PAPERBACK INFERNO

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Volume 4 Number 6 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas at Room 9, 94 St George's Square, Pimlico, London SW1Y 3QY, and with a brand new typewriter to boot. (The other one gave up and died mere minutes after finishing the previous issue.) This issue features reviews by Dave Langford, Ian Williams, David Penn, Bill Carlin, Roy Macinski, Brian Smith, Mary Gentle, and (of course) me -- several names, I'll grant you, but looking at the actual material I'll swear half of it is by me and a third by Mary. And if I don't use it I won't have an issue, since several people failed to deliver on time (and, in fact, haven't come through at all). An editor's life sure is fraught with problems....

Robert Heinlein -- EXPANDED UNIVERSE (Ace, 582pp lge format, $8.95) and THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST (New English Library, 556pp, £2.25)

According to the accumulations of folklore in which SF is sunk and which consistently hamper effective criticism of it, Robert Heinlein is one of its "established greats": a man who, noted for his ability to evoke credible-seeming pictures of then-possible futures, shot to prominence during the "Golden Age" and has remained at the forefront of the literature ever since. While there's no denying the influence of his early techniques on those who came after him, his prominence since derives less from his imaginative range and the complexity of his subject-matter than from both his early fame and from the demands he now makes to be taken seriously. These demands probably stem from his acquisition in the early fifties of a lucrative contract with Scribners for a series of juvenile novels and his post-war sales to such "slick" magazines as The Saturday Evening Post; a contract and sales which led him into believing that he'd made it as a serious literary figure and was hence enabled to pronounce upon political and social matters. And unchallenged to boot, because his readers lacked his experience of the world and were thus unable to distinguish between the fantasy one existing inside his head -- the only one in which his "rules" and philosophies have any application -- and the real one in which they would later have to live -- one in which life proceeds according to utterly different precepts. It was not until, with Starship Troopers, his didactic concerns began to bleed over into his adult fiction that his philosophies were at last exposed for what they were: a trite, empty and downright tedious farrago of half-baked anti-intellectual cracker-barrel pseudo-moralising in which the characters existed only as handy mouthpieces for his views (all opposing ones being deliberately so flimsily constructed as to be easily disposed of) and the plot suf-

ficed as but an arbitrarily-manipulated vehicle for their espousal.

The situation since has become so bad that his work no longer qualifies even as didactic art; it's merely didactic, fullstop. But still it sells — the man's a cult, after all, he's got a legion or three of ultra-loyal fans, they'll buy anything with his name on it.... Thus, I suppose, the excuse behind Expanded Universe, which reprints the stories from the 1966 collection The Worlds Of Robert A. Heinlein (themselves dating from the forties and fifties) and a few previously uncollected ones besides, and interleaves them with various nonfiction pieces, most dating from the fifties and sixties, with one written especially for this book. I suppose the word "interesting" might just do to describe these articles, but only as an understatement; repellent their wolfish libertarian politics might be, but you can't help but be fascinated by the dreadful superficiality of thought they display, not least because of the hundreds (perhaps thousands) of people who are likely to mistake it for deep insight. How anyone, in this day and age — post-Vietnam, post-Watergate — can possibly uphold a simplistic doctrine which divides everything into two camps — the Good, containing everyone and everything of which he approves, and the Bad, containing everything and everyone else — is astonishing; is he truly incapable of appreciating the fine distinctions between alternate doctrines and viewpoints? On the evidence of these articles, the answer has to be yes: ridicule and opinionated cant take the place of logic and reason, without even a subjective rationale that might give his views some weight being offered, and the result is a shrill dogmatism offensive both in itself and by virtue of the macho aggressiveness of its phraseology. Here, from a lecture to a class of US Navy midshipmen entitled "The Pragmatics Of Patriotism", is an extract purporting to deal with the silliness of pacificism:

> 'Today, in the United States, it is popular among self-styled "intellectuals" to sneer at patriotism. They seem to think that it is axiomatic that any civilised man is a pacifist, and they treat the military profession with contempt. "Warmongers" - "Imperialists" - "Hired killers in uniform" - you have all heard such sneers and you will hear them again. One of their favourite quotations is: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel".
>
> 'What they never mention is that the man who made that sneering wisecrack was a fat, gluttonous slob who was pursued all his life by a pathological fear of death.' (p.462)

The "fat, gluttonous slob" in question was Samuel Johnson — but pray tell me, Mr Heinlein: what had his girth and appetite to do with his intellect? And isn't it a natural human trait to be afraid of death anyway?

The last 67 (although it feels like 267) pages are occupied by a piece called "The Happy Days Ahead", the first half of which is devoted to a polemic on what Heinlein thinks is wrong with modern America (which seems a reasonable analysis until you put it up against other ones — I recommend Christopher Lasch's The Culture Of Narcissism as a good starting point — whereupon its flaccid banality becomes instantly apparent) while the second half concentrates on a laughably implausible scenario demonstrating how things can be put right again, featuring some doctrinaire "my country right or wrong" tub-thumping and a (black woman, but so what?) President who talks tough, stomps everyone who disagrees with her and sounds just like Robert Heinlein himself....and for all practical purposes is Robert Heinlein himself. The fact that such an authoritarian leadership contradicts the libertarianism he expresses elsewhere seems to have passed him by — and if his own politics is that confused then he has no business preaching to anyone else.

Leadership, or the duties and responsibilities thereof, occupies a large portion of The Number Of The Beast, mainly because the four main characters spend whole chapters on end discussing protocol and command procedure and related matters....although that should perhaps read "character", since much of the dialogue is presented without the speaker being identified, so that you can't etll them apart. Nor do you really need to, since they're all the same person — all clones of Heinlein....

The ostensible plot concerns the adventures through time and space of four smart-arse know-alls who, having invented a device that can take them to

all possible alternate universes (the number of which is as the Biblical Beast of Revelations, six to the sixth to the sixth, and the novel's only remotely original ingredient), are then set upon by a bunch of aliens who want it for themselves and are thus forced into fleeing through those alternate universes. There should thus have been plenty of scope for all manner of delightful invention, but no: as already noted, the bulk of the book is taken up with talk talk talk, so all we ever get in the way of a background is a series of hasty plagiarisms of other writers' universes (childhood favourites like Burroughs's Barsoom and Baum's Oz, plus one that resembles the sort of libertarian world he'd prefer, to name but three). Never mind all the entirely gratuitous sideswipes at his pet hates: philosophers, theologians, lawyers, teachers, godless communists, pacifists, ecologists, literary critics, and hundreds more -- he has, obviously, gone out of his way to insult as many people as possible, regardless of the fact that none of it has anything to do with the plot. It's the sort of book, in fact, that would be written by a man concerned not to tell a story but to vent several decades of stored-up bile; a man who, as the quotes about breasts used as page-fillers in Vector 101 amply demonstrated ("Her nipples went spung!" indeed!), is clearly in the last throes of senility -- that anyone older than a coy, gawky adolescent could ever write such vapid sexist drivel is little short of astonishing....but in Heinlein's universe, of course, the women exist only to service the men, who are superpotent. In this book, for example, both male protagonists get both female protagonists pregnant first time off -- which, unbelievably, actually motivates part of the plot, since in addition to being chased by aliens the heroes are looking for a universe with good obstetric techniques.

Ludicrous though this is, however, there's more to it for, although clearly intended less as a work of fiction than as a present to his fans, his condescending arrogance and patronising contempt for them drips from every page. I've already hinted that, in his plagiarisation of his alternate universes, he's simply revisiting favourite childhood haunts, and mentioned that the four main characters are but clones of himself; but it should be noted that the vast quantities of talk which fill the book indicate that he actually cares for nothing but the sound of his own voice and that the ramshackle plot demonstrates (or, rather, stands as a metaphor for) his almost overwhelming disinterest in having to explain his beliefs and attitudes; and as for the ending.... The final, crowning scene is in fact an SF convention attended by characters from other Heinlein novels, gathered together for the purposes of "Eschatological Pantheistic Multi-Ego Solipsism" -- and since they, too, are all clones of Heinlein and the (unstated) guest of honour is Heinlein...right. At last the true nature of the book is made overt: it has all been nothing less than one long orgy of slobbering self-worship.

The Number Of The Beast is, in sum, a thoroughly disgraceful piece of "work" -- not merely one of the worst SF novels to have appeared in many years but one of the worst the world has ever known.

Robert Stallman -- THE CAPTIVE (Timescape/Pocket, 207pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Roy Macinski

The Captive is the second in a trilogy detailing the life of a creature known as "the beast", which has the ability to create a human form in order to mask its true identity -- one described as akin to that of a large, powerful, highly intelligent golden bear.

After a short prologue which recaps the events of the previous book, The Orphan -- from which we learn that the beast knows little or nothing of its own origins and identity, and that it must find a human family with which to live to trigger the next phase of its growth; to do so it creates the persona of a young boy, but the family is destroyed and the beast has to move on -- the story gets under way in earnest. We find that due to a combination of inherited instinct and the emotional ties that bound it to its chosen family, built up by its human part, it cannot break away, and so has to seek out one of the family's relatives -- a young woman with a small child and a drunken husband.

The story, with its twists and turns, is in fact far more subtle and complex than this brief resume implies. Indeed, it is a credit to Stallman's

creative abilities that he manages to shape and build this rather unimaginative and dated theme into a compelling, exciting and often quite moving novel. However, it does have its flaws: occasionally, the style seems forced and uneasy, and the characterisation (which for the main part is so good) descends towards the end of the book into some fairly awful good and evil stereotyping. But I feel these weak points are greatly outmatched by the book's many outstanding features.

As I said at the beginning of this review, The Captive is the second in a trilogy. If its standard is maintained, the third should be worth looking out for.

Sheila Sullivan — THE CALLING OF BARA (Avon, 293pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Bill Carlin

Originally published in Britain in 1975 as Summer Rising, this fantasy novel takes the archetypal quest out of the closet for yet another dusting. Joseph Campbell must be smiling broadly as his views on the substance of myth are corroborated, whether consciously or unconsciously, once again, but I for one am beginning to grow bored with writers who take "the Hero with a Thousand Faces" on yet another excursion with only a nod in the direction of originality. Fantasy writers are invariably the worst offenders.

I must admit, however, that Sheila Sullivan tries harder than most of that ilk and her novel is obviously well-researched (frequent references to "Holy Brigid" justified one of my recent, sillier purchases; according to the Penguin Dictionary Of Saints, Brigid is the female equivalent of St Patrick). She is a good, descriptive writer, which is not a great advantage in the fantasy field, but very weak in the plotting department, which is a positive hindrance.

Bara, a young girl living in London in the wake of a great technological and economic collapse, finds herself pregnant after being raped by a mysterious albino warlord. Four years later, she is summoned by a telepathic message to Ireland, where her illegitimate son is destined to do great things. Along the way she must avoid a variety of wicked pursuers before becoming involved in a power struggle between rival factions in Ireland, the promised land of the future....stop me if you've heard it all before.

Basically, it's not a terribly bad book, but you should save your hard-earned pennies for something better. Such action may even coax publishers to break the mediocrity barrier.

Stanley Schmidt (ed.) — ANALOG YEARBOOK II (Ace, 294pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Ian Williams

I don't enjoy short stories much, I like anthologies even less, and I stopped buying Analog twelve years ago — so if I had to pick a book I was sure I'd hate (apart from the new Heinlein), this would probably have been it. Reality, however, proved somewhat different.

This isn't a reprint collection, but is intended as an extra issue of Analog in book form. Commercially, it's a good idea, as in theory every one of the magazine's one hundred thousand readers will fork over their two-and-a-half bucks, so you've a guaranteed quarter-million-dollar turnover; then, too, it forms a sampler to tempt bookbuyers into picking up on the magazine — if you like one you'll like the other.

It did cause me to ask one question, however: is Analog the magazine these days so depressing?

Out of seven stories, only two were what I thought to be typical Analog fare. The last and worst — George W. Olney's "Guard At The Gates Of Hell" — is one of those militaristic tales of banner-waving and duty that's so far over the top it could almost be a parody but for the total lack of humour. "Windship", by Lord St Davids is just a nasty piece of violence as a lone man fights off (and slaughters) terrorists on a futuristic oil tanker with the aid of a computer, and in which a female terrorist, while tied up, escapes by cutting off her hand with a razor blade. "She had got away by the classic trick of a trapped wild animal at the cost of a severed limb." I think the guy who wrote this is about fourteen — either that or an idiot.

The other stories deal less with violence than with emotion; and there's a surprising air of cynicism and despondency about them. The best is James Patrick Kelly's "Homo Neuter", in which a mutation allows early and hectic sexual activity before the testicles shrivel at the age of twenty to leave a very longlived adult telepath. The story concerns an adult neuter, Pelegrin, finding another of his kind in the form of an eight-year-old black from the ghetto, and his failing to reach accord with him not through cultural differences but through his own lack of insight into himself. I honestly didn't expect to find so intense and strong a story in Analog, especially with its undeleted expletives, and I'll be surprised if it doesn't turn up in a best of the year anthology.

In Thomas A. Easton's "The Last Flute", mankind receives a temporary immortality at a horrifying cost, and in a mere sixteen pages follows the life of one man over three thousand years to his final, moving end. Gordon Eklund's "Valo In Love" is about a robot originally programmed as a romantic poet but who, failing, was reprogrammed as an equally unsuccessful lawyer, and falls in love with a human client accused of murdering her police chief lover. It's a wry, mildly amusing story with a delightful twist.

The rest of the book consists of two stories not worth mentioning, a long poem by Jeff Rovin not worth reading, a short joke, and two articles I didn't read. Overall, the standard of writing isn't particularly high and nor is there a high level of imagination on display, so the book is not one that can be heartily recommended; but the attitudes of some of the writers show that there may be some life in the old horse. It's certainly not as complacent as I expected.

(The editor speaks -- I've just realised that I've omitted a couple of names from the colophon, for which I must apologise. Here's the review by the first of them....)

Larry Niven -- THE RINGWORLD ENGINEERS (Orbit, 354pp, £1.50)
Reviewed by Chris Bailey

This book contravenes two of my most cherished private precepts concerning the SF novel: firstly, that it should be comprehensible to the general reader and not, as it were, slink in through the back door through an over-reliance on genre shorthand; and, secondly, that if a sequel, it should stand on its own as a valid entertainment for the reader who has no knowledge of the original. Here, for example, the ignorant will be surprised to learn that the galaxy is exploding and that we really ought to be doing something about changing planets. Having said which, even those in the know will be disappointed by this book.

It is a critical commonplace regarding Ringworld that, having thought the place up, Niven could think of nothing for the characters to do other than have great difficulty getting off it. Their problem now is to prevent the Ringworld from grinding into its sun, and Niven somehow contrives to make this seem a matter of small consequence. By about halfway through, in fact, that the Ringworld should crash into its sun is a consummation rather to be desired from the reader's point of view, for the book is pedestrian -- it plods.

In the best of Niven's short fiction, we are shown the hero getting into a hole (black or otherwise), we are shown the tools at his disposal (spaceship, stasis field, etc.), the laws of physics operate as usual and the author thinks up a cunning way for his character to wriggle out. Niven writes comfortably within such a taut framework. But as we move about the Rongworld, there is room for ansolutely anything to appear -- and it does. We encounter vampires, giants, mermen....the scope available brings the book closer to fantasy, where the reader's interest is held by the variety and colour of the incidents rather than by any artifice of plot. Here, given that Louis Wu will almost certainly save the Ringworld from its doom, and the reader is left passively craving amusement, the meat of the book strugg;es from episode to episode, each one of which serves only to delay rather than enhance the end. Louis Wu's reward does not seem earned, the achievement of his goal is not enhanced by any prior suffering; we know that he will outsmart all comers. At one point, for example, he has a brush with a field of reflecting sunflowers

which focus the sun's rays and malignantly redirect them -- ingenious, tolerably entertaining, but not integral to the development of the novel.

The important point is that Ringworld Engineers is a dishonest book. It should not have been written because it did not want to be written: the author's reluctance seeps from every page. Perhaps when more writers pay less to their fans and their bank managers, we shall have fewer third-rate sequels to second-rate books and more first-rate SF.

Eric Van Lustbader -- THE SUNSET WARRIOR, SHALLOWS OF NIGHT and DAI-SAN (Star, 182pp, 216pp & 246pp respectively, £1.75 each)
Reviewed by Mary Gentle

Originally published in 1977 and 1978, these three books are science fantasy with a semi-oriental setting. They're not a trilogy, since that implies unity of conception; Van Lustbader calls them a sequence, which is obviously destined to continue, since a fourth book, Beneath An Opal Moon, was recently published as a Doubleday hardback. But then nor are they novels, they are television literature -- the timing, the shifts of scene and viewpoint, the repetitive violence and sex: all match the rhythm of commercial television. Whether this is as a result of TV's influence on this generation's readers and writers, I don't know, but it has unwelcome, even dangerous implications.

To consider the books in more detail, The Sunset Warrior is probably the best of the three, despite being two different books crammed into the same plot. Post-holocaust settings aren't new, though Freehold's underground bunker-society is nicely set out, and the Japanese-derived setting a welcome change from the usual Gothic-feudal culture. Ronin, the hero, is a masterless warrior, and the story -- which at first promises to be about the internal struggles of various Freehold factions -- turns into a series of events designed to force him from it into the outside world. The author occasionally lapses into non-English and nonsense, and has a bad habit of facetious naming: Neers for engineers, Rodent for mole (of the Le Carre variety). But the plot churns along, aided by deus ex machinae on all sides, until Ronin comes to the City of Ten Thousand Paths, which feels as if it had strayed in from a Jack Vance fantasy. Personally, I didn't find the science-superceded-by-sorcery rationale convincing, perhaps because it's presented late in the day in what had, until then, seemed a different type of book -- not that science and sorcery can't mix, just that here they do it like oil and water.

The Sunset Warrior has, however, more serious faults than bad writing and lack of credibility. Characterisation, for example -- we are rarely, if ever, inside Ronin's head; what emotions he has are those that could be guessed from a mediocre actor's face. The constant use of flashbacks may be the author's only way of showing us Ronin's past, and thus implying that he has a character, but it's a technique that fails. With others, characterisation is bad, shallow, in fact is wholly visual; its depth is that found in slick American TV (the programme that springs to mind is Fantasy Island). There's the same lack of plot, logic and explanation -- limitations of technique that derive from the limitations of that purely audio-visual medium, television. The impact of sound and vision are greater than that of the printed word, but they lack the subtlety of literature's stream-of-consciousness, that ability to show the interior machinery of the psyche. All Van Lustbader's characters are seen solely from the outside -- but why apply the limitations of one medium to another?

If The Sunset Warrior was the prime-time TV success, Shallows Of Night is the remake, briefly dragging in some of the villains from the first episode, but rapidly running out of plot and original settings. It begins with an ice-yacht chase that reads as if lifted from Michael Moorcock's The Ice Schooner or a recent Alan Dead Foster paperback. The yacht arrives at the continent of man, Asia, specifically the city of Sha'angh'sei; and for a man born and brought up underground, Ronin shows a total lack of surprise at it all. An "inhuman" menace is dragged in, kicking and screaming, to give the plot some impetus; and there is a great deal of retrospective characterisation which, if true, would require The Sunset Warrior to be rewritten. Basically, this is a short episode padded out to book length; Ronin could have found out what he needed in ten minutes, never mind 200-odd pages. Again, the prosaic world of

Sha'angh'sei and the entrance of a real live goddess don't mix. Ronin continues to battle the Makkon, a quartet of Black Riders whose presence announces the coming of Sauron -- I beg your pardon, the Dolman. Those of you who saw The Water Margin on TV a few years back will recognise the scenery here; unfortunately, Shallows Of Night isn't half as much fun as that particular epic.

There's nothing to be said about the various pathetic puns, except that you should avoid them.

So to Dai-San: Ronin's transformation into the Sunset Warrior, and the last battle of mankind against the forces of the Dolman. It has a brief entrance and a quick exit by one of Freehold's villains, this presumably being intended to further the illusion that the three books have a unity and weren't just tacked together as the author went along. Dai-San links two incongruous episodes, Ronin's ending of a cycle of time for a sub-Mayan civilisation while he searches for the mystic island of Ama-no-mori, and his becoming Sunset Warrior after reaching that most Japanese of islands. It's an amiable culture, complete with emperor, bujun, daimyos, etc., only too willing to go off and fight the last battle....which has the look of a plot device; I'm not too sure that the bujun isn't a snark after all. Two-thirds of a book of padding are followed by two pages of spelt-out plot for those of us who came in after the commerical break. The author shows his ignorance of elementary English (a smith is a person, a smithy is a place; the two are not interchangeable). As for the climax....the apocalypse is becoming obligatory in certain fantasy books, and I've seen it done far more effectively than this. There is never any dread of what the Dolman, that ectoplasmic octopus, might do if it won, because there's never any doubt that the Sunset Warrior will emerge victorious. The cumulative effect of a series of bloody battles means that the later ones lose all impact; and both the battles and the various supernatural appearances covertly resemble the sex act, to a degree that would interest an analyst, but then the links between sword-and-sorcery and sexual fantasy have always been obvious. Apart from an unconvincing explanation, and the reassessment of yet another character into an improbably villain, Dai-San leaves several loose ends which, I suppose, the fourth book is intended to resolve.

These are the books of the TV series, even if they never appear on the screen. Slick, shallow, they could be translated to TV without changing a word or an action -- which is frightening. Words are the most flexible medium, capable of long-term impact and influence, but these books are written as if they're meant to be read in the same way as one watches TV, without time to look back and link up cause and effect. To see one medium subsumed in another is unfortunate; to see a medium used to less than its full potential is tragic. TV is insubstantial, and TV SF is presumably not meant to be read twice -- or even once with close attention.

But dangerous? Yes -- TV kills the reading habit stone dead, because it's easier for the mind to watch than to imagine, and TV SF could kill good science fiction. With the spread of the visual media, we may well be on the way to a post-literate world; and if we are then The Sunset Warrior, Shallows Of Night and Dai-San are to be roudly condemned as the sort of books that will speed the process up.

Gordon R. Dickson -- LOVE NOT HUMAN (Ace, 249pp, $2.50)

The trouble with most of SF's aliens, as countless other writers have noted, is that they're not really alien at all; in speech, in expressed biological desires and in thought processes, they are dismayingly comprehensible -- which is hardly surprising, considering that they're essentially nothing more than a different variety of human (and often only American human at that): men in funny skins with squeaky voices and cute table manners.

This collection is unfortunately full of such "aliens", and the fact that the stories are ostensibly about the relationships between them and mankind -- "love not human", as the title claims -- tends to simply highlight this appalling deficiency. Many of them, indeed, are so ridiculously anthropomorphised that at times you simply can't tell the difference between them and the real humans. This may or may not be a fault of the time in which these stories were written -- most of them have copyright dates of the early to mid fifties: the McCarthy years, and thus perhaps an attempt on Dickson's part to demon-

strate that aliens are not necessarily to be feared -- but if so it doesn't excuse Dickson's tendency to patronise them, to treat them as wide-eyed small boys or, worse, dumbly loyal pets, and the stickily sentimental tone which results is not helped by the human protagonists being for the most part wide-eyed small boys, gawky adolescents and emotionally immature adults.

Offhand, the only truly alien-seeming aliens I can remember encountering in the past few years are the Cygnostikoi and the Asadi of, respectively, Michael Bishop's A Little Knowledge and Transfigurations: magnificently enigmatic (being alien, how could they be otherwise?) creations that stand far above almost everyone else's. It's a sad commentary on the (current?) state of imagination of SF writers that it hasn't been able to come up with anything remotely their equal.

Vonda N. McIntyre -- FIREFLOOD AND OTHER STORIES (Timescape/Pocket, 237pp, $2.75)

Reviewing the Gollancz hardback edition of this collection in Vector 98, Roz Kaveney remarked that each of these stories were rather repetitious in theme and tone, "a not particularly disguised or digested meditation on the personal and artistic problems of a bright young woman SF writer with a talent worthy of some consideration and very little to actually say", full of "standard Romantic cliches of the artist as doomed flier or misunderstood seer" -- commentary to which, having now waded through them for myself, I can only add my belated agreement. In fact, I'd go further, to add that their sentiments struck me as even stickier and more introspective than the above makes them sound: stories which, in detailing their protagonists' various losses (of love or senses or purpose or friendship or whatever) and subsequent struggles to come to terms with themselves, are very much in keeping with the current American fad of self-realisation and self-confrontation, the search for one's "inner identity" through session after session of psychoanalysis, group encounter meetings, EST, primal scream therapy and the like -- "me-ism", in other words, and as superficial and as embarrassing as such ever is. Like Roz, I hesitate to say anything rude about material so personal, but if the banality of the pseudo-self-awareness shown here is any true guide, then McIntyre still has a long way to go before she can be said to have any real insight into the human psyche.

Robert Silverberg -- THE SONGS OF SUMMER (Pan, 173pp, £1.25)

A rather second-rate collection, this, featuring stories dating from the mid-to-late fifties to the mid-to-late sixties, one or two of them previously reprinted elsewhere but most of them left to languish in the magazines and anthologies where they first appeared because, simply, they just weren't deserving enough. Which is about as much as you can say without locking horns with the author himself, Silverberg having pulled his usual trick of prefacing the volume with a rather self-serving introduction telling us how experimental and ambitious for their time the stories were and how, because they've survived this long, they must be good (which latter isn't necessarily the case, and exhibits a pretty shoddy logic to boot). Be that as it may, the first half of the book -- including the title story, a relentlessly pulpish piece of nonsense about an aggressive twentieth century man transplanted into the genteel thirty-fifth century and his attempt to rebuild what he considers as civilisation -- is almost wholly dispensible; the book only starts to pick up with "Halfway House", dating from 1966, it and the later stories -- particularly "We Know Who We Are" and "The Pleasure Of Their Company", both concerned with the dangers of self-deception and unwitting compromise -- exhibiting his growing awareness of and desire to question the gritty intricacies and enigmas of modern social life: these, after all, were the opening years of Silverberg's "reformed" period, which led to such novels as Thorns, The Man In The Maze, Downward To The Earth, The Second Trip and Dying Inside, and the stories are therefore of some intrinsic interest.

(Having got to the end, I'm returning to fill this space with mention of the fact that I had more on hand than I had room to print, which rather surprises me. Amongst the squeezed-out was the unnamed second reviewer's piece; sorry.)

Fred Saberhagen — SPECIMENS (Ace, 214pp, $2.25)
Reviewed by Brian Smith

Remember the Gothic paranoia boom in SF cinema in the fifties? Invasion Of The Body-Snatchers, It Came From Outer Space, that sort of thing? You probably thought that those days had gone for ever. Not if Fred Saberhagen has his way they haven't....

Dan Post and his bride-to-be buy an Old House, whose last owner killed himself in Mysterious Circumstances. Soon, Post begins to have Bad Dreams, seemingly racial memory, showing scenes spread over many centuries. Their common element is a mechanical, crab-like monster lurking inside a hill not unlike that on which his Old House stands. So what does the cretin do when he finds a bricked-up dorrway in the cellar identical to the one the monster uses in his Bad Dreams? Right, he gets a sledgehammer and breaks the bloody thing down. The alien starship buried under the house, which has been collecting Earth life-forms for millenia, Takes Over His Mind (no great feat for a pocket calculator, really). And so on and so on. Will Our Hero help the ship to complete its collection so that it can finally go home? Will his suspicious fiancee and trusty, grey-haired Dr Baer solve the riddle of the century-old diary and bring help in time? Who knows? More to the point, who cares?

Saberhagen seems to me to be completely out of his depth in a contemporary setting. The novel is set in the mid seventies but consistently feels and behaves as though it were twenty years earlier -- so much so that occasional references to such things as rock music and credit cards seems totally out of place. As for the characters, I can only assume that the cast was assembled after long and diligent study of every episode of The Outer Limits ever broadcast.

Saberhagen has never been a top-flight author, and on this showing he never will be. Anyone who considers a simile such as "with the amazing dexterity of an elephant's trunk" to be apposite will never stand with the great ones. Still, Specimens does provoke some sense of wonder -- was it really possible to sell such a tedious potboiler as this only five years ago?

Brian Aldiss — BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD and REPORT ON PROBABILITY A (Avon, 224pp & 144pp respectively, $2.25 & $1.95 respectively)
Reviewed by David Penn

Whereas some writers begin with a character, or some with a vague plot -- and bad SF writers with an hypothesis -- the first inklings of a novel in Aldiss's mind appear to take the form of a particular atmosphere or, more accurately, an image embedded in an atmosphere. Each of his stories is an approximation of a different image whose ideal form he has striven to realise on the page. Only such an approach could have produced two novels as apparently disparate as Barefoot In The Head and Report On Probability A.

As Barefoot In The Head was first published in 1969, having been built up from a series of stories which began to appear in 1967, you tend to automatically assume that Aldiss was attempting to jump onto the bandwagon of the hippie debacle. Certainly, my first impression was one of flower-power pretentiousness and pseudo-Beatlesque word-mangling, but the novel cannot be dismissed as easily as that. Heavily influenced by the Woodstock generation though Aldiss might have been, his novel justifies itself as a valid experiment, even if not a respundingly successful one.

The book presents a description of "psychedelic" society in psychedelic terms: the voice of the narrator is that of a novelist of the future whose mind has itself been enlightened by the Acid Head War. Consequently, the book -- at least superficially -- doesn't abide by normal concepts of good plotting and scene-setting. In appreciating it, the trick is to let your eyes wander over the words without trying to understand them but letting yourself be assaulted by the novel's conscious stream of images; the result is that about three days later a clear bubble emerges from the morass of multi-linear thought leaving you contemplating a totally incomprehensible cinematographic record of disintegration. It all fits: the very failure of the prose to communicate much to its readers about what's happening is perfectly consistent with the confusion that forms the backdrop -- indeed, most of the contents --

of the book, against which the characters are struggling to do something constructive with their minced brains. The impossibility of sensible conversation between them is emphasised by the impossibility of a reasonable storyline being established between writer and reader (but one of the sentiments behind the book seems to be that it's trying that counts).

As if to prove that Aldiss as a matter of course avoids the story proper, there's Report On Probability A, actually published the year before the book form of Head (but written several years earlier and delayed from reaching print them by unsympathetic publishers). It's a much more likeable novel than its bizarre stablke-mate, and the more successful. All bar a few lines are extracts from reports, and nothing happens in it beyond what is known by virtue of its appearance in one or another person's field of vision. The report is about three people who are watching a house; a man in another continuum is reading the report, and he is being watched by someone in a third continuum; and he by someone in a fourth, and so on. All the watchers are waiting for an event that will explain the existence of so many parallel universes and reveal how different, and in what way, the watched are from the watchers; thus everyone is observing everyone else for something that will be produced by an observed subject which will be the fruition of all the observing.

The book has dramatic movement, but in a very low key; and a true story would be out of place in a work whose theme is that life is non-teleological. We wait for a great revelation at the end of the book, but there is none. We read a prose which searchos through every minor event, tries to ne more and more explicit about the details, but of course always falls short of being a complete record and never discovers anything which points to a purpose. If the spirit behind the prose of Head was psychedelic, the spirit behind that of Report is existential. As Head is itself an attempt to attain a multi-linear thinking — or at least to imitate it for the purposes of art — Report is the very embodiment of the vision of man as a sense-maker in a nonsensical world. Again, the image is the life and breath of the book; the novel is a complex exploration not so much of a conscious proposition but of an inexplicit atmosphere, crystalised in the relationship between the writer and the reader. To be fair to both books, but ospecially Head, we must read them in the light of this very special approach of Aldiss's, and though it's easy to knock Head for its sometimes annoying prose, the book asks to be seen not as an attempt to engage our intellectual capacities but as being directed at our imaginations: only our imaginations can grasp its image and only our imaginations can feel what Aldiss is trying to say.

Syd Logsdon — A FOND FAREWELL TO DYING (Timescape/Pocket, 206pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Roy Macinski

A Fond Farewell To Dying is set in a post-apocalyptic era some two hundred and fifty years from now when, for reasons that never seem really believable and are also somewhat contrived, India is the first nation to rebuild its society, culture and science. The main character, David Singer, is a biologist who flees there from the ruins of North America in order to carry on his experiments in transferring his mind into a cloned replica. His Indian girlfriend, however, has grave doubts about the validity of these experiments because her Hindu religion will not allow her to believe that whilst he may succeed in transferring his mind, he will not succeed in transferring his spirit.

Thus the central thematic questions of the book are posed: can you transfer just the mind? Must you also transfer the spirit? Indeed, does the spirit, soul or atman even exist? Its crucial in such a book that they are addressed in a convincing and forthright manner. Sadly, Logsdon ignores this important point and by arguing around, rather than directly tackling, these intriguingly metaphysical and philosophical dilemmas, he turns them into dull and mediocre reading. Given this shakiness and the fact that the rest of the book is as badly flawed (the characters are transparent, the plot truly feeble), it comes as no surprise when the whole unsightly edifice finally falls apart and comes crashing to the ground. Which is a dreadful waste, really, since SF has very rarely dealt with this theme, and even flawed works like Robert Silverberg's novel Recalled To Life and John Brunner's story "The Vitanuls" tackle it more interestingly than A Fond Farewell To Dying.

Nancy Springer — THE SABLE MOON (Pocket Books, 263pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Mary Gentle

Readers of SF are doubtless familar with the seven deadly sins. The eighth deadly sin, of course, is incompetence — and anyone wishing to become familiar with that should read The Sable Moon.

It's a crying shame that it isn't a better book. It has the seeds of a passable, if not particularly original, plot. It begins a generation after The Silver Sun ended, the two heroes of that book now ruling Isle, and this book being concerned with the heir to their thrones, Alan's son Trevyn, who is making the difficult transition from child to adult. Running from Gwern — child of no mortal parents — he discovers that Isle is under threat of sorcerous invasion. Wolves haunt the forests. He leaves Meg, a peasant girl who is also the Wise Maiden, and tracks the evil to its mainland source. But then he must go further still, beyond Earth, in order to be able to save Isle...,

All pretty standard stuff, and palatable if done well — but The Sable Moon isn't. Firstly, Springer can't characterise. Trevyn has two forms of behaviour: that of a petulant three-year-old, and that of a second-rate Sir Galahad. It might be credible if he grew from one to the other, but no: he changes attitudes like overcoats, whenever Springer requires him to act in a certain way to further the plot. Meg, the "love interest", is a gosh-wow schoolgirl with an appalling line in country dialect, and changes to her avatar-of-the-goddess personality for no apparent reason. Those characters brought over from The Silver Sun — Hal, Alan, Lysse, Rosemary and the rest — are as tw-dimensional as before. The goodies are handsome and brave and strong, and the baddies are wet and weedy; Springer might just as well have dealt out black and white hats for identification.

The trouble with the monarchs in The Sable Moon is that they don't behave as if they hold ultimate authority over Isle, or ultimate responsibility for it. Perhaps it's the shortage of kings and queens in the USA, but Springer's act as if they have to justify themselves before a Seante committee. In short — when they're not being mind-bogglingly dim, they're just too pale-pink-nice about the whole thing. You may protest that Springer's not copying history, and that Isle is meant to have a small chivalric Arthurian court....well, for those who've forgotten Malory, if you want a catalogue of murder, rape, intrigue, abduction, theft, infanticide, incest, sorcery and plain bloody-minded butchery, then you need search no further than Morte d'Arthur. Not that it doesn't have courage and godliness and the rest, but they stand out by virtue of their scarcity, and are all the more valuable because of it. There's only one Sir Galahad, and Springer might remember that one's enough before she start shipping them into Isle in cartloads.

Another carry-over from The Silver Sun is the attitude towards the ordinary people of Isle. They're all yeomen good and true, straight out of Robin Hood, but only in American fantasy does it happen that way, with no intimation of what kind of support the peasantry has for the monarchy. (Two kinds: firstly, when the king is the absolute power, you'd better raise a cheer when he passes unless you want to lose your head; and, secondly, the post-restoration or figurehead phase, when the king provides pageantry and an opportunity to dwell fondly on past royal glory.) Springer shows nothing of the subtlety of the ruler-and-ruled relationship, even when she comes to the war against the invaders of Isle.

Another fault lies in the motivation. The villain masterminding the invasion is totally inconsistent: on one page he's an evil sorcerer who moves people around like chess-pieces, gaining satisfaction from the game, and so not required to do things the easy (efficient) way; but next he's revealed as an old enemy with a long-standing grudge, driven by hatred and a desire for revenge — not the type to be sorcerer-as-gameplayer. The "menace" to Isle is pathetic anyway, and illogical; I've seen better plots in a cemetery. Here's a sorcerer who can transfer his soul to other bodies and control people at great distances by possession of some object they own — so why didn't he transfer himself into a castle servant, collect that week's laundry, and lure the entire nobility of Isle board ship and out to sea, preferably into the path of a hurricane? Trevyn carries the solution to the invasion problem around with him for half the book before it occurs to him to do anything.

Tolkien's influence is as strong in this book as in The Silver Sun and The White Hart. (King Alan is Aragorn, right down to the green elfstone.) In The Sable Moon, Springer makes the mistake of taking us to her land-beyond-Earth, Elwestrand, something Tolkien had the sense not to do with Numinor. Elwestrand is a place where thoughts and dreams become physical reality -- not something guaranteed to make it a paradise, but apparently only the best people get to go there, those with no peculiar fantasies or nightmares clut tering up their subconscious minds. Elwestrand is beyond the sunset -- literally: Trevyn witnesses the sun sinking into the sea, hissing like a defunct kettle....

Happenstance and coincidence send the plot limping on towards the climax, where we discover that it was all "meant to happen", being planned that way by the various avatars of the Mother-Goddess and the Sun-God. They, it seems, have nothing better to do than play games with Isle and its inhabitants -- do Springer's characters resent the fact that they're helpless pawns? I don't think they even notice.

And yet it could have been a good book; they are touches that show as much. The relationship between Trevyn, concealed as a mute slave, and the wizard Emrist and his sister Maeve. Hal's leaving, without any human grief, for Elwestrand. Gwenn's death. Trevyn's son Dair, born as a wolf-cub. Most of all, the return of magic to Isle -- while many writers have dealt with the decay of magic, enchantment leaving the Earth, few have written of it coming back to an arid land (the only example that comes to mind is Dunsany's superb The King Of Elfland's Daughter. But Springer misses her chance, as she missed all her other chances to make The Sable Moon a good book, and it remains a hodge-podge of Tolkien and Celtic mythology. Given the loose ends left at the end of it, and the fuss made over the series by the publishers, it won't matter if you miss this third book of Isle -- there'll be another one along in a minute.

Peter Marsh -- THE SILICON CHIP BOOK (Abacus, 211pp, £2.50)
Reviewed by Dave Langford

This is another very average book on the "microchip revolution", once again operating on the unspoken assumptions that (a) the reader knows nothing of electronics and needs a child-sized does before they can begin to appreciate the economics of chips, and (b) no other popular books on the subject exist. Thus the first sixty pages cover "obligatory" background, with the author seeming not wholly at ease: "But these tiny bits of hardware will change our lives", "The movement of electrons from one point to another produces the phenomenon of electricity", "And this is exactly what electronic engineers, clever people as they are, have done". The second part of the book, "Applications", is considerably better, with lots of figures and knowledgeable comment about the microelectronics boom, chip-enhancement of practically everything, computerised homes, advanced industrial robots, the communications explosion, uplift and optimism.... Only the last 50 pages, "Consequences", move into the areas promised by the blurb ("controversial analysis - social schisms - will millions of people soon be unemployed"): there's an "optimistic" scenario wherein workers displaced by microelectronics live happily ever after by waiting hand and foot on the ultra-wealthy computer engineers who actually run the automated factories; there are numerous opinions on who's going to be out of work; a page or two is devoted to each of four possible futures envisaged by the author. A final, doomy note concerns the even greater potential miniaturisation of circuitry (incidentally ignoring the fact that when you're down to semiconductor pathways only 50 atoms wide, as cited, the essential impurity atoms tend to diffuse clean out of the material, making the device a bit short lived): "People could harness such chips, which, by now, would be as intelligent as several Einsteins...to wage war or bring about tremendous social discord". Oh dear.... This is a lightweight, bitty and almost excessively "popular" treatment, strongest on the economics of microchips (Marsh is Industry Editor of New Scientist), but never really interestingly written. Better if he'd dropped the all-encompassing approach (who hasn't read some kiddies' version of How Computers Work?) and tackled his strong subjects in more depth. As it is, the book's overpriced.