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# Paperback Inferno

89

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*The Review of paperback SF*

April – May 1991

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Graham Andrews, Chris C. Bailey, K.V. Bailey, Norman Beswick, Colin Bird, Lynne Bisphan, Terry Broome, Mat Covard, Geoff Cowie, Alan Fraser, Chris Hart, L.J. Hurst, Edward James, Ken Lake, Dave Langford, Helen McNabb, Andy Mills, Nik Morton, John Newsinger, Joseph Nicholas, Phil Nichols, John D. Owen, Jim Provan, Ian Sales, Andy Sawyer, Harriet Sawyer, Martyn Taylor, Steven Tew, Sue Thomason, Neale Vickery, Jon Wallace, Brendan Wignell, Jessica Yates,

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DEADLINE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS to *PI 90*  
is Friday May 24th.  
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#### HELP WANTED

Volunteer typists (Anstrad PCW preferred) with time to spare for working on *PI* reviews are welcome to contact the *PI* address.

#### BACK ISSUES

Back issues of *PI* are available from MAUREEN PORTER, 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent CT19 5AZ.

APOLOGIES: Edward James' magazine reviews did not arrive in time for incorporation into this issue. Instead, a batch of reviews scheduled for *PI 90* have been included. Normal service will, I hope, be resumed from next issue.

## Paperback Purgatory

I notice that one comment in the BSFA survey regarding *PAPERBACK INFERNO* wanted "less politics" (another wanted "less *Paperback Purgatory*" but surely you wouldn't grudge me my little moments of soapboxing, would you?) which I thought was a little strange as I can't remember embarking on any major political comment for quite a while. However, whoever you are, don't turn the page, because I'm not going to do so now. To make any specific comment regarding the Gulf at this time - several weeks before you'll actually read it - would be a waste of time. But I think the *general* comment - that we are currently living in what I can only describe as a fantasy world which most of us would find too far-fetched if we came across it in print - is valid.

I can't be the only one who has looked at the events of the past few weeks with mounting disbelief. We had a gigantic live arcade game on our TV screens from which most of us except those with friends and relatives actually serving in the gulf were distanced by the bland assurances that all the explosives dropped on Iraq were taking out military targets only. Our lives went on as normal punctuated by news broadcasts, and as usual in Britain the weather at one stage wiped the Gulf off the front page. The biggest man-made explosion, the most devastating environmental pollution ever, and the total but unconfessed failure of allowing good psychopaths to do what they like so long as they're making war on bad psychopaths are worth a few lines and a picture or two of cutely suffering birds.

Even now - some weeks after I wrote the first draft of these lines and as the papers mutter about Victory Parades - the horrific images of burning oil-wells covering hundreds of miles with thick smoke under which the sun can barely pierce can't seem to reflect the reality. One report, though, sticks in my mind. "If there is ever a nuclear winter," said one commentator, shivering beneath a

daylight sky which was more like deep twilight, "it will be like this." It was a report from the future; a future we have read about so often. It didn't seem very entertaining.

Smoke will pour into the atmosphere for months - perhaps a year. And already the emphasis on news broadcasts is shifting away. Perhaps, as well as a Victory Parade, perhaps even as well as a reminder of the true number of casualties in this war, we could have constant updates on this horrific environmental catastrophe.

I think we need to remember.

Think of the number of science fiction stories which have depicted major and violent changes in the world order as part of the background to the actual plot; in which a catastrophe is mentioned a paragraph or two into the story to give a sense of estrangement. We lived that estrangement. What is going to happen next? Who can tell? I'm not going to prophesy, but if life is going to reflect a B-grade SF novel I'd rather it was the one in which the victorious powers realised that they had been on the edge of something catastrophic and did something to prevent a "next time" rather than - well - letting there be a next time.

Unreality seems to have spread everywhere, for when I look at the Guardian's annual list of paperback fastsellers - basically those books which have sold more than 100,000 over the year - I find an entire coven's worth of "Mutant Turtles" spin-off books, most if not all of which are so vilely written as to make "Sweet Dreams" romances seem like Jane Austen. There's not a lot of joy when we look elsewhere in the Hot Hundred. Terry Pratchett has PYRAMIDS, GUARDS! GUARDS! and TRUCKERS doing very nicely for him - and pretty well for those of us lucky enough to have read them. TRUCKERS, of course, is a children's book. David Eddings, who I'm being rapidly persuaded is quite a good children's writer rather

than quite a bad adult one, has also done well with THE DIAMOND THRONE and SORCERESS OF DARSHIVA. Apart from that, the highest-placed book which PI readers might be looking out for is Stephen King's THE DARK HALF, the most imaginative and all-round *best* is Umberto Eco's FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM, and the one I've still to prise out of my daughter's circle of friends in THE SECRET DIARY OF LAURA PALMER.

Horror - psychological or otherwise, seems still to be doing better than SF or fantasy, though considering the number of books by Dean R. Koontz that have appeared over the year it's surprising to see only MIDNIGHT in the list. Clive Barker's THE GREAT AND SECRET SHOW made the upper half of the chart, but Thomas Harris's SILENCE OF THE LAMBS (which I first saw reviewed in the horror press) did considerably better.

Raymond E. Feist's PRINCE OF BLOOD joins Eddings in the clone-fantasy field, and William Horwood's DUNSTON FOUND proved that you can still write bad talking-animal books and get away with it.

But enough of this fringe stuff, you cry! What about *science fiction*? Well, Isaac Asimov scraped in at 99th place with NEMESIS, just above Dave Morris's TEENAGE NINJA TURTLES. And that, as they say, is it. Don't dream too long of superstardom, all you *FOCUS* readers . . .

Perhaps the next-but-one chart will feature the winner of the GOLLANZ/BOOKSHELF FIRST FANTASY NOVEL COMPETITION. The winning novel will get £2,000 together with a £2,000 advance against royalties, and will be published in 1992. Two runners-up will receive £500, and Gollancz will hold options to publish at a later date. Entries must be in by 30th July, and further details

are available from Mark Hutchinson at Victor Gollancz Ltd, 14 Henrietta Street, London WC2E 8QJ (Tel. 071 836 2006). Apparently over 2,000 entry forms have gone out already, so get in quick. The judges of the competition include Mary Gentle and Terry Pratchettas well as Richard Evans and Faith Brooker of Gollancz and Nigel Ford of *Bookshelf*.

Last issue I mentioned the launch of MILLION 'The Magazine of Popular Fiction', edited by David Pringle. The March/April issue has much to interest SF/Fantasy readers, with Colin Greenland interviewing Kurt Vonnegut, David Langford explaining the circumstances behind the obscenity trial of James Branch Cabell's JURGEN, Nick Lowe seeing how Jean Auel's fourth stone-age blockbuster compares with a new author's excursion into the same territory, and Brian Stableford and Mark Morris looking at some recent SF and horror respectively - though why I should make those

natural assumptions of ownership of different areas of the Fantastic I don't know, because this issue's short story is a *conte cruel* (helpfully translated on the contents page as "nasty tale") by Brian Stableford which certainly isn't SF but makes a hauntingly ironic horror tale of self-loathing. On the non-SF front, there are fascinating features on Sherlock Holmes "continuations" and Baroness Orczy, creator of the "Scarlet Pimpernell". Best of all, though, are Stableford (again) on the elusive P.C. Wren, author of BEAU GESTE, and Eugene Byrne on George MacDonald Fraser and his "Flashman" novels. Once again, *MILLION* offers another wide selection among the rich fields of popular fiction, and anyone who can't find anything to enjoy and marvel at in it must have a poverty-stricken imaginative life indeed.



Stanislaw Lem  
 THE CYBERIAD (Mandarin, 1990, 298pp, £4.99)  
 THE STAR DIARIES (Mandarin, 1990, 278pp, £4.99)  
 MORE TALES OF PIRX THE PILOT (Mandarin, 1990, 220pp, £4.99)

(Reviewed by Alan Fraser)

These three books of stories from Stanislaw Lem continue the Mandarin reprints of the Polish Maestro's work. THE CYBERIAD was originally published in the UK in 1975, THE STAR DIARIES in 1976, and MORE TALES OF PIRX THE PILOT in 1983.

All three are well outside the mainstream of SF written in English, being both humorous and philosophical works more in the tradition of Aesop or Swift, rather than his best-known, more conventional, SF novel, SOLARIS.

THE CYBERIAD is a collection of fables concerning two powerful but bumbling constructor robots, Trurl and Klapaucius, who can "kindle or extinguish suns as easily as shelling peas". This foolish pair sally forth through the Universe having chaotic escapades, but sometimes doing more good than harm.

THE STAR DIARIES, more tales from which are included in Lem's MEMOIRS OF A SPACE TRAVELLER, contain the Swiftian voyages of hapless cosmonaut Ivan Tichy, also featured in THE FUTUROLOGICAL CONGRESS. Like Lemuel Gulliver's, Tichy's descriptions of the foibles and idiosyncrasies of the amazing civilisations he visits cast more light on our own society than on these imaginary ones.

MORE TALES OF PIRX THE PILOT is very much in the same mould. I have not read the first book in this sequence, but this one is much more of an extrapolation of our own future than the bizarre universe of Tichy. Pirx travels our Solar System and nearer parts of the Galaxy, but exploring the interface between humanity and technology rather than the Milky Way. Like Trurl and

Klapaucius, robots in Pirx's tales show disconcertingly human foibles.

"Sci-fi? Sure, I like it, but only the trashy stuff," writes Pirx. "The kind I can dip into between shifts, read a few pages at a time, and then drop." These works by Lem are the opposite of trashy, but they are definitely ones that you need only to read a few pages at a time, enjoying the humour in small doses, and digesting the underlying messages.

Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman - - DRAGON WING (Bantam, 1991, 432pp, £4.99)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

Up until now I have tried to avoid the work of Weis and Hickman. Make no mistake; I thought that their *Dragonlance* books were terrible and although the *Darksword* trilogy had a lot going for it, notably an intriguing cosmology and a neat incorporation of magic into their scheme, it was marred by what I can only (albeit chauvinistically) call a peculiarly *American* use of whimsy instead of humour. Naming a character Simkin is nearer to THE MAGIC FARAWAY TREE than THE LORD OF THE RINGS, and whoever invented the kender has taken on precisely the wrong aspects of hobbyism.

It's for this reason that I failed to read the recent *ROSE OF THE PROPHET* trilogy, even though it had some good response from unexpected quarters. The latest project from the dynamic duo is the mammoth *DEATH GATE* cycle - seven volumes of which this is a mere starter. There are elves, humans and dwarves as usual and - yes - dragons, though for some reason the dwarves call themselves gogs and spend their time operating something they call a kicky-winsey (does the larry-cum-twang come in the next volume? I wonder, and don't write for an explanation, please). But ah, the setting.

This is really good.

Apparently a world has been split into four realms; sky, stone, fire and sea. *DRAGON WING* takes place in the realm of sky; floating islands where water is a precious resource. Strangely enough, it reminded me of Larry Niven's hard-SF novel THE INTEGRAL TREES, where orbiting plan(e)s play similar roles to the floating islands.

There is an assassin who is hired to murder a king's son - by the king himself - and finds himself in a plot spanning the whole realm. There is a mysterious stranger who is discovered in the realm of the gogs. He has somehow infiltrated into this realm from another, a realm where errant sorcerers are being "rehabilitated" by their enemies, the Sertan - who apparently have vanished. But just who is the blundering Alfred? Why is Haplo here in the first place? What role is the aptly-named Sinistred

playing in all this? And what role does the *dog* play in all this? Not all these questions are answered and Weiss and Hickman successfully tease the reader into biting the wall until further volumes which *may* answer them are published. (I have to say that ELVEN STAR, the second volume which is available in hardback, is a perfect vindication of the awful whimsy of previous books: either these people are completely out of their skulls or they know what they're doing, and parts of ELVEN STAR were the most over-the-top and *funniest* of this kind of fantasy I've ever read).

Paul F. Olson & David B. Silva - - POST MORTEM (Corgi, 1990, 349pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by John Newsinger)

This is a superb collection of new ghost stories. Out of the seventeen tales that Olson and Silva have assembled only two failed to entertain this reader and a number of the others were really impressive.

The stories by Kathryn Ptacek, Thomas Monteleone, Charles Grant, Gary Brandner, Charles de Lint, Janet Fox, Thomas Tessier, Donald Burleson, James Howard Kunstler and William Nolan are all competent exercises in the writing of supernatural fiction, but the volume also contains a number of really outstanding contributions.

Ramsey Campbell contributes 'The Guide', a story that M.R. James felt it too dangerous to record; Steve Rasnic Tem and Melanie Tem contribute 'Resettling', a tremendous haunted house story; P.W. Sinclair contributes 'Getting Back', the story of a young man's brief contact with the supernatural on his father's farm, and Melissa Mia Hall contributes 'The Brush of Soft Wings', a superb story of vampirism.

My personal favourite, however, is David Silva's own 'Brothers', a story that took my breath away and left me gasping. This is without doubt the best short story I have read this year (not excluding Suzy McKee Charnas' 'Boobs' in the SKIN OF THE SOUL collection. It tells of twin boys and of how time has come for one of them, the eldest who has always looked out for his brother, to die.

This collection is well worth getting hold of. It is essential reading for anyone who likes supernatural fiction and as Dean R. Koontz points out in the 'Afterword', there really has to be something wrong with people who don't like ghost stories.

Philip K. Dick - - BEYOND LIES THE WUB (Grafton, 1990, 510pp, £5.99)

(Reviewed by K.V. Bailey)

The first of five volumes of Philip Dick's shorter fiction, this offers in addition to twenty-five early - some uncollected - stories, an epistolary preface (Dick), illustratively distinguishing SF from fantasy, ten pages of authorial Afterthoughts, including an anatomy of short story and novel, and a Zelazny Introduction bringing into focus the man, his imagination and his humour.

To such fiction of circa 1952 the aura of late pulp and early SF&S and GALAXY naturally and nostalgically clings. 'The Crystal crypt', for example, from PLANET STORIES, is the very model of a space-operatic sabotage adventure. Find in it, however, varieties of fearful entrapment: find immediately that significant Martian milieu. I'm not saying, of course, that these first stories are simply hunting grounds for Dickian motifs (though 'The Defenders' is an overt ingredient of THE PENULTIMATE TRUTH and 'The Great C' made its contribution to DIES IRAE). They are all unique achievements in the medium which Dick in later career neglected in favour of the novel. Yet of his first sale, 'Roog', he wrote in 1976; "I love this story, and I doubt if I write any better today. . . I just write longer." Yes; that marvellous story sounded the note of pure genius. And of paranoia, in this case occasioned (in a dog) by dustmen. Elsewhere it is occasioned by artefacts ('Colony'), by insects ('Expendable'), and by trolls ('The King Of The Elves').

Personal favourites are 'Piper In The Woods', an upbeat approach through pastoral to the Dickian psyche, and the myth-haunted fantasy 'Out In The Garden', which

even more than 'Meddler' (which Dick himself cites as doing so) tokens his dawning awareness of the truth of the Heraclitean axiom that "the nature of things is in the habit of concealing itself".

Gareth Knight - - THE MAGICAL WORLD OF THE INKLINGS (Element Books, 1990, 258pp, £9.99)

(Reviewed by K.V. Bailey)

The Inklings, that informal literary group which met in Oxford half a century ago, had four outstanding members whose writings were fruitfully interactive: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Owen Barfield. Gareth Knight, a scholarly expositor of the occult, in providing a critical survey of their works, examines these interactions.

His knowledge of metaphysical esoterica enables Knight expertly to trace neoplatonic and cabalistic imagery in Lewis, while demonstrating how the occult attracted/repelled him; and to reconcile Lewis's scepticism of Barfield's anthroposophy with enthusiasm for such works as ORPHEUS in which Barfield embodied it. Tolkien's respect for Barfield was grounded in compatible philosophic attitudes to language, Barfield much concerned with the magical roots of speech, Tolkien having derived the SILMARILLION mythos from his creation of Elvish languages. To the ambivalent Lewis, Williams showed how the occult might mediate between higher mystic flights and mundane existence, though not without risks of perversion.

Knight allows "magical" a specific connotation, relating it to the Coleridean/Goethean "secondary imagination" i.e. the active perception of harmonies and holistic connections transcending the mechanistic. He systematically identifies such perceptions in the Inklings' fictions, only occasionally pleading over-specially or introducing tangential material. The book is stimulating reading, and for its synopses, chronology and bibliography, an invaluable work of reference.

Frederik Pohl - - POHLSTARS (Gollancz, 1990, 203pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Graham Andrews)

POHLSTARS (Ballantine, 1984) is the first volume of never-before-collected Frederik Pohl stories since THE GOLD AT THE STARBOW'S END (way back in 1972) - and it's been well worth the wait. Of the eleven (see BELOW) well-made stories, I particularly enjoyed 'The High Test' (a tribute to E. E. 'Doc' Smith, but none the worse for that) and 'We Purchased People' (a nastily credible story about a credibly nasty protagonist: 'hero' is definitely *not* the word for Wayne Golden, the ultimate wage-slave). However, the best-written and most memorable story in the book is 'The Sweet, Sad Queen of the Grazing Isles'...

...which could almost be regarded as a 'condensed novel' (74 pages long). 'TS,SQotGI' is another tribute - to Cordwainer Smith, this time - but the Man Himself never produced a more tragically evocative and (at the same time) scientifically valid piece of work. 'Jason', the one-name viewpoint character and (pleasantly) flawed hero, reminds me of 'Stevens', the butler in Kazuo Ishiguro's THE REMAINS OF THE DAY (the best novel to win the Booker Prize ~~since~~). He is doggedly loyal to his (now dead) employer, Commodore Mackenzie, and deep in (unrequited) love with said Mackenzie's daughter, May (the eponymous 'Queen of the Grazing Isles') - both of whom are Not Very Nice People. Most of the action takes place upon one O.T./Ocean-Thermal/'Oatie' boat or other (an ocean-thermal generating boat lives off/commercially exploits the temperature difference between deep water and sun-warmed surface water).

BELOW: The First Edition of POHLSTARS included a twelfth story, 'The Wizard-Masters of Peng-Shi Angle', which was a re-translation into English of the Chinese translation of 'The Wizard of Pung's Corners' (Galaxy, October 1958) + notes. Would I lie to you? ...Gollancz have not only seen fit to delete 'TW-MoP-SA' + N from this edition, they've also altered Pohl's Introduction to Suit Their Purposes. POHLSTARS - or POHLAXED?

# R e v i e w s

Brian Herbert - - THE RACE FOR GOD (Ace, 1990, 295pp, \$4.95)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

Evander McMurtrey, the charlatan prophet of the Interplanetary Church of Cosmic Chickenhood, receives a genuine call from God. What's more, God leaves his address and an invitation to come and visit.

Brian Herbert's seventh novel, THE RACE FOR GOD is a parable about the number of competing paths to God, and contains among its characters representatives of just about every major faith and sect - lightly disguised: this is not exactly our universe - as well as an executioner who does thoroughly disgusting things with the corpses of his victims and a killing android with armament implanted in every conceivable orifice; yes, folks, even *there*. Most of the action takes place on board the ship which is taking - to God - a group of people including McMurtrey and a token atheist who will inevitably get the chance to interrogate the Creator and audition for the role of His replacement.

In places, the satire is heavy-handed. In particular, the world D'Urth (Earth) has Krassians (Christians), Hoddists (Buddhists), Iasammedans (Mohammedans) . . . gedit? and after a few pages of this the reader is left with a sense of being bombarded by cartoons. But there are interesting and vital issues discussed here, and eventually we have a fairly straight discussion about how emphasising the differences between faiths distorts their similarities, while the novel's climax is an all-too-brief excursion into some fascinating metaphysics with a slight air of Phil Dick.

Front and back cover point out that the author is the son of Frank Herbert, but there is little of the detailed worldbuilding of DUNE. Brian Herbert has wisely aimed to strike out for his own territory. It's an uneasy mix of deep concepts and shallow humour; take it as entertainment and the rest will follow.

Dan Simmons - - SONG OF KALI  
(Headline, 1990, 311pp, £3.99)

Dan Simmons - - CARRION COMFORT  
(Headline, 1990, 992pp, £4.99)

(Reviewed by Colin Bird)

Dan Simmons, author of the hard SF HYPERION books, can hardly be accused of a lack of versatility as he now offers us a mammoth horror novel together with a reissue of an award winning dark fantasy. All of his books straddle accepted genre boundaries; none more so than CARRION COMFORT which is laced with action, interspersed with morbid horror and bound with psychological speculation. The book features a dizzying array of characters which the author follows through his spaghetti junction of a narrative with meticulous skill.

SONG OF KALI offers little of the surface excitement of the newer book, its span being shorter and more concise. It does, however, contain some passages of feverishly imagined horrors which stay in the mind long after the book is closed.

Both books draw upon the iconography of horror with SONG OF KALI conjuring images of human sacrifice and necromancy in the dark side streets of modern Calcutta. CARRION COMFORT makes use of the vampire legend, together with references to The Holocaust, to create an atmosphere of impending Armageddon. The vampires here are psychic vampires with the power to control normal humans and feed off their pain. They treat humankind as their playthings just like the ancient Gods worshipped with foul deeds in Calcutta. Simmons uses the large canvas to evoke the mythic nature of the struggle between his evil Titans.

Some readers may find the extreme violence a turn-off and CARRION COMFORT would have been more

interesting with at least one sympathetically portrayed vampire instead of a parade of scumbags on one side and the representatives of weak humanity on the other. Simmons scores with his impressively researched background detail and intelligent prose. The action set-pieces are written with real page-turning verve. Both books are well worth your attention but the smaller of the two offers the greater return.

ARTHUR C CLARKE & GENTRY LEE - - RAMA II (Orbit, 1990, 495pp, £6.99)

(Reviewed by Andy Mills)

"The Ramans do everything in threes" ... so ends RENDEZVOUS WITH RAMA and, whilst in 1973 Clarke had no intention of producing a sequel or two, here he and Lee have come up with RAMA II, the second part of a projected four volume series.

The plot is straightforward enough. Seventy years after RWR a second alien spaceship approaches the solar system. This time Earth is prepared for the visit and despatches a team to investigate the craft. The team finds this vessel to be subtly different from its predecessor and the situation is altered by deaths within the team and by the altered trajectory of the alien ship - it is on a heading for a collision with Earth, whose leaders decide Rama II must be destroyed.

RAMA II is not a continuation, either in style or content, of RWR. Gone is the sparse writing of the original, along with the single-minded, moral outlook of Captain Norton and his crew and the sense of wonder evoked by their investigations into the mysteries of Rama. Instead we have a long build-up to the voyage out to Rama II, an ill-chosen crew (difficult to see how this lot got selected, except by authors who *want* to create friction), shenanigans and a murder mystery (which plot line is never tied up), many flashbacks to pad out the story, including some silliness concerning a crew member's dalliance with the English King, and mawkish dialogue - particularly towards the end. However, the new discoveries in Rama II are interesting, if not illuminating, and the finale is genuinely exciting. Since there are further episodes to follow, there is no complete resolution.

All in all, a disappointing novel, especially when one considers the quality of the original work, and one which could have benefited from much judicious pruning.

Robert Asprin - - MYTH DIRECTIONS

(Legend, 1990, 202pp, £3.50)

Robert Asprin - - HIT OR MYTH

(Legend, 1990, 170pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

Being books 3 and 4 of an ongoing series which opened with ANOTHER FINE MYTH and MYTH CONCEPTIONS; these much belated titles (originally published in 1982 and 1983) have now reached #9 in the original, larger-format, better-bound, superbly illustrated (Polly and Kelly Freas and others) editions by Starblaze for which I have been paying steadily rising prices (from £3.50 to £7.25) over the years and which have always been a source of immense and reliably guffaw-manufacturing pleasure to me.

Seeing these slim, smaller, pictureless paperbacks with their overly-sexually-orientated Fangorn covers, I am reminded that presentation had a lot to do with the success of the Starblaze editions, but that is not to suggest in any way that Asprin's amazing Universe can't stand up to this trivialised British image. The characters - from Skeeve Our Hero to Aahz the Pervert (get the spelling right!), from Gleep the 20-foot-long half-grown dragon to the cute, curvaceous, cuddly Tananda the Assassin - are apt to gallop off in all directions.

bringing chaos especially to Skeeve, while the fantasy situations are indescribable in this small, quivering review.

If you think you have a sense of broad, slapstick humour, do try these - but take my tip and begin with #1 and #2 first, for while each volume can at a pinch stand (or roll around helplessly) alone, there really is an ongoing story here and to be honest I found the impact of #1 stronger than any subsequent titles. Were it not too late to say so, I'd be labelling these "ideal for the Christmas stocking", if that capsule guide says anything to you.

Fred Saberhagen - - **BERSERKER BLUE DEATH**  
(Gollancz, 1990, 282pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

The sixth **BERSERKER** title to come from Gollancz in their VGSF series, this one dates from 1985 but has, they say, not appeared previously in the UK. Saberhagen produced the first fix-up from a medley of stories and novels in 1967 and hasn't stopped since - which is not surprising since the plot matters not one iota, it's the killing machines that lie at the heart of all these titles. Even Poul Anderson, Bryant, Donaldson, Niven, Willis and Zelazny jumped on the bandwagon with a shared-universes compilation, and you can't get more populist than that.

Strong, fast, reasonably well tailored space opera is the key here - Doc Smith planet-destroying, teenage-reader-oriented stuff. Vengeance is the name of the game, and when one considers the nameless frustrations and put-downs festering in the breast of the average young reader it's not surprising that these essentially mindless forays provide instant catharsis. As the *New York Times* puts it portentously "in single-minded pursuit of their pre-programmed course of destruction [the Berserkers] attain a kind of perverse stature that makes them worthy stand-ins for the dark side of human nature"; I can't think of a better way of saying 'if you feel nasty inside, work it out with a dose of this stuff'.

K. W. Jeter - - **SOUL EATER**  
(Pan, 1990, 314pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Jon Wallace)

David Braemar is divorced, and on weekends his daughter stays with him. But his daughter seems unbalanced, and one morning he finds a kitchen knife stuck through a heart on an apron, pinning it to the wall...

Jeter combines psychological and supernatural brilliantly, mixing the points of view of all the characters to lead the reader smoothly through the chain of events, through its twists and turns to the climax. Jeter writes convincingly both about the mundane domestic events of the early part of the book and the horrors that unfold later as things get out of control...

"Jess was slouched in an aluminum lawn chair. One of the woven plastic straps had frayed loose and dangled beneath the tarnish-flecked frame." p.28

"Her mother, or whatever it was that her mother had become... had stationed herself, knife in hand, right in the middle of the camper, barring Dee from the big sliding door along the camper's side." p.92

Jeter has created a scary book, and despite stretching credulity a bit at one point, the settings and situations are real enough to keep you turning pages right to the end.

Sherril S. Tepper - - **THE GATE TO WOMEN'S COUNTRY** (Corgi, 1990, 363pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Brendan Wignall)

Science Fiction and Fantasy as a whole have not been good at dealing with gender relationships in an

intelligent fashion; true, they've come a long way since the so-called Golden Age of SF, but even those with good intentions seem often to lack the subtlety to deal with the issues effectively.

**THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS** is undoubtedly the most successful in this area, with **THE FEMALE MAN** and **THE HANDMAID'S TALE** some way behind that, but still impressive.

**THE GATE TO WOMEN'S COUNTRY** is not in this leading group. It is set in a future society where men live in garrisons and spend their time doing militaristic things, and women live in walled towns being civilised and sensitive. A character from each side of the divide (former lovers) undertake a quest together, during which some fairly obvious points are made about the nature of their respective societies.

The novel is well-written in many ways, but it is completely let down by its willingness to deal in clichés; perhaps Tepper feels there is some point in working on this level, but if she does then she's wrong. I'm afraid this is stale and leaden and brings nothing new to its chosen subject.

Christopher Stasheff - - **WARLOCK; TO THE MAGIC BORN**  
(Pan, 1990, 696pp, £5.99)

(Reviewed by Martyn Taylor)

Several years before I was introduced to the Great A'tuin I was loaned **THE WARLOCK IN SPIRE OF HIMSELF** and so enjoyed it I sought out the later volumes. So I received this omnibus edition of the first three books in the series - **ESCAPE VELOCITY**, **WARLOCK** and **KING KOBOLD REVIVED** with pleasure, not having read either work.

By comparison with other humourists of the fantastic, Stasheff is gentle - even the blackest villains are really just misunderstood, or maybe maladjusted (just like us really...). So Gramarye's witches and wizards are the result of genetics rather than pacts with Satan. The neanderthal killers in **KING KOBOLD REVIVED** are really sweethearts hypnotised into being monsters by time-travelling future anarchists and/or totalitarians (and not even in Heinlein is it so clearly spelled out that Utopia really is MidWestern democracy, but I will forgive Stasheff this... just).

This sequence takes us from the establishment of Gramarye as a deliberately medieval lost world - a by blow of the main plot in **ESCAPE VELOCITY** - to the arrival there of Rod Gallowglass as an agent of SCENT and his subsequent taking up of permanent residence, via wars, dynastic struggles, marriages and the like. It has to be said that the plots creak a little and too many contrivances turn out to be pegs for jokes. Neither does Stasheff attempt the black satire or machine gun delivery of, say, Terry Pratchett. Nevertheless his jokes can be funny and as for his puns... one about cricket sticks in my mind and I wish it wouldn't!

This volume makes a good introduction to the series and strikes me as excellent value for money. Maybe it isn't great but it is entertaining and on that basis I recommend it.

Christopher Stasheff - - **THE WARLOCK ENLARGED** (Pan, 1991, 442pp, £5.99)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

This second omnibus *Warlock* book contains **THE WARLOCK UNLOCKED** and **THE WARLOCK ENRAGED**. Like the first books in the series, **THE WARLOCK IN SPIRE OF HIMSELF** and **KING KOBOLD**, these are amusing romps in the realm of cod-medieval space-operatics featuring a world settled by members of the Society For Creative Anachronism where a fungus affected by latent psi powers happens to bring to literal life their fantasies - hence the existence of elves, witches and ghosts. Once lost, the world of Gramarye is being reclaimed for democracy despite the interference of totalitarian and anarchist forces by Rod Gallowglass and his trusty robot steed Fess.

Tushery abounds, and a merry time is had by all, but here little new is given about Gramarye and its unusual history. **THE WARLOCK UNLOCKED** introduces one of those irritatingly cuddly spiritual Machiavellians who pop up whenever the plot of a science fiction novel requires a

Roman Catholic priest, while THE WARLOCK ENRAGED seems to be mostly about Rod learning to keep his temper with his children, as rapsallious a bunch of little espers as you'll ever meet. I enjoyed the earlier novels tremendously, sort of *quite liked* these, and will probably loathe any others I come across.

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Angus McAllister - - THE CANONGATE STRANGLER (Dog and Bone, 1990, 204pp, £5.00)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

McAllister's THE KRUGG SYNDROME was a delightfully sardonic SF comedy; this is a rather more gothic tale of murder and possession which is reminiscent of Stevenson's DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE. An Edinburgh lawyer, Edward Middleton, finds he is living through the actions of the man known as the "Canongate Strangler". Is he suffering from blackouts, telepathic communication, or what? Just what is the relationship of the murderer to him - if a relationship exists at all?

Some apparent illogicalities early on - surely Middleton could have done more to persuade the police of the truth of his story of "seeing" the second murder by simply relating what happened: his own alibi is unshakable - seem to be overshadowed by the development of the ambiguous parallels between Middleton and his alter ego. Attractively designed - by Alasdair Gray: (though the back cover should have been proof-read more carefully) this is yet more evidence - as if it were needed - that London does not have the monopoly in original fiction. It is unusual crime fiction with a touch of the para-realistic rather than anything which could be called SF, but it's well worth reading for its atmospherics.

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CANDAS JANE DORSEY - - MACHINE SEX (Women's Press, 1990, 164pp, £4.95)

(Reviewed by Lynne Bispham)

Having got past the somewhat provocative title (with machines? between machines?) the reader of this anthology will find thirteen unusual and thoughtful short stories, many of which reveal Candas Jane Dorsey as a science fiction writer of skill and originality. There is a unique lightness of touch about much of her writing, so that atmosphere and emotions are depicted with just a few well-chosen words.

Some four stories, two of which are downright inaccessible, fail to develop their ideas satisfactorily, but the remaining nine are intelligent and very readable - not a bad tally for a collection of short stories. Particularly recommended are 'You'll Remember Mercury' in which the emotional distance between individuals is compared with the physical distance between stars and 'Willows' which considers large SF themes at the human level in wonderfully lyric and evocative prose. There are spaceships and aliens to be found in Dorsey's writing, but they are kept in the background; it is the inner life of the characters in stories like 'The Prairies Warriors' or the lingering atmosphere of stories like the elegaic 'Black Dog' that are important and make these tales so singular.

As for the title story - it takes a feminist swipe at cyberpunk with the ultimate in virtual reality.

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Robert Silverberg - - AT WINTERS'S END (LEGEND, 1990, 491pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by K. V. Bailey)

First of a trilogy epic, this has elements of both Ragnarok and Pentateuch, combining a mythopoetic/cosmogonic cycle with scenarios of Genesis and Exodus. We start, as the eon-long winter-bound Earth moves into Spring, with the monkeyish neo-human People emerging from their subterranean "cocoon". The Tribe is expelled from its 'Eden' womb to be exposed to many ecological challenges in the course of its Exodus towards a promised inheritance. It settles temporarily

in Vengiboneeza, relic city of the former six-race inhabited Great World, anciently destroyed, as was the preceding exclusively human world, by showers of dust-producing, ice-age causing, asteroidal "fire-stars".

"Hresh, wonder-boy/Old Man", discovers still-active technologies and weapons to serve in the building of a future for his matriarchally/patriarchally dividing People. These also lead him to question the nature of the tribal gods, their purposes, and what constitutes 'human' status. It will be a million years before the "fire stars" again wipe the slate clean, but a closure of sorts for this volume is provided by Hresh's visions of the Great World's heyday and ending. If these and certain other episodes are phantasmagoric, the realism of Silverberg's story-telling ensures empathy with his likeable People's intrigues, loves, lives and deaths, while his perennial inventiveness offers such pleasures as a kind of portable black hole.

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ROBERT SILVERBERG - - THE WORLD INSIDE (Gollancz, 1990, 174pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Chris Hart)

THE WORLD INSIDE is in every sense a product of its age.

The heavy handed exposition takes the reader and the visitor, Nicanor Gortman, on a guided tour of the Urbmon 116, a free-loving utopia in the form of a massive vertical city designed to accommodate 881,000 people. In a world of 75,000,000,000 people holding a puritanical belief in mass fertility, these cities have become vital dwelling spaces that are divorced from natural existence and are free from disease, war and famine. Any person causing a threat to urbmon existence, or 'Flippos' as they are branded, are simply and quickly eradicated down the chute. The central ritual behind the urbmon culture is the practice of Nightwalking; men wander through the cities making 'wet, slippery' love to different women - not out of hedonism, but from a desire to procreate.

Jason Quevado is an historian conducting research based upon the hypothesis that human beings have adapted "readily to relatively little living space and a low privacy quotient." (page 75) He explores the comparatively chaotic and inhibited culture of the late sixties through the archives of popular films. Silverberg detaches himself from the sixties' sexual revolution to make comments about the hypocrisies apparent in contemporary legislation. Jason's exploration is entertaining and intelligent as he becomes aware of his own morality and jealousies - attitudes that he believed had been removed by evolution. His developing awareness of these issues becomes an inspiration to those around him, they start to step back to evaluate the qualities of life within the urbmons.

It is perhaps significant that Gollancz have chosen to reprint the story now because 1990 is earmarked by Jason as a point where the characteristics of the homo urbonesis begin to manifest. We are privileged with the knowledge that the world has become increasingly fragmented. In the light of our post-HIV, post-tower-block, post New Wave SF experience, the 90's reader is distrustful right from the words "Here begins a happy day in 2381..."

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Joe Haldeman - - THE LONG HABIT OF LIVING (N.E.L., 1990, 300pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

Haldeman can do little wrong in my eyes, but this time he has done little either way I'm afraid. Dallas Barr is an immortal thanks to the Stileman Foundation's \$1,000,000 operation; so is Maria Marconi - and the boredom of those names indicates the slightness of the whole book.

Sir Charles Briskin aims to manipulate the world through the Foundation; in fighting his nefarious underlings Dallas and Maria touch base in various outré places including Ceres via a number of 'stealthed' and other spaceships.

There isn't a character who isn't a caricature, the blood and gore run thick and fast from a multiplicity of

weapons, coincidence piles upon coincidence, and Haldeman even resorts occasionally to padding by quoting unnecessarily from documents and media reports.

Toward the end I felt myself muttering 'get on with it' as more padding had Dallas pondering that he could have done this, or that, or the other... when of course we all know that what he did was what Haldeman had him do. Once reader self-awareness reaches this level, the book has failed, but to be honest it failed for me right from the start because I just could not empathise with the ruthless profit-motivated single-minded lack of ethics that drives all these self-made millionaires to lie, rob, kill and misuse their world's resources for purely selfish reasons.

I still admire Haldeman. But this book is facile and amoral. And to descend to bathos, even the cover design stinks!

Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (eds.) - **FEAR ITSELF, The Horror Fiction of Stephen King (1976 - 1982)**  
(Pan, 1990, 251pp, £4.99)

(Reviewed by Jon Wallace)

This book is an addition to the ever-growing pile of books about Stephen King. It is actually an early addition in the States where it was published in 1982, but a late one here: this is its first British publication. It is a collection of essays on various aspects of King's work, written by such people as Fritz Leiber and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. This aspect works as well as collections of this type do: the reader agrees with some views, and complains about the stupidity of others. Tacked on the end is a detailed bibliography, something which Underwood and Miller's **BARE BONES** (a collection of interviews with King) badly needed. Unfortunately, this bibliography is now eight years old and, given King's output, well out of date: If you are interested in the recurring themes and influences in King's work, (and the horror field in general) or in how his books translated to the movies, then this book could be valuable to you, but it is a shame that Pan didn't see fit to have it revised and updated.

Jenny Jones - - **FLY BY NIGHT**  
(Headline, 1990, 340pp, £7.99  
and 1991, 499pp, £4.99)

(Reviewed by Dave Langford)

This is a promising debut, a nice gloomy fantasy which builds on an old SF metaphor about immortality and sterility to give quite an original feel.

It begins conventionally, with the traditional importation from our own 'real' world of a useless-seeming saviour (Eleanor) who's not much of a person but is clearly destined to end the unchanging stasis that freezes the fantasy domain. Jones then conscientiously tangles the often too-simple issues of good and evil. Most people on the 'wrong' side are likeable, perhaps pardonably selfish: contrast Western civilization and the suffering third world. The moon-goddess on the 'right' side destroys an innocent bystander in a shockingly gratuitous way, merely to underline her authority. Few characters are certain they're doing the right thing, or that if they are it'll lead to the right end. Gruelling examples are given.

Good stuff, though still very much a first novel. Jones appears to have learned valuable complexities from Stephen Donaldson but has also grown over-fond of one of his pet words, 'exigent'. The giant telepathic hawks are well evoked but with rather too close a parallel to Anne McCaffrey's dragon 'Impression'. Several chapters end with somebody dying melodramatically only to re-emerge later as not actually dead. While beer, sandwiches and rucksacks might be universal, I'm unsure that fantasy worlds are enhanced by jeans, cigarettes, whisky, and digitalis (why not 'toxglove'?). Problems of transition between worlds and the fact that both use English are judged with quasi-scientific waffle about dimensions and resonance: a wiser policy might have been, "Never apologize, never explain".

These are quibbles. There's talent here, and **FLY BY NIGHT** ends well despite impending trilogy sequels.

**AS ON A DARKLING PLAIN** - - - - - Ben Bova  
(Mandarin, 1990, 189pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Edward James)

Mars was colonised by an ancient human civilisation, destroyed by aliens before the last Ice Age. The aliens left behind mysterious machines on Titan. The mission: to find out more about the machines so that homo sapiens can defend itself against the alien. Sounds familiar? If it does, this may be because you've read the numerous pulp predecessors; or because you've read two Bova juveniles, published back in the '60s, which form part of this sequence; or because you've read this, either in two magazine instalments back in 1970, or in its US publication in 1975 or its UK paperback (from Magnum) in 1981. The hero is Sid Lee, an archaeologist, though apparently of very strange education, since he says he knows nothing of anthropology (impossible these days for an American trained archaeologist) and since his previous coup was the translation of the Martian inscriptions. (Why do people persist in confusing archaeologists with linguists or epigraphers? Most archaeologists I know have problems enough with English, let alone foreign languages. Michael Ventris, whose achievement mirrors Sid Lee's, was an architect.) Lee is a typical Bova hero: an individualist, impatient with bureaucracy, and rather more devoted to the Truth than to other human beings (especially women). The story follows him from Titan, to Sirius, and back to Titan again. Real dirt archaeologists discover proof, out of a hat, that there really was a technological civilisation before the Ice Age (pull the other one, Bova), and Sid discovers that maybe mankind is just as clever as those mysterious aliens after all. The mystery is wrapped up neatly, and an idle hour or two has been filled, with only minor annoyances along the way. Wonder why Mandarin reprinted it?

Patrick Tilley - - **THE AMTRAK WARS: EARTH THUNDER**  
(Sphere, 1990, 484pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by John Newsinger)

Ostensibly this is the last volume of The Amtrak Wars Saga, but this seems most unlikely. What Tilley seems to have set out to do in this sixth volume is to conclude the first cycle of his story of the Talisman Prophecy while he draws breath before tackling a second cycle. The book ends with some of the players cleared from the board, with the Federation still intact, with the Iron Masters plunged into civil war, and with some progress being made in uniting the Plainsfolk. The Talisman is coming... but has not yet arrived. Obviously, the story is not yet over. At least I hope not!

What of the series so far? Tilley has written one of the best and most important science fiction adventure stories of recent years. He has managed to satisfy some jaded palates (like mine) and without any doubt has also attracted many new readers to the genre. On top of this, he created Mr Snow, a really memorable character, sadly missed in the latest volume. For all this he deserves considerable applause and at least some degree of critical recognition. This has not yet been forthcoming from within the BSFA and Tilley appreciators are still forced to go bowed and shamefaced through the Blue Sky World.

Clifford D. Simak - - **ENCHANTED PILGRIMAGE**  
(Mandarin, 1990, 218pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Graham Andrews)

"... First the Witch House, he (Mark Cornwall) thought, counting off the major landmarks, then the Blasted Plain, and now, finally, the Castle of the Chaos Beast and after this, the Misty Mountains, whatever they might be..." (p.138)

No - the above quotation hasn't been 'untimely ripp'd' from almost anything by Terry Brooks, Karl Edward Wagner, Robert Jordan, or... just about anybody else who writes That Kind of Thing. It's actually from



ENCHANTED PILGRIMAGE (Putnam, 1975), the first of three forays into High Fantasy (or whatever) by that most commonsensical of all SF writers... Clifford D. Simak. Be honest now - could you have guessed the author's name before reading the head-notes for this review?

I'd Outline the Plot, but there's little or no space for such s\*\*\*work, and - well - I just couldn't be bothered. Still-and-all... Mark Cornwall (a one-sworded/two-fisted scholar) is Looking For Something (the Old Ones in general - the Caretaker in particular), along with such Fellow Travellers as Snively (the gardenless gnome), Gib ('...of the Marshes'), Oliver (the rafter goblin), Mary (serving wench/Romantic Interest), and Hal ('...of the Hollow Tree').

Simak proved himself adept at weaving supernatural threads into many of his SF novels (especially THE GOBLIN RESERVATION, A CHOICE OF GODS and CEMETARY WORLD, and making them seem 'real' - even, perhaps, inevitable. But the (moth-eaten) 'supernatural threads' in ENCHANTED PILGRIMAGE overrun and tangle up the SF rationale, which involves some perfunctory higger-mugger about Jones - a self-styled 'philosophical engineer' from an alternative universe which sounds just like O\*R E\*\*\*H. Rating: E for Ennui. A writer must - I suppose - be more than half-mad in order to make High Fantasy (or whatever) convincing, and CDS worked under the 'handicap' of being eminently sane.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN. Simak wrote two more High Fantasy (or whatever) novels: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE TALISMAN (Ballantine, 1978) and WHERE THE EVIL DWELLS (Ballantine, 1982).

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Clifford D Simak - - OUR CHILDREN'S CHILDREN (Mandarin, 1990, 186pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Norman Beswick)

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What a disappointment! This had such a captivating beginning: suddenly, all over the world, thousands upon thousands of people start emerging from tunnels, claiming to be refugees from the future

Now this could be a great idea, and even when it transpired that all they were fleeing from was alien monsters I wasn't too downcast. Simak had allowed himself a few "surprises" - the future wasn't devotedly capitalist, and nobody was in the least interested in religion: that sort of thing - and I was generously ready to forgive him the stock cliché characters and the narrow American focus. When the monsters too began charging through the tunnels I shed my years and whooped excitedly like a child.

But it all fizzled out. The monsters thought better of it and magicked themselves away, not very credibly. The laborious method of time travel - going OUT into another universe entirely, where time is in reverse, and then BACK into our universe again - was explored no further. The US president and his pals slapped each other on the back. And the future-refugees toddled off down fresh tunnels to the Miocene; we wish them joy.

So it wasn't an exciting story, it wasn't social comment, it couldn't handle its own ideas, and apart from reminding us to keep heavy artillery around just in case aliens start pouring out of time tunnels, we're none the wiser. From Clifford Simak this is disappointing indeed.

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ISAAC ASIMOV - - AZAZEL (Bantam, 1990, 221pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Brennan Wignall)

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This is a collection of eighteen short stories about Azazel, a two-centimetre high demon who lives with George Bitternut, a linguist and fictional acquaintance of Asimov's. All the stories are "light" and, according to Asimov, intentionally Wodehousian, and all have been published previously, with fifteen in IASFM.

Wodehousian "according to Asimov", because all these stories strive to emulate the tone and structure of Wodehouse's work, with a twist in the end which illustrates the adage 'the best laid plans of mice (or demons) and men etc'; however, Wodehouse is largely successful and although profoundly trivial, is usually reasonably entertaining. Asimov, in comparison, is at least as trivial but considerably less entertaining.

The formula to which the stories adhere with almost universal monotony includes an introductory section where George indulges in some ritual abuse of Asimov before telling him of his experiences with Azazel. George is tedious, unpleasant and completely unbelievable; if Asimov was determined to frame the stories with a narrator he ought to have made him plausible; Azazel's character is as impoverished as George's.

Things would have been better if Asimov had at least worked these stories up for publication in a collection and excised the routine abuse and explanations which get each one off to such a leaden start, but even if he'd done this I doubt if any of these would have been published if they had not been written by him.

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IAN McDONALD - - OUT ON BLUE SIX (Bantam Books 1990, 335pp £4.99)

(Reviewed by Neale Vickery)

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This is Ian McDonald's follow up novel to the highly acclaimed DESOLATION ROAD. Perhaps all the hype surrounding McDonald had inflated my expectations to an unreasonable level, but I was confidently expecting to enjoy OUT ON BLUE SIX. In fact, I found this a disappointing book.

The story takes place some 500 years in the future, after the Break which destroyed our civilisation, in a new Compassionate Society run by computers to eliminate human pain.

It has two main plot lines which merge two-thirds of the way through. The first charts the picaresque adventures of cartoonist Courtney Hall as she struggles through the city's Underground, while the second follows alternative entertainment troop the Raging Apostles and the mysterious stranger Killmanjaro West. Once united our heroes proceed to a climactic judgement of the Compassionate Society itself.

McDonald deliberately sets out to be a stylist. He takes great delight in his verbal pyrotechnics and at one stage I thought he was trying to set a world record for alliteration in a single paragraph. I found it unconvincing. There is more fizz than substance.

But it is the plot that really lets him down. It's as if he just set down and started writing, without any idea of where he was going or how he was going to get there. The story is simply a succession of adventures, entertaining in themselves, but not really fitting together.

I also found some of it highly derivative. The notion of the Underground and the use of Surrealist imagery are very reminiscent of Richard Kadrey's METROPHAGE (like Kadrey, McDonald even has a character called Man Ray). But whereas Kadrey's novel has exceptional resonance and the surrealism is an integral element of his book, for McDonald it is merely window dressing, another example of the primacy of surface over substance.

OUT ON BLUE SIX has some brilliant parts, but it never succeeds in being anything more than just the sum of these parts. As a novel it never takes off.

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Octavia Butler - - WILD SEED (Gollancz, 1990, 248pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Sue Thomason)

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A paperback edition of a novel first published in 1980, this story explores a standard horror set-up - mutant superhumans with destructive powers - in a non-sensational way. Doro is a 3,000 year old body-stealer, who practices serial possession. He has been breeding humans with ESP talents for hundreds of years, regarding them as psychic "food". In 1690 CE, on an African expedition to collect "wild seed" for his breeding programme, he finds Anyanwu, a long-lived shape-changer and healer, and brings her back to the USA to exploit, as women and slaves were customarily exploited. The book is based around their changing relationship.

WILD SEED interested me in two ways. Firstly, its background is in African and Afro-American history and culture, a setting that hasn't been much used in standard fantasy and SF. Secondly, Doro and Anyanwu embody

opposing archetypes; Lord of Death and Lady of Life. Doro is a cartesian dualist whose life exemplifies the separation of (inferior) body and (superior) mind. He has no compassion, no empathy for other living beings. His touch brings death. Anyenwu is deeply linked with the natural world. She can become a genetic copy of another living being. She is a healer, a mother of many children, a nurturer and carer. Doro consistently tries, and fails, to dominate and subdue her. The book ends inconclusively, and I feel it's basically unsatisfying in its present form because because it uses a "story" format to examine a plotless myth, a timeless opposition.

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Piers Anthony - - HEAVEN CENT  
(NEL, 1990, 324pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Ian Sales)

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Piers Anthony is a well-known author - which probably says a lot about the state of the world today. Piers Anthony is also a best-selling author - which definitely says a hell of a lot about the state of the world today.

HEAVEN CENT is the sequel to VALE OF THE VOLE and the second book in the latest Xanth trilogy. Briefly, the plot concerns the quest of young Prince Dolph, a shapechanger, to find the missing Good Magician Humfrey. Along the way he encounters various Xanthian monsters, a lot of awful puns, love, betrothal, betrayal, and finally realises that his big sister is not the bossy cow he always thought she was.

There is nothing objectionable to having a nine-year old boy as a book's main protagonist, but I do object to the reader being treated as if he or she were also nine years old. Anthony writes in his usual irritating hectoring voice, and the book has all the simplistic moral stance of those dire US sitcoms the BBC is so fond of broadcasting. In fact, this book is the NEIGHBOURS of written SF - with less characterisation, more simplistic plotting, and none of the it's-so-bad-it's-good addictive factor. If HEAVEN CENT had lots of big pictures, one word per page, and was about thirty pages long, it would be vastly improved.

Consider anyone who tells you that this book has even the slightest redeeming feature as a brain donor.

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Tanith Lee - - KILL THE DEAD  
(Legend, 1990, 172pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Sue Thomason)

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This paperback edition of a novel first published in 1980 relates the story of Parl Dro; man in black, ghost-killer, deviant talent, wounded hero clinging to his dark but ethical vocation in defiance of the despair, ambiguity and violence of the world around him. His mission: to find and destroy the physical links that bind ghosts, innocent or malign, to manifestation in the world of the living. Specifically, he is seeking - or being drawn to - Gbyste Mortua, the dark town of the dead. He acquires as travelling companions Myal Lemyal, musician and gifted failure, and Ciddey Goban, a vengeful but curiously innocent ghost.

Lee's prose is limp and evocative, her atmosphere -building superbly skilled, her plot twists unexpected but uncontrived, and her depiction of the characters and their interactions sensitive and genuinely cathartic. It's a dark fantasy, NOT a horror story - and probably a once-only read that loses its force with re-reading - but the first reading is definitely worthwhile.

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Robert Rankin - - ARMAGEDDON: THE MUSICAL  
(Corgi, 1991, 331pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Terry Broome)

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Rankin's surrealistic future vision, originally performed by the Gasworks Theatre Company at Waterman's Art Centre (says the blurb), has holocaust survivor Rex Mundi team up with a time-travelling brussel sprout and Elvis Presley to fight totalitarian ruler, Dalai Dan the 153rd. It is 2050 and human affairs have been controlled for centuries by an alien civilisation for the

sake of boosting audience figures for its most popular soap, 'The Earthers'.

Rankin, much more than Sheekley ever did in his worst moments, guns through the plot with all the bravado of a bull at a gate. This overload would have been bearable had not the abysmal jokes scarred nearly every page, detracting from the finer, parodical humour and the bizarre plot. In this desperate tornado of fun, characterisation and description are swallowed whole. In addition, my proof copy contained a dismaying number of printing errors which, like those in THE DOOR INTO FIRE, occasionally twisted the sense.

Rankin has a manic, comic talent that needs to be harnessed if he is to do his stories justice, but here his enthusiasm gets the better of him, with the result that we have a forced, flibbertigibbeted spaghetti with neither meat nor sauce.

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John Kessel - - GOOD NEWS FROM OUTER SPACE (Grafton, 1991, 402pp, £5.99)

(Reviewed by Ken Lake)

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Never have I had cause to change my mind so drastically between the beginning and end of an SF novel. It's chiliastic millennial time, but from the state of civilisation in the USA you'd imagine things had been falling apart for a quarter-century, and that dissuades you from suspending your belief.

The dead are being revived, everyone is paranoid if not totally insane, and fundamentalist preachers are plotting and polluting the airwaves in true American style. Meanwhile aliens are stalking the earth - or are they? The first few chapters show Kessel's black humour at its best, his characters seem like real people and the style seems to break formulae while building up your interest.

Unfortunately it then turns into an archetype Quest, the characters get less and less believable, motivations are blurred and we descend into black stapstick. Basically this is a morality tale, with alien "logic" providing the moral - unless it's a bootlegged genetically mutated virus created by a raving feminist, of course.

It's the format and cost of this edition that bugs me most, and I think it's time something was done about this. Details of the b-format Grafton edition are above, and there's a new cover design which is uninformative as that on the a-format Tor paperback. The original plates have simply been blown up to fit the larger pages - yet my Tor edition was priced at \$4.95 and cost me, through a major british SF mail-order firm, just £3.99. Why should we have to pay well over the odds for the unnecessary paper of the larger-format UK edition? Especially for a story which is so totally ephemeral: it's good reading for a very long train or plane journey, but you wouldn't want to keep it.

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Gael Burdino - - STRANDS OF SUNLIGHT  
(Orbit, 1991, 371pp, £7.99)

David Gemmell - - QUEST FOR LOST HEROES  
(Legend, 1990, 316pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by John D. Owen)

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Two fantasy novels, ostensibly within the same subset of the genre, one by an established British male author, the other by a relatively new American female author, and both showing, I think, a definite male/female orientation.

QUEST FOR LOST HEROES is the fourth novel in Gemmell's 'Drenai' sequence, following on from THE KING BEYOND THE GATE and very much the mixture as before. In a land overrun by the Nadir, four Drenai heroes come together again on a quest to free a woman sold to the Nadir by slavers. This humble quest leads into a far-reaching adventure when they discover the woman has been taken into the Nadir Khan's household, and that to rescue her means venturing into the heart of the Nadir Empire. The story is expertly woven, though there are few surprises to anyone who has read previous Drenai volumes, but it holds interest because of Gemmell's excellent male characters, and his superb handling of the action. It is the few female characters in the story that are weak: Tenaki, sister of the Khan, but in exile, is the most extensively drawn female, but is too much a

male 'dream goddess' to be a real person. The only other female of note, Ravenna, the subject of the quest, is scarcely sketched out at all. But then, I would expect Gemmell's readers to be mainly male, since the main themes of the book are of male comradeship, strength in adversity and self-sacrifice for a cause.

Burdino's STRANDS OF SUNLIGHT, by contrast, is a very feminine book, concerned with underlying themes of growth and healing. Burdino's heroine, Miriam, is a healer persecuted by the inquisition in an 'alternate' 14th Century Europe. She escapes from the torture chamber to a region called the Free Towns, an area that has thrown off the aristocrats' rule, and much under the influence of the elves of Malvern Forest. Miriam's journey from torture chamber to freedom, and the growth and maturity this brings, is excellently handled. Along the way she encounters a group of characters (evenly balanced male and female) who help her, heal her, and, in turn, are healed by her as she grows in strength. The secondary strand of plot, the confrontation between the Christian Inquisition and the religion of the elves (which many people in the Free Towns have adopted) draws heavily on Burdino's own work as a minister of Dianic Wicca, and is convincing simply because it does not come out as one-sided: there are good Christians to offset the politically-motivated Inquisitors.

Where STRANDS OF SUNLIGHT falls down is in those areas where QUEST FOR LOST HEROES excels. When violence rears its ugly head, Burdino fails to be convincing, while Gemmell makes you smell the sweat of warriors, the stink of blood. Where Gemmell fails, and Burdino excels, is in emotional maturity: Gemmell's characters are forever locked into a macho, live-by-the-sword philosophy, while Burdino's come to know that growth and maturation takes one into other, more settled areas of life that are every bit as challenging as the field of war.

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John Brosnan - - WAR OF THE SKY LORDS  
(Gollancz, 1990, 252pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Mat Coward)

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In the 21st century, huge corporations grew powerful on the inventions of 'genengineers', which led, inevitably, to terrible wars, plagues, monsters, and that sort of carry-on. Four centuries later, impoverished surface-dwellers are in thrall to the Sky Lords - enormous airships, originally built to provide disaster relief. Now, life aboard these floating cities has become medieval, and their hierarchies are subject to intrigue and coup. But some of the airborne colonies have come under the control of Jan Dorvin, who plans to use pre-Gene Wars technology to bring hope to the lowly 'Earthworms'. It's impossible to précis the rest of the plot: WAR OF THE SKY LORDS is a marvellous adventure story (the middle volume of a trilogy which began with THE SKY LORDS), with more than enough fascinating ideas to qualify it as SF. The action never stops, as the characters undergo radical shifts in fortune every few pages. The excitement is spiced with sustained and easy humour, and it's even quite sexy in parts - how many SF novels can you say that about? Admittedly, the characterisation is a bit half-hearted, and there is, perhaps, one too many miraculous escapes, but the setting is novel and well-realised, and the whole an enjoyable, unpretentious, imaginative, good read.

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Ann Halam - - THE DAYMAKER (Puffin, 1990)

(Reviewed by Jessica Yates)

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This is the first in a science fantasy trilogy for young people - 10 - 15 perhaps - which has won praise for its well-devised future world and the topicality of its themes, as well as for its suspenseful plot. In the future, around at least 2,500 AD, western civilisation is a distant memory. The scientific way of life has collapsed owing to the exhaustion of energy sources. Society is now led by women who have discovered their innate magic powers and developed a new religion in harmony with nature, or "Under the Covenant". It has not been possible to turn all the polluted wastelands green, so "Inland" is a small country of fertile patchworks superimposed on a

larger "England".

It took me several readings to be sure that the setting was truly our world in the future, and not another planet or fantasy world with a similar history, but volume 2 TRANSFORMATIONS (also in Puffin) clinched it with its Welsh setting with echoes of the Lake District, while volume 3, THE SKYBREAKER, takes place in a future Holland and North Germany.

Zanne, the heroine, grows up in a valley where her mother is covener, or magic-wielder under the Covenant. As with Earthsea, the balance must be kept. Zanne is also magically talented and is sent to Hillen Coven, the boarding-school for magical females. She is fascinated by some old machines she discovers, and uses her powers to set them going. This blights the valley's orchards, and a bridge which has been repaired by magic starts to collapse. The villagers smash the machines, but Zanne still hasn't learned that one power must cancel out another. She runs away to the "badlands" to find the rumoured Daymaker (power station), hoping to use her magic to generate its electricity and bring back the past.

I was intrigued by the idea of tracing out the remains of modern England from Halam's clues. I could identify Hillen Coven with the Manchester area (where Ann Halam, i.e. Gwyneth Jones) grew up, but could not decide whether Zanne's home valley was Oxford or points west. "Flying Road" could be the remains of Spaghetti Junction, but I can't locate the daymaker itself, though that may have been constructed later than the 20th century. Yes, there are echoes of THE CHRYSALIDS and THE WEATHERMONGER, but in this contemporary treatment of a future society reverting to medievalism, two topical themes are addressed: the society run by women and the potential exhaustion of earth's energy sources. The story of the heroine's quest is in the foreground, the message interwoven with the plot without preaching.

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Brian Aldiss - - STARSWARM (Gollancz, 1990, 190pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Helem McNabb)

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The cover blurb calls this an "interconnected collection of Aldiss stories set on a vast, distant galactic cluster", which is accurate enough. The stories in this collection are linked together by the clever framing device of a survey of civilisations showing varying aspects of civilisation itself. The stories are not connected, any more than different stones in a necklace are connected, but framed by Aldiss they unite to create an effect much greater than a series of isolated stories, however good those stories may be, usually does.

As for the eight stories, they range from the easy to read 'Sector Violet' following two cold-blooded humanoids in their trip to the centre of the sector, with a neat twist in the tail, to the more abstract and elusive 'Sector Green'. Aldiss sometimes suffers from a reputation for obscurity, which is true in some stories but by no means in all of them as this collection shows. The majority of these stories are readable, ingenious and enjoyable. They are not outstandingly brilliant, not the best he's ever written, but they are easily a great deal better, more original and more thought-provoking than a lot of the competition. They are well worth reading.

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Robert Charles Wilson - - THE DIVIDER  
(Orbit, 1990, 249pp, £6.99)

(Reviewed by K. V. Bailey)

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Stories in line of descent from Jekyll and Hyde (split personality) and Frankenstein (scientist-created 'monster') tend to converge. They do so here most intriguingly. The scientist's creation is scarcely a monster: the split involves not good and evil but the vulnerably sensitive and the frighteningly rational. John is the creation of molecular biologist Max Kyriakides - no Shelleyan tinkering with body parts, but an intrauterine induced enhancement of neocortical functions. John involuntarily creates Benjamin, his compensatory alter ego, each persona then by turns submerging the other. Wilson skilfully explores the stress conditions under which this happens, and convincingly represents the a-sensual perceptions of an

alienated superman.

*Since childhood he (John) had lived in a world of Platonic abstraction, Schema and essence, the word behind the shadow. It was Benjamin who had inhabited the universe of surfaces and colours.*

This John, though by no means derivative, does at times echo Odd John. (Stapledon is, a shade patronisingly, alluded to.) THE DIVIDE is a fast-paced narrative in which the psychological and sexual interplay between John/Benjamin and the two women who both support and depend on him/them, and John's quasi-oedipal relationship with Kyriakides, are well-integrated with the novel's speculative content. Its Toronto-Lake Ontario shoreline setting is realistically drawn, an environment sharply reflective of the story's tensions.

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Frank Berbert -- THE DOSADI EXPERIMENT (Gollancz, 1990, 336pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Helen McNabb)

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This is a successor to WHIPPING STAR, using the same protagonist, Jorje X McKie, a member of the Bureau of Sabotage, an agency whose job is to keep the ConSentiency (a multi-world civilisation on an even keel. McKie is sent to Dosadi to see if the Gowachin have been using sentient beings for experimental purposes. What happens to him there and thereafter makes the story.

The wide scope of the ConSentiency is well shown, as are the legal systems within which McKie and others must work - in fact the legal twists and turns are the most interesting aspects of the book in some ways. As a straight narrative, as a tale, the book works well, but lacks depth. None of the characters are fully formed, they fit the roles they must play in the story, but there is no feeling of them having any independent existence, nor does the writing ever rise above the competent. It is all right for train reading to pass the time, but I am afraid that it is nothing better than average.

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Robin McKinley -- THE OUTLAWS OF SHERWOOD (Orbit, 1990, 300pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Sue Thomason)

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Legends are difficult to handle in standard present-day fiction. Most authors end up concentrating on either the timeless archetype and mythical elements of the story, or demythologising it and retelling it as a historical novel. This retelling of the Robin Hood story tries to be historical, or at least "historically unembarrassing".

The result is a charming and delightful romance, a skilfully-crafted tale which reads like an adult version of PETER PAN, with the Merry Men as Lost Boys playing at camping out, treehouses and socialist revolts. Sherwood is a remarkably well-groomed forest, nobody has ailments other than semi-humorous head colds in winter and battle wounds, and the physical, moral, and ideological domination of the Church is represented by jolly Friar Tuck. There are also a remarkable number of girls dressed as boys, to maintain a cheerfully feminist atmosphere. McKinley makes Robin a charismatic figurehead whose archery is barely passable, persuaded by his friends to become a focus and embodiment of Saxon revolt against the Normans. The other lead characters have little individuality, and the latter part of the book becomes dominated by the romance between Sess (Will Scarlet's sister, girl-disguised-as-boy) and Little John (homespun philosopher and gentle giant). The cover shows Robin and his lady marian as two elfin adolescent escapees from the SCA. Definitely one for romantics, not realists.

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Sheri S. Tepper -- GRASS (Corgi, 1990, 540pp, £4.99)

(Reviewed by Jim Provan)

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About a year ago I read an article in FOUNDATION by Richard Grant in which he praised the stylish fiction of M. John Harrison and Sheri S. Tepper. Being an admirer of

Mike's work, I decided to check out some of Tepper's material, but things as they are, I never managed to get around to her until GRASS arrived for review...

It is the far future and humanity is falling victim to a rather nasty viral plague whose long incubation period and shades of autoimmune dysfunction are suggestive of a more contemporary agent. As the plague is rife on nearly every planet in known space, however, a galactic Safe Sex campaign is going to be rather impractical so Marjorie Westriding is sent to discover why Grass seems to be immune, in the hope of finding a cure.

From the opening scene on Grass, Tepper's elegant prose is woven skilfully around what I found to be a disappointingly thin plot and whilst Marjorie's relationship with her family is well-handled, its function seems primarily to be padding. The science behind the fiction, however, contains a few interesting concepts, the most notable being the Föxen/Peep/Hound/Hippae ecosystem and the molecular biology of the virus. On the whole I found Tepper's biology more plausible (if less inventive) than that of Geoff Ryman's THE CHILD GARDEN, another recent sf novel rooted (!) in nature.

All in all a pleasant enough, deftly handled tale which seemed so environmentally friendly that I wouldn't be surprised to find that the book had been printed on recycled paper.

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Jonathan Littel -- BAD VOLTAGE (Orbit, 1990, 301pp, £3.99)

(Reviewed by Helen McNabb)

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Oh dear. I now have to confess that this is one of the few - very few - books for review which I have failed to finish/ It is set in a future where violence is rife, drugs are the norm and everything is high-tech, and we follow the protagonist around the high and low life of Europe. The book uses a compressed and difficult to follow jargon which sometimes mellows into smoother language, containing a boring amount of swearing instead of originality of invention.

If you enjoy the elliptical but somewhat hackneyed images used, including sex and blood, then you might well enjoy this book because the author has clearly put a lot of thought into it. He knows his world and its inhabitants well, so the book scores high on internal consistency, but . . . I'm afraid I gave up and skip-read enough to get an idea of it. Apologies to all, but failure to finish a book is in itself a judgement.

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Larry Niven & Steven Barnes -- THE BARSOOM PROJECT (Pan, 1990, 340pp, £4.50)

(Reviewed by Jim Provan)

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Co-author extraordinaire Larry Niven rejoins forces with quondam partner in crime Steven Barnes with appallingly predictable results. THE BARSOOM PROJECT manages to plumb new depths of tastelessness and mediocrity by combining two of the most abused sub-genres of sf, pseudo-hard sf and RPG-style fantasy, into one of the most disagreeable books I have had the misfortune to read in a long time.

In the early seventies, Ursula K. Le Guin condemned hard sf as being "...all hard and grey and martial and threatening...", arguing that it was sexist and socially regressive. The last few years have seen advances towards more literate forms of hard sf (à la Bear, Zindell etc.), but just when it seemed that such outrages were a thing of the past, a book like this rears its ugly head from the sf junk heap and the genre once more becomes the object of (fully justified) scorn and ridicule.

The plot? An overweight woman returns to Dream Park, hi-tech amusement arcade and scene of earlier harrowing episodes to participate in some recreational equivalent of the F-plan diet. But history starts repeating itself... etcetera.

I found this a deeply offensive book, both morally and stylistically and I hope that the PI readers appreciate what I went through to write this review.

Louise Lawrence - - **EXTINCTION IS FOREVER** (Bodley Head, 1990, 189pp, £5.99)

(Reviewed by Jessica Yates)

Louise Lawrence is a British SF/Fantasy author who has written for the young since 1971, but has not achieved the status of, say, John Christopher or Monica Hughes. Unusually, her books have been more popular in the USA than here, and three of them are still unpublished in the UK. Here is her first short-story collection, three of them having appeared in commissioned anthologies, the other five being new. She is noted for the emotional dilemmas facing her central characters, concern about possible futures such as nuclear holocaust, the destruction of the environment, or totalitarianism, and for her climactic "purple passages of descriptive prose.

The title story is chilling: time-travel to the future 1000 years ahead discovers a post-holocaust London and an evolved civilisation of mer-people. In order to preserve their own existence, they sabotage the time machine so that nuclear war in our near future will go ahead.

The mess we've made of planet Earth is also the subject of 'The Death Flower', when the Galactic Council debate the morality of seeding the death flower across the planet to kill off everyone except the meek, whose emotions will not disturb the flower.

Other stories feature teenage crises against, usually, a future background, sometimes on Earth and sometimes on other planets. Ms Lawrence writes of idealistic young people whose moral sense is superior to adults' and who have to choose between their hearts and their heads. 'Rigel Light' is especially powerful: the story of aliens with a two-stage evolution, first humanoid, then a body of light, "a pillar of silvery white brightness trailing its tongues of crimson fire" - but of course the stupid earthlings don't realise that the Rigelians have a wondrous second stage and simply use the humanoids as slaves on their native planet. Recommended, as are her other teenage novels CHILDREN OF THE DUST, MOONWIND, and THE WARRIORS OF TAAN.

Dan Simmonds - - **PHASES OF GRAVITY** (Headline, 1990, 282pp, £7.99)

(Reviewed by Sue Thomason)

Set in a barely fictional and realistic present-day America, this novel explores the life and character of Richard Baedecker, ageing ex-astronaut and introspective self-indulgent slob. "His quest for higher meaning", says the cover blurb, and I'm afraid it's true, "begins when he meets a mysterious young woman" (a one-dimensional and convenient anima figure), in India while awaiting his son's release from a strict ashram retreat run by an unspecified New Age sect. The novel reads like an exercise in sentimental nostalgia for the American Space Race and its heroes, taking in the Challenger disaster, a sweet little old lady UFO-watcher, a born-again Apollo crew-member turned televangelist whose rebellious teenage son uses the F-word, test-pilots' nightmare turned reality, and the mysterious death of another ex-Apollo pilot. Those who like this sort of thing will like it. All others, please avoid.

Bob Shaw - - **THE FUGITIVE WORLDS** (Orbit, 1991, 254pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by Norman Beswick)

This is typical recent Bob Shaw with his tried and tested formula: start with footling cardboard characters and a creakingly manipulated plot, begin to capture our interest with a curious alien around page 64, and bring the whole pantomime to life with a transformation scene and a sensawunda climax, in the process gently guying the so-called "golden age" tradition it remembers.

We're in the same universe as THE RAGGED ASTRONAUTS and THE WOODEN SPACESHIPS, with its twin planets sharing a single atmosphere. But this is no trilogy; the story stands on its own and you'll follow it quite well even if you didn't read the others. Toller Maraquine II, grandson of the hero of the earlier novels, flaunts sword and military courage to impress his beloved Countess Vantara before (and within) an amazing alien crystal artefact in midspace; we meet Divividiv and the Xa, both of whom I wanted to stay with and know more about; and a preposterous tale ends up with the humans transported to a very surprising elsewhere.

No use complaining that almost everyone except Divi and the Xa is exasperating; because that's all part of the design. I have to say I had to push myself through the first eighty pages, but quite enjoyed the last sixty, with some nicely stunning old-style sf ideas and one tiny plot twist (Jerene) I actually applauded. But read it again? You mean, like, all of it? There's too little there to savour, second time around.

John Brunner - - **THE SHEEP LOOK UP** (Legend, 1991, 461pp, £4.99)

(Reviewed by Phil Nichols)

Very much a cautionary tale, this 1972 novel is one of those 'past futures' which is as interesting for what it says as it is for the way it says it. Written under the influence of the Vietnam war and the first wave of ecological awareness, it nevertheless retains its relevancy.

Structured as something of a jigsaw - though not so much of a 'puzzle' as Brunner's earlier STAND ON ZANZIBAR - the book belies its epic length by being a breeze of a read. Plot thread after plot thread appears, all becoming intertwined as time passes: this is one year (one very significant year) in the life of mankind; what he does to his fellow man; what he does to his planet; and what he has to do to compensate for what he has *previously* done to his planet. People wear filtermasks in the city, may drink only bottled water, can't even grow successful crops or use humble fly-paper. Convenient travel is by supersonic jet - you have to wait half a day at the airport because the planes are always late, and the sonic booms may cause the odd avalanche and case of severe mental shock, but what the hell, you get to your destination faster.

Sixties consciousness is evident throughout the book. The simple life of the Irainites is something of a hippy existence. The details may be slightly out - in 1972 there was little talk of greenhouse effects and ozone holes - but the thesis of the book is an inevitable one. Maybe not this year, maybe not next, but if we do go with a whimper, Brunner may have foreseen it more clearly than any other novelist.

The witty chapter headings alone make this book well worth the cover price; I recommend it highly.

Pauline Fisk - - **MIDNIGHT BLUE** (Lion, 1991, 217pp, £2.99)

(Reviewed by Andy Sawyer)

This fantasy is winner of the 1990 Smarties prize which sounds naff but is one of the major children's book awards. Bonnie escapes from her domineering Grandmother in a balloon to a world behind the sky, where analogues of the people she knows in this world (including Bonnie herself) are found. But 'Grandbag' also has her analogue in the evil 'Grandmother Marvell' who appears to be able to do literally the soul-withering which Grandbag does metaphorically. Can the presences of the ancient Lord and Lady of the Hill - who appear to be the old gods Edric and Godda - help Bonnie?

One of my colleagues found the part of the book where Bonnie throws herself from a window to drive Grandmother Marvell away to be one of the most disturbing things she has ever read, and I can see why. Despite some wonderful invention - such as the Shadowboy - MIDNIGHT BLUE is a curiously opaque book which works by opposing symbolism and obvious metaphor rather than character. The most insensitive thing a reviewer could say is that a book contains the core of something brilliant which has not, in fact been written but in this

case I can come to no other conclusion. It has a hallucinatory, even catatonic air about it: the world it begins in cannot be our world but then neither, perhaps, is the world Bonnie enters. The fantastic elements never quite gell and as a whole the book is coldly elusive. Only time can confirm *MIDNIGHT BLUE*'s prizewinning status.

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Phyllis Eisenstein - - *SORCEROR'S SON* (Grafton, 1990, 446pp, £4.50)

(Reviewed by John D. Owen)

A reprint of the 1979 fantasy novel to coincide with the belated sequel, *THE CRYSTAL PALACE*, *SORCEROR'S SON* recounts the early adventures of Cray Ormoru.

Eisenstein's fantasy is unusual (i.e. there is no trace of Tolkienism), and uses a small cast (a mere six main characters, and few minor ones) to excellent effect. The plot evolves from the paranoid imaginings of the sorcerer Rezhyk, who, as the story opens, has had his offer of marriage refused by the sorceress Delivev Ormoru. Fearing the refusal is prelude to attack, Rezhyk sends his most trusted fire demon, Gildrum, to seduce and impregnate Delivev in human guise. Unfortunately, something rather untoward happens: Gildrum falls in love with Delivev, and, though unable to disobey its master, subverts his attempts to kill Delivev's offspring, Cray.

The adult Cray sets out on a quest to find his father, the young knight who promised to return once his task for his liege lord was complete. Gildrum tries to steer Cray away from the truth, but instead Cray becomes apprentice to Rezhyk! Naturally enough, this gives Rezhyk's paranoia full rein, and he does his best to prevent Cray learning his secrets, though with unexpected results.

The whole novel is well-written, though the pacing is a little uneven (at 350 pages, it might have been tighter), but is admirably original.

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Dean R. Koontz - - *THE BAD PLACE* (Headline, 1990, 500pp, £4.99)

(Reviewed by Lynne Bispham)

Every time Frank Pollard sleeps, he awakens to fresh horror. He knows his name, and that someone - or something - is trying to kill him, but nothing else. He has no memory of his past life, no memory of how, while apparently asleep, he acquired a suitcase full of cash, nor how he came to be covered in blood. Private Detectives Bobby and Julie Dakota, hired by Frank to investigate the circumstances surrounding his loss of memory, uncover a series of horrific murders which leads them into confrontation with Candy, a particularly unpleasant psychotic who seeks Frank's life.

The only aspect of this pulp horror novel that is remotely interesting is the question of who Frank is and where he goes when he goes to sleep. Unfortunately, before these questions are fully answered the reader has been faced with "hot blood spurting" from bitten-out throats, incest, immortality, telepathy and telekinesis, not to mention inter-planetary travel. Subtle, *THE BAD PLACE* is not, nor does it place much emphasis on credibility.

In fact the real mystery, far greater than the mystery that surrounds Frank Pollard, is why the book has followed Koontz's earlier novels into the best-seller lists. One can only assume that there are an awful lot of readers out there who find graphic descriptions of animals having their heads bitten off entertaining.

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Philip K. Dick - - *THE GAME-PLAYERS OF TITAN* (Grafton, 1991, 223pp, £3.50)

(Reviewed by L. J. Hurst)

This is one of Dick's novels I had not read before and I was left confused when I read it because it seems like two different books stuck together, with very little to connect them.

It must be an early novel, I thought, as I read the first chapters, because this atmosphere is the same as his mainstream novels with only a slight change to the future. But it was first published in 1963, the year after *THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE*, and was Dick's twelfth or thirteenth to be published.

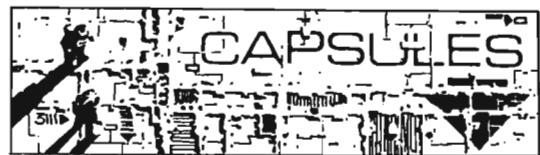
The book's opening is set in California after an unspecified war with the Vugs from Titan, whose main effects are to leave everyone depressed and the Earth with a low birth-rate. The game-players are a privileged group who meet in conclaves around the country to play the game, which is mainly the bluffing aspect of poker, and to exchange land-rights and wives as their winnings. If these people met to play poker on a Friday night, get drunk and swap wives today, their lives would not be much different.

Murder and an unexpected pregnancy intervene, however, and then we are travelling through some bizarre astral projection to Titan, where hawk and dove Vugs are engaged in bitter infighting, with the new conception their *casus belli*. That change of location marks a change in the style of the novel, and we are into time travel, amnesia, conspiracies and a generally different world.

Recently, I read that Stanislaw Lem wrote off Dick as another Van Vogt, and it might have been *GAME-PLAYERS* that made him do it. Lem later revised his views, but this remains a problematic novel. The revelations of the last part are in such a different tone that it is hard to reconcile them with the downbeat style of the first.

There are, though, yet more things in the book to be considered: people's relations with domestic robots (which Dick calls the Rushmore Effect, throughout), for instance, and the everyday consequences of telepathy.

And the consequences of all this? Not a failure, but a novel with many strands that will bear reading and re-reading.




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Jerry Ahern - - *FINAL RAIN: THE SURVIVALIST: 19* (N.E.L., 1990, 220pp, £2.99)

John Rourke, "CIA-trained weapons and survival expert", having spent five centuries cryogenically asleep, carries on the eternal war against Soviet communism. Gun-fun for people who don't read newspapers. (Mat Coward)

Orson Scott Card - - *CHARACTERS AND VIEWPOINT* (Robinson Publishing, 1990, 182pp, £5.99)

Ansen Dibell - - *PLOT* (Robinson Publishing, 1990, 170pp, £5.99)

Two items from a new Writer's Workshop series, aiming to give practical advice to aspiring new writers. Both authors have written SF and Orson Scott Card has won umpteen awards and sold millions. The advice each gives is sensible and thought-provoking, with many examples from the SF/Fantasy fields, and young writers will be entertained and may well profit from study of it: so long as they pay equally close attention to the impulse that made them write in the first place. More books in the series are promised and may be worth looking out for. (Norman Beswick)

Jack Chalker - - *WHEN THE CHANGEWINDS BLOW* (N.E.L., 1991, 293pp, £3.99)

Another ineliminable first volume of a fantasy with a SF veneer, *CHANGEWINDS* I was so muddled, tedious and repulsive that by page 40 all I wanted to do was put it

through a shredder and burn it. Two teenage girls find themselves transported to another world where they become the pawns of two equally ruthless Dark Lords. Chalker seems obsessed with female auto-eroticism and lesbianism, and the two girls regularly end up naked, admiring themselves and each other, or having sex to get out of various difficulties (one even enjoying her role as mind-slave and prostitute). The style suggests it is aimed at the juvenile market. (Terry Broome)

**David Cook - - HORSELORDS** (Penguin, 1990, 312pp, £3.99)

Thinly disguised Genghis Khan clone goes on conquering spree in world of *Forgotten Realms*™. It's a shame they couldn't have stayed forgotten. I object to bookshops filling their shelves with these shit role-playing game spin-off books. They only take up room that could be used by an author with at least some literary merit - like Jeffrey Archer, for instance. (Ian Sales)

**Diane Duane - - THE DOOR INTO FIRE** (Corgi, 1991, 332pp, £3.99)

This first volume of the *TALE OF THE FIVE* was first published in the UK with an "Overture" by David Gerrold in a 1981 Magnum edition. It was Duane's first novel, before any of her *STAR TREK* tie-ins, and reading it a decade later I am still impressed by her leisurely, but rivetting, exploration of her hero's psyche and the price he pays for his power. However, Herewiss's quest to discover his True Name is occasionally diminished by some very purple love scenes, and the book ending in mid-story is another minus, especially if it takes another ten years to see it through to its conclusion. (Terry Broome)

**Diane Duane - - SO YOU WANT TO BE A WIZARD** (Corgi, 1991, 237pp, £2.99)

Nita's library book tells her how to become a wizard, which is a good enough escape for a bullied teenager. Together with another trainee wizard, and a White Hole with a serious emission problem, she goes to the Timegate to look for her lost pen, and ends up saving the universe from its new owner. It has an original plot, (very funny in some places, particularly the idea of a Dark Lord of a universe where the lights don't work) though man-eating helicopters don't really appeal to me. Sometimes it seems that Diane Duane has worked too hard on writing a *children's* book. Still, there are a lot of funny ideas though the humour is more Douglas Adams than Terry Pratchett. (Harriet Sawyer)

**Doris Egan - - THE GATE OF IVORY** (Mandarin, 1990, 319pp, £3.99)

An engaging space fantasy following the adventures of Theodora, a penniless scholar and Tarot reader stranded on the only planet in the galaxy where magic works, and her macho aristo employer Ren Cormallen. Theo learns to live less in her rationality, and more in her intuition (via the Tarot), her emotions (via Cormallen), and her body (via expert teaching in equivalents of Tai Chi and Shiatsu). Like most wish-fulfilment lead characters, Theo is just a bit TOO good at everything she learns, but it's a fine tale; I'd cheerfully read a sequel. (Sue Thomason)

**Mary Kirchoff & Douglas Miles - - FLINT THE KING** (Penguin, 1990, 308pp, £4.50)

*Dragonlance* spin-off in which Flint the dwarf gets put down a pit and ends up adopted as king by the repulsive (but amusing) gully dwarves, who aid him in his flight against the repulsive (but nasty) mountain dwarves. (Andy Sawyer)

**Richard A. Knaak - - KAZ THE MINOTAUR** (Penguin, 1990, 314pp, £3.99)

In so far as any facets of the *Dragonlance* world is interesting or amusing, the minotaurs, with their strict code of honour, are. This story, the sequel to *THE LEGEND OF HUMA*, features a minotaur, but the plot is - well, the same as the others, really. (Andy Sawyer)

**Grahame Masterton - - DEATH DREAM** (Sphere, 1990, 383pp, £3.99)

Nine-year-old Lenny is a channel for a creature which literally lives in dreams - and comes out to commit

horrific slasher killings. Only the return of the Night warriors can stop it. A cross between "stalk 'n' slash" and toy-based superhero cartoon, *DEATH DREAM* is obviously what your kiddies will graduate to if you bought them Ninja Turtle product for Christmas. (Andy Sawyer)

**M.E. Morris - - THE ICEMEN** (Grafton, 1990, 384pp, £3.99)

Antarctica, renescent Nazis, a US Navy Commander and his "stunning co-pilot Lt. Sheila (Frosty) Kohn," snappy dialogue, far too much technical data from the retired naval aviator author, a near-future setting, man against the ice and evil of facism, and if you've read his *ALPHA BUG* you'll have a good idea what to expect. Take it on holiday, on a long flight, anywhere that will provide no distractions, and you may have a lot of innocent fun with this boy's own adventure story. (Ken Lake)

**Steve Perry - - THE MACHIAVELLI INTERFACE** (Orbit, 1990, 197pp, £3.50)

Last volume in a trilogy, following *THE MAN WHO NEVER MISSED* and *MATADORA*, in which the corrupt Galactic Confederation is overthrown by rebels. Unexceptional space empire tale. (Mat Coward)

**Richard Sanford - - THE CALLING** (N.E.L., 1990, 189pp, £3.50)

Fairly routine horror that actually gets better as you get further into it. Competent writing, a few touches of originality, and an interesting ending put it a notch above the usual low standard of the genre. If you're a fan of horror, you could do much worse. (Ian Sales)

**David J. Schow - - THE KILL RIFF** (Futura, 1990, 406pp, £3.99)

Schow's short stories have attracted a lot of reader-attention. His first novel is a rock-and-roll murder shocker. Lucas Ellington leaves an institution with a certificate to prove he's sane and proceeds to wreak revenge on the members of the heavy-metal band at whose concert his daughter died in a crowd riot. Is Lucas truly out for revenge or does he just despise what the cock-rock exhibitionists have done to rock-and-roll? It's a bit of both, and neither, as Schow stomps and struts through an awesomely wicked parody of rockpress cliches and vigilante violence to a twist which kicks the story into orbit. Some of the best suspense I've read in a long time. (Andy Sawyer)

**Ed & Lorraine Warren with Robert David Chase - - GHOST HUNTERS** (Futura, 1990, 215pp, £3.50)

Allegedly true stories of demonic possession and the like from a pair of supernatural investigators. It's hard to tell if the rabidly evangelical-Christian viewpoint or the dreadful writing style, which blends breathless shock-on-shock, *True Confessions*, and a general assumption that three sentences is all a paragraph can reasonably be expected to take, is the worst aspect of this book. (Andy Sawyer)

**Freda Warrington - - THE RAINBOW GATE** (N.E.L., 1990, 381pp, £3.99)

Stock-footage fantasy scenario, slanted at "adults" (i.e. includes sex), in which Helen and her mysterious childhood friend Rianna pass through a gate to the alternate world of Tevera. Rianna is amnesiac, possibly unstable, a gifted doll-maker (they are soul-dolls) and (it eventually transpires) a native of Tevera. Helen and her niceguy friend Martin have holiday romances with a couple of Teverans, and sort out the relationship between the antipathetic "optimist" and "pessimist" Teveran cultures. The book's best feature is its roots in Leicester landscape and folklore; its worst, self-indulgent and muddled disavowals of the reality of death. (Sue Thomason)

**Margaret Weiss & Tracy Hickman - - ROSE OF THE PROPHET** (Bantam, 1990, 390pp, £4.50)

Volume Three of the *Prophet of Akhran* trilogy by the popular Weiss and Hickman team, creators of the *Dragonlance* series. I found reading this book a terrible chore. Strictly for fans. (John Newsinger)

## Index of books reviewed

### "Upon the rack in print"

**INTERZONE 44 - 45**  
(February - March 1991)  
(Reviewed by Andy Mills)

War and recession: these are hard times, so let us be likewise severe in our categorisation of the fiction found within these issues; let the labels be Very Good, Fair and Poor. Starting with the Very Good . . .

The major story has to be Robert Holdstock's novella 'The Bone Forest' (IZ 45). The title is drawn from a chapter heading in *LAVONDYSS*, as is one of the characters (the mythago Ash), but the action really takes place before *MYTHAGO WOOD*, and it is internally consistent with both. I approached 'The Bone Forest' with caution, for I had found the first part of *LAVONDYSS* to be, frankly, tedious. The narrator is George Huxley (father of Steven, the hero of *MYTHAGO WOOD*) whose fate we know, as we do that of all the characters, and the initial pages cover old ground such as defining mythagos, presumably to let the story stand on its own. But persevere into the tale proper, for a jewel is to be discovered. Apart from fleshing out certain characters from the novel - especially Huxley's wife - this is an exciting and strange read about a semi-ghostly Huxley brought across from a parallel world and the original Huxley's attempts to understand and then combat his doppelganger. A quite different story from that provided by Greg Egan, whose 'Blood Stickers' (IZ 44) is the best in that issue.

Can this man do wrong? Egan here ties together illness, medicine and computer hacking to attack medical practices, but it's his sensitivity which strikes the reader most, in this case the empathy he displays with seriously ill people. Yet it's leavened with a wry touch, as in this illustration of a child's logic: "She sterilised the needle in the candle flame, then wiped it clean of soot with a tissue and saliva." Egan deals with bereavement as does - more directly and with no less sensitivity - John Christopher with 'A Journey South' (IZ 44). Simply yet strongly written, set in a future where a kind of utopia has been achieved through depopulation, Christopher's hero is an atavist in that he *wants* to feel pain and grief.

Two stories in the 'Fair' category: Brian Stableford's 'The Man Who Invented Good Taste' (IZ 45) and Sylvia M. Siddall's 'Thylacine, Thylacine' (IZ 44). Stableford's is an old SF theme, that of the perversion of a scientist's work for monetary gain, and the cracking title is followed by a story which is really only let down by a weak ending. Siddall's is a tale of diminished expectation and resignation, as an ill-matched couple hunt and capture a weird creature, which latter eventually escapes them.

Finally for the fiction, the 'Poor' category includes slight and unconvincing stories by Alethea Amsden ('Fugitives From The Watch Ward', IZ 44); Geoffrey A. Landis ('Jamais Vu'), Stephen Baxter ('Traces') and Neil Jones ('Heads Or Tails', all IZ 45). The greatest disappointment, however, lies with 'Piloting' by Eric Brown, whom one approaches with high hopes. In a setting resembling Silverberg's 'The Conglomeroid Cocktail Party', Brown's heroine has the augmented ability to enter and animate the dead. This grotesque idea is off-putting enough; it's compounded by the bathos of the story's conclusion.

On the non-fiction side, there are two fine interviews by Stan Nicholls - with Joe Haldeman in IZ 44, including much about the process of writing *THE HEMINGWAY HOAX*, and with Robert Holdstock on the *MYTHAGO WOOD* works (the intimation here is that MW will form the basis of many stories to come: ". . . if I had someone Chinese camp next to the wood no doubt there would be some very bizarre mythagos appearing") - and one by Colin Greenland with Ursula K. Le Guin, about herself and her defense of genre as well as about Earthsea and *TEHANU*.

I can't end without myself defending that marvellous TV 'Twin Peaks', castigated by Wendy Bradley as being rebarbative. Quite the opposite - take that opening scene in the second series, where the prone Agent Cooper and the doddering waiter pulled the viewer between high tension and comedy. Great Stuff!

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