a novel about an orchard but four loosely linled horror tales set in Grant's mythical town of Oxrun Station. Grant is always readable but THE ORCHARD is too patchy to rank as one of his best. (Colin Bird)

Harry Harrison - - THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT SAVES THE WORLD (Bantam, 1989, 160pp, £2.50)

A reprint of a vintage novel in the 'Stainless Steel Rat' series, originally published by Sphere Books in 1973, with this edition enriched by a cover from Jim Burns. This time Slippery Jim DiGriz has to travel back in time to Earth in the year 1984 to save the universe (not just the world!) from villains who are tampering with the past in order to get their evil way in the present. As one of the people who has ceased to exist because of their time changes is his wife Angelina, Jim has a very personal reason for sorting out the baddies and putting things straight. Very enjoyable hokum, although the territory it covers has become very familiar. Harrison has always been a skilful writer of this type of light SF, and the book is well worth a read. Of course, when it was written, 1984 was an ominous date in the future... (Alan Fraser)

Simon Hawke - - THE KHYBER CONNECTION (Headline, 1989, 195pp, £2.99)

The author's closing background notes reveal his enthusiasm and research; this sixth book of the Time Wars series has all the adventure and verisimilitude of its predecessors, with none of the thrill that came from learning the temporal framework so convincingly explained in the first book. Exciting reading, yes, but the swashbuckling Temporal Corpsmen provide no more than an easy escape from a complex plot. Light-hearted fun, well done, nothing more than that. (Ken Lake)

Bob Kane- - BATMAN VS CATWOMAN (Titan, 1989, £2.95)

This time the Catwoman provides the villany in three more '50s Bat-adventures with a neat touch in fairytale/pulp archetypes if a little (surprisingly) slow in action. (Andy Sawyer)

Clare McNally - - COME DOWN INTO DARKNESS (Corgi, 1989, 286pp, £2.99)

A derelict house bought as a children's shelter turns out to have a Dreadful Secret and only the characters in the story are naive enough not to notice something unnatural about the dishy Brendan. Readers will have sussed it within five minutes but may enjoy the tale nevertheless. (Andy Sawyer)

Mike McQuay - - ISAAC ASIMOV'S ROBOT CITY BOOK TWO: SUSPICION (Orbit, 1989, 177pp, £2.99)

Book 2 in the 'Robot City' series and you have to look hard for the author's name. L.J. Hurst's review of book 1 (PI 77) just about says it all. SUSPICION follows closely from ODYSSEY and so doesn't really stand alone. (Brian Magorrian)

Kate Novak & Jeff Grubb - - AZURE BONDS (Penguin, 1989, 380pp, £3.99)

Another TSR fantasy adventure, which seems to be all that Penguin do nowadays. Mercenary swordswoman Alias wakes in a tavern with a series of tattoos on her arm and no memory of how she got them. Notable mainly for the first incidence of a female halfling in major supporting role that I have come across. (Andy Sawyer)

Wendy & Richard Pini - - QUEST'S END (ELFQUEST 4) (Titan, 1989, £8.95)

Despite at times bloody scenes, the Pinis' elves are nothing else but cute. ELFQUEST is hardly even Disneyish. It's Blyton with sex 'n' violence and dollops of phoney mysticism. If you missed the original comix production of this overblown epic, it won't hurt if you do likewise with this expensive 'graphic novel'. (Andy Sawyer)

Joel Rosenberg - - THE SWORD AND THE CHAIN (Grafton, 1988, 271pp, £2.99); THE SILVER CROWN (Grafton, 1989, 367pp, £3.50); THE HEIR APPARENT (Grafton, 1989, 348pp £3.50)

This 'Guardians of The Flame' series is yet another series about fantasy games players transported into the realm of their game, and has little to add to the basic idea. There's a dragon with a nice line in sarcasm and an ongoing 'beat the Slavers' storyline, but for a fantasy the characters and locale are about as exotic as the Wild West; less so, in fact. (This could be described as 'fantasy western': there's even a cattle drive in THE HEIR APPARENT!) These are books 2 to 4 of the tetralogy, but HEIR has a suspiciously cliff-hanging ending... (Andy Sawyer)

Fred Saberhagen - - SIGHTBLINDER'S STORY (Futura, 1989, 248pp, £2.99)

This is the second Book of Lost Swords, and as twelve Swords of Power are apparently lost, completists are in for a long haul. The story is competent, the plot full of predictably unexpected twists, the prose style clean and supple, and the characters totally indistinguishable from one another. Curicsity may propel you to the end but you could not possibly care. (Norman Beswick)

Nancy Springer - - MINDBOND (Orbit, 1989, 243pp, £3.50)

MINDBOND is the 2nd volume in the 'Sea King' fantasy trilogy. Dannoc and Korridun, linked together with Mindspeak and strength-giving Handbond journey to the undersea realm of the death goddess Mahela. Since a lot of the tale seems to follow on from vol. 1 (MADBOND) it would be better to read that first. Yet another fantasy trilogy? I'm afraid so: not particularly good or bad. (Brian Magorrian)

Whitley Strieber - - CAT MAGIC (Grafton, 1988, 458pp, £3.50)

This is a horror story with a difference, a tale of benign witchcraft in small town America under threat from fanatical Christian fundamentalists. Strieber tells an exciting story with great skill and sensitivity. A humane book preaching tolerance, understanding and forgiveness. I enjoyed reading it and will certainly look up Whitley Strieber again. Of course, there is always the nagging suspicion that he might actually believe it all! (John Newsinger)

Claude Tardat - - SWEET DEATH (Pandora Press, 1989, 130pp £3.50)

Hardly fantasy, never mind SF, this is a diary form novella about an unloved young woman who turns to sugar and obesity as a means of comfort and suicide. Written with skill and clarity, this is an impressive and absorbing psychological tale which deserves to be read, whatever the reader's preferences may be. (Craig Marnock)

Roger Taylor - - THE FALL OF FYORLUND (Headline, 1989, 467pp, £3.99)

The far-to-few appearances by Gavor, a somewhat disreputable raven, are the main bright spots in this second volume of the Chronicles of Hawklann, a particularly characterless hero even for heroic fantasy. (Andy Sawyer)

Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman - - DOOM OF THE DARKSWORD (Bantam, 1989, 383pp, £3.50)

Second volume of the trilogy in which magic is Life and those born without it are Dead. Too much second-hand whimsy, but that at least makes it more interesting than most by these authors. (Andy Sawyer)

"Upon the rack in print"

THE GATE 1. Edited by Maureen Porter, published by and available from 'W' Publishing, 28 Saville Road, Westwood, Peterborough PE3 7PR. U.K. subscription (4 issues) £8.50)

(Reviewed by K.V. Bailey)

Welcome! To get incidentals out of the way; its hip-pocket size is convenient; its presentation is plain but attractive; gremlins have only entered to print a few redundant pages. Now on to essentials; and first as to tone. The title-character of Eliot's 'Sweeney Agonistes', reflecting the down-beat 'thirties says "Birth and copulation and death/That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks." They are certainly the brass tacks you come to, usually pretty traumatically, in most of the seven stories; death in sensitive slow-motion in Richard Paul Russo's 'Night Passage' birth and death in searing slow-motion in David Mace's powerfully nihilistic 'The Purpose of the Experiment'; birth, death and all the seven ages in Brian Stableford's 'Cinderella's Sisters'; the bleakest of encounters of love with death in Alex Stewart's atmospheric 'Christmas Away From Home'. And copulation abounds throughout.

A new writer, Stratford A. Kirby, in his 'Revelations in Stone', uses the icons of invasive calcification to symbolise urban alienated humanity being "dragged back to the basic feed, sleep, screw, die pattern." James White, in the only story ('Type "Genie" and Run') that tempts a smile, monitors the birth of an electronic intelligence and adroitly details its steps towards self-preservation.

While these stories are moved on by such 20/21st century phenomena and technologies as cosmetic engine ring, hacking, laser shows and neural chemistry, they demonstrate also the current trend towards a feed-in to hard and 'sociological' SF from fairy-tale and tradition; e.g. from the glass slipper in Stableford's story; from the 'three magic wishes' in White's. There is even a sub-structure of Medusa-petrification in Kirby's story, and a specific minotaur-in-the-maze analogy in David Mace's, while Alex Stewart counterpoints terror against the familiarly-named milestones that mark a year's beginnings and endings.

A promising start. Though presently limited in variety, THE GATE matches its peers in quality. Correspondence will start up. Of the 160 pages, 20 are usefully given to sharp book and film reviews (Kincaid and Newman respectively) and a clear editorial statement of intent; six pages to rather muddy film stills. Some SF art might be more stimulating. Steve Kyte's cover is colourfully pleasant, but its space opera and S&S images haven't much relevance (Cinderella etc. notwithstanding) to this issue's contents - save perhaps Kim Newman's plot-summary of WILLOW.

INTERZONE 29 (May/June 1989)

(Reviewed by Andy Mills)

Sex Wars II or, Son/Daughter of Sex Wars Rides Again. This issue revisits the country of male/female relationships first "reconnoitred in force" (as the editorial neatly puts it) in IZ 16. One contributor to that issue was Brian Stableford, and he returns to give us 'The Magic Bullet'. Lisa Friemann is a forensic scientist whose help is requested in investigating an attack on the work and person of an elderly genetic engineer. Lisa's interest in the case is more than personal - she was the victim's occasional lover - and it is this which determines the resolution of this compelling story. Stableford's characters are brilliantly drawn, the secret he reveals leads to the most revolutionary of all the scenarios postulated in this issue. A must! Also very good is Phillip Mann's often hilarious 'An Old-Fashioned Story'. Perhaps it's because I'm currently bungling my way through a series of home "improvements" that this story of a boy attempting to repair, with a modicum of tools and knowledge, his female android really struck a chord. Contrast the sophistication of these tales with Marianne Puxley's 'Cronus', whose finale does not redeem the crudity of the story (it(s good v. evil, and no guesses as to which sex is which). Also a straightforward sexual power struggle is 'The Men's Room' by Garry Kilworth. Here a novel type of time travel leads to twists in society and the experience (as in Esme Dodderidge's THE NEW GULLIVER, but not as well executed) of sex-role reversal. However, it is good to see a male writer so thoroughly espousing the feminist cause. Karen Joy Fowler gives an interesting addition to the male-dominated bar-room tale in 'Game Night at the Fox and Goose'. Men lie, she unequivocally states, as does Andrew Ferguson, less successfully, in 'Green-Eyed Monstera'. Ah, but we also feel: Greg Egan's

'The Cutie' charts the human cost of two radical scientific breakthroughs - male pregnacies and genetically-programmed living dolls. Of interest on the non-fiction side are the two author interviews - Michael Moorcock's is strong on the background to his work and on Moorcock's attitude to his fiction, while the shorter one with Lisa Tuttle concentrates on her as writer. But for me it's undoubtedly the fiction by Stableford and Mann which makes this issue really worthwhile.

FANTASY TALES Vol 10 no. 2 (Spring 1989)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

This second issue of the relaunched FT (£4 for four issues from Robinson Publishing, 11 Shepherd House, Shepherd St., London W1 Y 7LD) maintains the impact of the first, with a greater variety of stories within its pages and the kind of topical nonfiction material (profile of cover artist Les Edwards, Mike Ashley's survey of forthcoming fantasy) which makes a magazine rather than an occasional anthology of stories.

The Weird Tales tradition which FT attempts to carry on is very much idebted to Howardian sword-and-sorcery. Largely this involves rewriting the same old plot of barbarian meets monster, barbarian slays monster and wanders off grunting platitudes about cold steel being no match for this danged unnatural sorcery. Ken Bulmer's 'Ice and Fire' has a brother-and-sister team with enough perverse suggestions about their relationship to have caused palpitations in the original WT readership. And would Puss Nicholson have got away with that illustration in the 1930s? Bulmer makes a better story out of his tale of combat by stressing some of the undercurrents of the genre. A more modern touch is offered by Joel Lane's 'The Dispossessed', a 'bleak urban horror' story which explores territory reminiscent of that covered by Ramsey Campbell and Clive Barker (especially the sardonic touches of humour: check the title of the opening section). However, Lane is by no means derivative: judging by this story he has a confident voice of his own.

William F. Nolan's 'The Cure' is a macabre example of that peculiar horror subgenre, the 'serial killer'story. This time the narrator, a finely-drawn psychopath displaying his normality to his journal, is trying to kick the habit. Well, it can be a bit addictive, I suppose. Brian Lumley's 'The Man Who Felt Pain' is more science-fictional than is usual with this magazine. What can you do if you are subject to the physical agonies of all surrounding life, feeling, for example, the pain of a car-crash victim in the vicinity? Much horror fiction is about pain of some kind: this story seems to reverse the fascination and obsession and underlying it, I feel, is a parable about how we hurt each other. Returning to the Weird Tales tradition, there just has to be a story which uses the words 'mephitic' and 'eldritch' and Will Johnson's 'Stepping Out' is it. There's a nice touch in making the demon from hell the viewpoint character. Finally, Neil Gaiman's poem 'Vampire Sestina' has lovely brooding images of blood and love and loss.

There's some criticism in the lettercolum about the change in design from the old small-press format to something nearer Robinson Publishing's 'house style', but I think it looks pretty good. And in any case the contents are what matters and they're first-rate.

Paperback Purgatory

(Reprise)

Professor Tom Shippey of the University of Leeds has asked me to mention a conference he is organising jointly with George Slusser from the University of California (Riverside) at Devonshire Hall (University of Leeds) between June 28th and July 1st. The theme is "Cyberpunk: Fiction Approaching The Year 2000", and among the writers invited are Samuel Delany, Lewis Shiner, Greg Benford, Harry Harrison, Brian Aldiss and Rob Holdstock. "We already have 8 or 10 papers promised by academics in the UK or the US, and we expect a certain number of staff and students from UCAL to come over to support the conference. We are also, I should say, sending out calls for papers both in this country and in the USA, and would be glad to have even more writers, critics or other interested particicpants come along."

Registration fee is £20, and bed and breakfast accommodation will be available at about £15 per night. In close proximity is a good collection of ethnic restaurants, and a wide variety of local beers.

"We are confident that we will have a succession of good speakers who are actively thinking not about the past of science fiction but about its future." Anyone interested is invited to contact Tom Shippey at the Department of English Language and Medieval English Literature, The University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT (Leeds 334 738).

If you have got this far, you'll notice that this issue of PI consists of 20 rather than the usual 16 pages. We hope to be able to bring you these longer issues in alternate months - i.e. the next issue will be 16 pages, but I hope that the one after will be back to 20.

This leaves me in the unusual position of not having a file of material carried forward to the next issue which could have been in this had I more space... although because of erratic deliveries of Analog and Asimov's, Edward James has been unable to deliver his usual magazine reviews. We hope to catch up next time. Meanwhile, I'm very grateful to K.V. Bailey for reviewing The Gate at very short notice. That review was typed and inserted on the evening it was received, a couple of days before the deadline, in the week I am supposed to be re-sitting a first aid exam; so I hope you'll excuse a few infelicities of layout towards the end of the magazine. It's not easy to paste up a magazine and practice your bandages at the same time.

I hope to be able to have more space to devote to artwork as well. Good fillers are always welcome, but I'm always on the lookout for stunning cover art as well. If it fits with the theme of the multidimensional reader in all sorts of strange circumstances which Colin Davies has established as a PI 'style', so much the better - but different ideas are accepted too! Incidentally, I hope you like the cover for this issue. I think it's great - even though I do wonder if I'm being got at...

Index of books reviewed