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Volume 5 Number 1 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas from his usual abode of Room 9, 94 St George's Square, Pimlico, London SW1Y 3QY, and featuring in this issue reviews by Chris Bailey, Brian Smith, John Hobson, Mary Gentle, Paul Kincaid, Ian Williams, Dave Langford, Judith Hanna and (of course) me. Despite my dire prognostications about the possible thinness of this issue if everyone didn't get their stuff in on time, I have in fact enough in the inventory for two issues; and while I normally dislike having to carry material forward, I rather welcome it because it should serve to take some of the pressure off everyone involved -- every issue so far has been produced under the gun, and it was getting to be a bit of a drag trying to keep up. But that doesn't mean that the people who still have reviews owing should get complacent; keep pushing the deadlines, guys!

Joan D. Vinge -- THE SNOW QUEEN (Futura, 536pp, £1.95)
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

This is solid, competent stuff -- but unfortunately the same solid, competent stuff we've already seen time and time again. Somewhat better than others of its kind, maybe, but still so familiar.

I found it a very difficult book to read, not because it makes any great demands on the reader (for it makes none), but because it was difficult to stop my attention wandering; it just did not hold my interest. The world is about as well realised as such worlds usually are -- the city of Carbuncle is quite distinctive and fascinating, but the rest of it could be anywhere. The people I just couldn't care about -- it so happens that most of the leading characters are female, but apart from a different pronoun there isn't much to distinguish one sex from the other. The plot moves steadily along, but without any surprises. Given the parameters of this type of novel, you know exactly how each situation is going to end, and you aren't disappointed.

These days, it seems, publishers want big books -- never mind the quality, feel the width. If it's long enough you can guarantee that someone will call it a masterpiece, and it might even become a bestseller. But The Snow Queen is more of an endurance test than a novel. It's a nice enough mixture of contemporary SF cliches -- political corruption, a technophile aristocracy and technophobe goodies, immortality and cloning, black holes as gateways between worlds, a "Hegemony" of planets replacing a more advanced

but long-gone Empire -- but while it is all competently done, handled with a fair degree of skill if little art, it is not well done. Vinge manages to wring no new changes even from so heady a mixture; the book just bored me.

Fred & Geoffrey Hoyle -- SEVEN STEPS TO THE SUN (Penguin, 189pp, £1.25)
Reviewed by Brian Smith

This book takes me back. Back to what genre children's SF was like 15 or 20 years ago -- bludgeon the plot on its way in the first fifteen pages, accelerate said plot to 90mph or so through some sub-Wellsian social extrapolation towards an upbeat ending, and for God's sake don't look down. As the blurb neatly (for once) sums up, it's all about a writer who starts work on an SF script and suddenly find it coming true -- on him. He leapfrogs into the future ten years at a time, and at each step has various adventures (making fewer mistakes than I believe would be humanly possible under the circumstances), finding out what has happened to the world in his absence, very much in the manner of Laurence Manning's "The Man Who Awoke" series of the 1930s. You might think that this sounds thoroughly hackneyed and old hat. Congratulations. It is. The story charges breathlessly along through less-than-exotic locales and less-than-memorable characters with a deus ex machina scene-change every twenty pages on the way to a finale that I guarantee will have you saying "Oh God -- I don't believe it!" Do not use a lettuce leaf as a bookmark, for the rabbits from the hats will devour it utterly by page 100. Matters are not at all helped by the committee structure behind it all -- I have a sneaking suspicion that Geoffrey Hoyle's role in these collaborations is to insert sufficient post-war references to stop the reader checking on the copyright date. As for the editorial function of Eileen Hoyle, conjecture fails me....

As I hinted earlier, this novel is virtually a juvenile; true, there are occasional allusions to the existence of Women and Naughty Things, but they do get rather swamped in the wham-bam-kerpow adventure, and are really quite innocent. And the style....come back Hugh Walters and Angus MacVicar, that's all I've got to say. I do wish that Fred Hoyle would resign himself to becoming the new Velikovsky and stick to plugging his latest theory in The Sunday Times Magazine, I really do.

Ian Watson -- THE EMBEDDING (Granada, 185pp, £1.25)
Reviewed by John Hobson

Ian Watson has been in the vanguard of the attempt by British SF writers to inject life and some literary value into the worn-out genre of hard SF, starting with The Embedding way back in 1973. The elements of the story will be familiar to all his readers because he structures his tales in the same manner, throwing seperate ides into the air -- in this case linguistic experiments in England, Brazilian Indians facing extinction, and alien contact -- like a juggler and hoping to catch them all at the end. The book's main concept is the idea that there might be a universal (literally) vocabulary which has been embedded in everyone's mind. Chris Sole is attempting to discover this language by a series of drug-induced experiments on children, while his wife's lover is studying an Amazonian tribe about to be wiped out by a new dam project, who appear to be able to view the world from a different perspective while high on drugs. Not surprisingly, the aliens who arrive midway through the book are on a similar quest for the universal language, and it is agreed to hand over some human brains to them in return for technical information. The book practically dies at this point, but is saved by the undermining of the CIA's plans to locate the Indian chief so that his brain can be one of those traded; human bloodlust intervenes and the story ends on a pessimistic note: Watson has a poor view of homo sapiens.

While Watson is a far more accomplished thinker than a bus-load of Larry Nivens, The Embedding reveals the flaws in his writing which have dogged him since. He finds it difficult to merge his ideas with the narrative, so that there are often large chunks of Verne-like lecturing dressed up in pseudo-scientific prose; this failure of style is one of the most glaring blemishes of the book. At one point, he describes reality as "The jagged

inkdrip of a thought recorded by the electroencephalograph pen" (p.78), and such heavy-handed imagery is quite wearying. The characters are equally ill-defined: Sole is supposedly an iconoclast, but this is not apparent until the end, while the reminder are described only by their external appearance. The kindest thing that can be said about the few females in the novel is that Watson seems to regard them as penis receptacles.

Hard SF fans will need no recommendation for The Embedding, but those who wish to see this sort of SF written in a more literary style will find it disappointing.

Gene Wolfe — THE SHADOW OF THE TORTURER (Timescape, 262pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Dave Langford

This marvellous book was reviewed in its British hardback edition in Vector 102; here there's room to do little more than endorse Paul Kincaid's praise of the best "science fantasy" since The Dying Earth, and pick out a few strong points for comment. Perhaps the strongest is the effect of alienness obtained by showing us a decayed, far future "Urth" through the eyes of Severian (up-and-coming Torturer whose infrequent qualms about his career amount to no more than those of a 1980s' accountant wondering if he's in the right job), who describes his life without any seeming compromise for our benefit, leaving us to assimilate from the context the status of the City castes of optimates, armigers and exultants, or the meaning of the "New Sun" ("The Book Of The New Sun" is the tetralogy's overall title), or even the extent of his own occasional self-deception: in some ways this lead character seems more alien than could possibly be true of the undescribed visitors from elsewhere, the cacogens (look it up) — while at the same time he's manifestly an ordinary young man shaped by an incredible society. Meanwhile the shadowy picture of Urth builds up in tiny, subtle touches. One instrument of torture is unimaginably sophisticated yet rotting with age: the cultured Master Torturer can't even name the principle which makes it work, coming up only with the word "lightning". (Another machine points slyly back to Kafka.) Inscriptions in dead languages are interpreted glibly but with certain distortions: a second glance reveals that "deus" apparently translates as "the New Sun". Incredible gulfs of time are hinted at, with legend and history running together. Snatches of philosophy, many worthy of an entire Borges short story, flit through Severian's head in a paragraph or so. And, finally, Wolfe makes triumphant use of the English language, writing with utter clarity yet outdoing Vance in his pillaging of dictionaries for one right (though obscure) word — then placing it so carefully in context that almost without noticing you gradually pick up Wolfe's version of its meaning. The whole is beautifully written: I recall only one flawed passage, where a weirdly fascinating discussion of the inhabitants of mirrors breaks down into a brief lecture on mirror-powered interstellar flight which might (if less grammatical) have been lifted bodily from Analog. But at the end, despite a fistful of unresolved enigmas, I was left thoroughly satisfied, with the feeling that I'd been in good hands and could trust Wolfe not to let me down through the next book (The Claw Of The Conciliator) or the two to follow. This has to be a landmark in SF/fantasy. The only enigma which bothers me is the usual one of (all together now) why the hell isn't this on the Hugo shortlist?

H. M. Hoover — RETURN TO EARTH (Avon, 143pp, $1.95)
Reviewed by Mary Gentle

One way of identifying an adolescent novel is that it so often deals with the child-to-adult rite of passage. (So, of course, do many supposedly adult SF books, which may indicate something about the genre.) Return To Earth is a rite of passage for the fifteen-year-old protagonist, Samara Lloyd, heir to the power of a great industrial company on this future Earth.

The plot is uncomplicated. Galen Innes, a retired Governor-General of the satellite-world Marsat, returns to his old home on Earth to consider the problem of his succession. His path crosses Samara's — in the grounds of his estate, on which she has a sentimental claim; at a religious ceremony

stage-managed by a cult leader called the Dolmen — and he becomes her adviser. When her mother is assassinated and she takes over as Director of the company, he and Samara go on the run, both on Earth and off it.

The chapters are short, a few pages at most; the vocabulary is straightforward and the concepts familiar. Despite these limitations, Hoover has written a very satisfactory book, throwing new light on the cliches rather than being original. In this Earth's computer society where literacy is obsolete, for example, there are non-technological communes in the wilds, but instead of reforming them Samara gives them what they want rather than what society thinks they should have. Of the company, one character says "Most Corporation people never give a damn — but then, they don't have to, do they?" — to which Galen replies "Only if they want to survive". And of the villain (adolescent books tend to have exterior rather than interior villains), he says "But once you have the Dolmen under control, it would be wise to learn why he became so popular in the first place. What need he filled". There is a degree of immaturity — ultimately, no one in whom Samara puts her trust betrays her — but the emphasis here is on the responsibility of power, not the accompanying paranoia.

The core of the book is the relationship between Samara and Galen. Less of an age gap would have it sexual, and the book adult rather than teenage; as it is, the relationship is emotional, part mentor and pupil, ruler and adviser, part friendship and love. Galen is nicknamed "monk" more by accident than design, but he is a kind of pilgrim. Samara is no superkid, but she shows the signs of having been trained for her position without the option of refusal. Hoover has a good grasp of character, and a dry humour that might not be recognised by the younger reader.

Return To Earth would be a good book to start an adolescent reading SF — better than the repressed childish egotism and aggression of, say, "Doc" Smith and Heinlein juveniles. The future's technology is well depicted, but the accent is firmly where it should be: on the human.

Michael Moorcock — THE OAK AND THE RAM, THE WAR LORD OF THE AIR, THE SAILOR ON THE SEAS OF FATE and MOORCOCK'S BOOK OF MARTYRS (Granada, 157pp, 156pp, 190pp & 175pp resp, 95p, 95p, 95p & £1.25 resp)

A cornucopia of Moorcock; but all this is middle-period Moorcock, written during the early seventies, during his transition from mechanical hack (grinding out endless sword-and-sordidry novels to pay the New Worlds printing bills) to conscious prose artist (The Condition Of Muzak, Gloriana, Byzantium Endures) and thus representative of neither epoch. The Oak And The Ram is the second volume of the second "Prince Corum" trilogy, full of gaudy but wildly overplayed imagery; The War Lord Of The Air is the first of the "Oswald Bastable" novels, set in an airship-dominated parallel early twentieth century and owing much to Wells's The War In The Air; The Sailor On The Seas Of Fate is the last of the "Elric" novels, uniting its protagonist with the other three main characters (Hawkmoon, Corum, Erekose) of Moorcock's rambling fictional arcana (where they seem to do no more than discuss their predicament at inordinate length in infuriatingly pseudo-cryptic sentences) and then going on to incorporate the novella "The Jade Man's Eyes", which first appeared in one of Lin Carter's Flashing Swords! anthologies (and seems to have been written for no other purpose than the paying of a belated visit to a previously unexplored bit of Elric's world); and Moorcock's Book Of Martyrs is a collection of stories intended to illustrate how and why people offer up their lives in the service of a particular cause — the best of which is the original novella version of "Behold The Man", better by far than the later expanded novel one. Of the four books, the fourth is the one I'd recommend the most.

(The editor cocks up — I have omitted the names of no less than four reviewers from the colophon of this issue, which was not at all intelligent. Blame my recent Australian trip (ah, how I wish I was still in Sydney!). They are: Chris Morgan, Kevin Rattan, Roy Macinski and Geoff Ryman, and with my apologies to them well to the fore, their material follows....)

Jack Williamson -- THE HUMANOID TOUCH (Bantam, 210pp, $2.25)
Reviewed by Chris Morgan

You've got to admire those old-time, pre-war SF writers who are still writing. Here they are, forty or fifty years on, turning out novels which, in some cases, are not very different to their earliest efforts. Of course, in those heady days of the pulp magazines, Williamson represented the more literate aspect of the genre: he could tell adjectives from adverbs and even understood the use of the semi-colon. Since then, hordes of young upstarts with college educations have jumped onto the SF bandwaggon, bringing with them not only an understanding of syntax but also some idea of style. All that Williamson (and his contemporaries) have had to offer in return has been ideas.

Williamson once had a great idea for a story. What if a scientist managed to build perfect humanoid machines? They would be slightly smaller than men, so as not to appear threatening, but they would know everything, be able to do everything much better than men, and would move with an inhuman grace. (Never mind that such creations wouldn't be credible; sufficiently advanced science is much stranger than fantasy, and all that; besides, they could be powered by some new and hitherto unsuspected energy principle -- let's call it rhodomagnetics.) The clever part of this idea is not that these humanoids should cause technological unemployment but that they should be charged with fulfilling a Prime Directive: "To serve and obey, and guard men from harm". The humanoids' interpretation of this is that they should protect men from themselves by removing all weapons and anything else which could cause death or injury. So men are forbidden to possess sharp tools, engage in violent sports, drive cars, operate machinery or carry out any form of research. Food, alcohol, tobacco and sex are all limited so as not to overtax people's bodies. The humanoids are determined that mankind will be safe and happy; anybody who is unhappy is obviously maladjusted and is either given euphoric drugs or surgically altered until happiness occurs.

Such a degree of interference with individual freedom is, for me, one of the most horrible things imaginable. The struggle of mankind against these benevolent despots (who, being perfect, are bound to win) is adequately (though overemotionally) conveyed in the original story, "With Folded Hands" (Astounding, July 1947). It is repeated at greater length but with no significant differences in the novel The Humanoids (1948). This latest book, The Humanoid Touch, is not a sequel but a further reiteration. Oh, the characters have different names and even indulge in a bit of premarital sex, just to be trendy, but the essence of mankind's relationship with the humanoids remains the same. Rather than buying a copy, save your time and money by hunting out "With Folded Hands" in one of its many anthology appearances.

Orson Scott Card -- SONGMASTER (Futura, 338pp, £1.75)
Reviewed by Kevin Rattan

Songmaster, including as it does the novelette "Mikhal's Songbird", is the best Card I've yet read, far better than A Planet Called Treason and an improvement over the merely average Capitol and Hot Sleep. It reminds me in a pale way of Frank Herbert's Dune, as the Songhouse with its discipline of Control is similar to the Bene Gesserit's control of the body and the emotions. The Songhouse as an institution devoted to song and using song to influence people is also reminiscent of McCaffrey's Harper Hall.

The book echoes preoccupations and opinions present in Card's other works. His attitude to authority is further refined -- any brutality is acceptable if it brings peace. Again, violence is present in clear and gory detail: "Esste watched as Ansset drove the splinters of the door into his nose and brow and cheeks until blood flowed"; but, as opposed to A Planet Called Treason, it is present only in odd snippets. In both books there is a hint of homosexuality; here, virtually every male character seems to lust after the body of Ansset, a boy whose puberty is delayed by drugs to preserve his perfect singing voice, which have rather nastier long-term effects.

And yet I liked the book. The Songhouse holds some fascination, for Card understand the power of song, and how much it can mean to the singer; and I shall eventually re-read it.

Kenneth C. Flint — A STORM UPON ULSTER (Bantam, 309pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Roy Macinski

Kenneth C. Flint is a professor of literature and for some time lived in Ireland, so it seems natural that he chosen the country, with its myths and legends, as the background for this novel. Whilst the story is fiction, its major characters and events are drawn from ancient Celtic culture. The plot itself is concerned with the attempts of Ulster's chief warrior, Cuculain, to defend the state against the invading armies of the south, led by Queen Maeve and her evil Druid adviser Calatin.

On reading the book, two important points came to mind.

Firstly, it's very obvious from the notes at the beginning and end that Flint has expended a large amount of research to ensure the authenticity of the characters and the events. Sadly, however, the quality of his writing does not match the quality of his research, for with the exception of one or two nicely realised and constructed sequences the reader never gleans anything from Flint's work: the book is almost completely devoid of a sense of time and place and the characters remain firmly mythical.

The second important point is that this whole vein of writing is in danger — and indeed it could be argued that it already has been — of being strangled by its own overformalisation: the seemingly obligatory maps and glossaries, the endless bloody battles, evil magic and earthy passions. It could be said that these elements are those which lie at the very core of this type of book, and if that's the case then there surely can't be much left of them to mine. And I for one am becoming weary of the whole thing anyway....

I fear that even dedicated fans of this sort of thing will find little to entertain or inspire them in A Storm Upon Ulster.

Jerry Pournelle — BIRTH OF FIRE (Pocket, 172pp, $2.25)
Reviewed by Geoff Ryman

A streetfighter of the future tells us in a dismissive tone of voice that shows he's as bored with the story as we how he was wrongfully convicted of murder and given a choice of prison or transportation to Mars. In the telling, he establishes how little the Welfare State has to offer him, taking a few rehearsed swipes at social service agencies. His name is Garrett, which we are told with a straight face means "brave spear". He goes to Mars and is put through a survival course in which men die and no one cares. In a lawless, frontier world, he learns, you either make it or you don't. The superintendent tells him "And they sent you here to work your balls off until a blowout kills you. That's the breaks. But before you think there's a better way of working, let me tell you that there's not one social worker on this whole planet". So, we think, we're in for a sub-Dispossessed balancing of socialism against frontier libertarianism.

No such luck. The superintendent invites Gary to take part in a secret conspiracy called The Project — a scheme to make the ecology of Mars habitable. Sound familiar? You bet your sweet Herbert it's familiar. Gary is taken up by a fellow conspirator, a crusty old codger called Sarge who trains him to be a Marsman by working him on his spread called "Windhome". Sarge says things like "Garrett, I have a big place out here...you stick with me a Mars-year — that's two Earth-years — and you'll know the score and have a stake you can use to get out on your own". Soon Gary is saying things like "I'd do anything for you, Sarge", and is being taken to weddings at the ranches of men called Zeke, where the padre gives the service and everybody joins in a hoedown in which "there are some remnants of Earth square dances".

Oh God. Mars is America. Or, rather, western America: Reagan-land, Marlboro country. The big corporations start hassling the hardy settlers and suddenly we find ourselves — stop me if you've heard this one — in the middle of the Martian War of Independence.

I won't bore you by calling Pournelle a fascist -- it's old hat and, besides, it's simply not true. He is an American conservative, which means he feels threatened by and resentful of the recent politicing by people of another race, thinks sex is dirty, has only a hazy understanding of sexual politics, and veers between a flinty hard-headedness and an oozing sentimentality. He also knows that police can be unfair, that the poor are oppressed, and that judges are influenced by convenience. The prime villains in his book turn out to be a Federation of large corporations, rather than Earthly do-gooders (not forgetting, though, a treacherous conspiracy of university professors). He seems to be in favour of gun control, farming co-ops, and letting prisoners run their own prisons, none of which would be too out of place in The Guardian. All he wants is a world where men can be men, where it's tough so that the tough can get going; and for his own delight, he imagines it. That's why, as Oscar Wilde said in another context, we call it fiction. He's closer in spirit to Edgar Rice Burroughs that to David Irving, and I can't imagine what all the fuss has been about.

He does have a peculiar attitude to war and violence; part of him likes it. He imagines that, because war gives people an opportunity to be brave, self-sacrificing, and ingenious, then it is somehow admirable; and if it did not exist, he would have to invent it for his own amusement. This is not so different from what most adventure story writers do, and there are times when Pournelle is more creatively disturbing than that. If he brings us the bad news that some people like war, we must remember not to blame the messenger for the message -- we are sheltered by the intervention of law, charity and good manners, but Pournelle can bring us back to how hard and basic life is without them. Despite all the silliness, there were times, early on in the training camp, when I believed in Pournelle's Mars and felt horrifically trapped in it.

Then the whole thing turned into an episode of The Waltons with added grievous bodily harm. Pournelle doesn't write like a hardened streetfighter or a cowboy rebel; Garrett talks to us in a flat, dreary voice that comes out of books, salted with the odd bit of unforgiveably wrong slang ("groovy"). The writing is self-conscious and stilted -- "We were a proud lot", says the streetfighter, not "and we were proud!"; "We had no possessions", he says, as opposed to "We didn't own anything". Where's the swagger, the bitterness, the inventiveness of the real talk? Pournelle's style is that of a house-bound writer of little verbal flair, armed with scientific references, believing in grammar, conventional storytelling, conventional stereotypes, and technical credibility. He's a plodder, in fact; a competent hack, a mere fantasist. That's the trouble with actors patting on rouge, or writers spreading their arses over chairs before beating their conservative, he-man chests: they turn out to be decadent softies underneath.

Ursula K. LeGuin -- MALAFRENA (Granada, 380pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

Malafrena is not SF or fantasy, being a long novel set in the firm historical context of the 1820s. Such fantasy content as there is comes only from the physical setting of the action in LeGuin's fictitious land of Orsinia, the landscape of northern Italy transposed, as dar as one can tell, eastwards and south a bit. The publishers of this edition certainly seem confused, featuring the word "romantic", although qualified, on the front cover and filling up the end pages with their SF list. Be that as it may, readers of Paperback Inferno will want to know what this particular author is up to at present, and the book is palinly related to the rest of her output in its overriding concern with the moral development of character, although in a more conventional social environment than we have been used to. In spite of my above comments, the marketing of the book is mainstream and should lead many new readers to LeGuin's other work and, just as importantly, might remind some diehard SF addicts of the solid virtues of the traditional novel; for this is a slow, spacious and absorbing work of fiction.

Malafrena explores a simple and universal notion: the problem of what to do with one's life. The protagonist, Itale Sorde, is shown at the beginning as burdened with the weight of his family's expectation -- or, rather, as-

sumptions -- that he will dutifully run the estate at Malafrena now that his grudgingly allowed time at college is over. He feels that this is somehow too easy and instead elects to go to the capital, Krasnoy, in order to campaign as a political journalist against the repressive Austrian hegemony which is stifling his country, saying "I can't stay here until I'm free to stay here". The irony is strong, for this resolve eventually comes true in a manner he cannot presently imagine.

However, we are offered more than a simplt tale of a young man gaining in wisdom as he loses in hope. The author gives no straightforward answers, but rather a whole variety of points of view; even Itale's laudable struggle against the Metternichian toils is at one point seen as "small" and "shabby" by his lover Luisa, while the wretchedly poor Brunoy accuses him of playing at revolution by way of a nobleman's pasttime.

Further perspective is provided by the efforts of the other characters to apprehend the courses their lives are taking, and their various understandings of the conflict between free will and predestination in a world that seems to promise much but gives little. Itale's cousin Piera learns to tread a path between her realisation of her own essential helplessness "under the enormous and indifferent sky" and assuming a defiance that society has not trained her for. Shackled by the expectations of society, the other women in the novel also come to find compromises that are the best that can be hoped for under the circumstances, Luisa in a degree of political self-awareness that frees her spiritually from the world of the salon, and Itale's sister Laura in an unlikely alliance with the professional revolutionary Sanguisto. The book suggests a difficult balance between acceptance and striving, illustrated by its continual references to places and journeys, as in Itale's final words: "I didn't know why I left until I came back -- I have to come back to find that I have to go again. I haven't even begun the new life yet. I am always beginning it". Itale learns a truth that his friend the poet Estenskar, who found harmony only in death, had perhaps missed.

If the above should make the book seem somewhat arid, then do not be deceived: it has descriptive and narrative colour in plenty, from the warm pastorals of life in Malafrena to the darkly painted industrial town of Rakava, the harrowing treatment of Itale's torpor of spirit after his release from a state dungeon and the sheer excitement of the insurrection in Krasnoy. The whole is presented in the unobtrusive and luminous prose which is perhaps LeGuin's chief glory.

Doubtless you are all fed up with reading paeans in praise of LeGuin; I know that I was hoping that this book would be bad, but it isn't. Malafrena is packed with literary protein, and you are strongly urged to read it.

Lyndon Hardy -- MASTER OF THE FIVE MAGICS (Futura/Del Rey, 373pp, £1.50)
Reviewed by Judith Hanna

This is a remorsely pedestrian narration of how Alodar, magician's apprentice, his path impeded no less by set-piece blocks of determinedly detailed description than by opponents as hollow as his own character, pursues his quest for fame, glory, his father's lost title, and the hand of the preposterously eye-catching Queen Vendora through an amorphous sort of mock-medieval domain where the mechanics of the magic (divided into the "five arts" of the title) really work most of the time. You will, if you decide to read it, probably guess the one not-quite-standard, though not really original, plot-twist within the first twenty pages. It is, in other words, yet another hack fantasy from Del Rey.

Alfred Bester -- GOLEM 100 (Pan, 383pp, £1.75, illus. by Jack Gaughan)
Reviewed by Ian Williams

Alfred Bester? Oh yeah! Gully Foyle. "They Don't Make Life Like They Used To". "The Pi Man". "Fondly Fahrenheit". Ben Reich. "...tension, apprehension and dissension have begun..." "Goufree Martel". The Demolished Man. Tiger! Tiger! And there's more, dozens of memorable images and characters scattered over three novels and a handful of short stories.

Golem 100 adds nothing to this store. It's packed with ideas, people,

slang -- none of which work. Nothing works; it's a mess. There are in fact so many things wrong with it that you could use it for a lengthy thesis on how not to write a novel, but I haven't the patience and there wouldn't be any point anyway.because the flaws I'd pick out aren't those that someone else might. A friend disliked it because he thought the characters acted inconsistently; I didn't think that there were any characters to begin with. I could not believe in the existence of anyone in the book: they did not live or breathe, they were just names that went through the author's hoops. But my disbelief really stopped being suspended when the hero told the heroine that she was blind but had never noticed because she saw through other people's eyes -- ridiculous, because unless she took a communal crap you'd think she might have suspected that the loo at least was unusually dark.

It's a tour-de-force, all right, but this particular tour should never have set off.

Spider Robinson -- TIME TRAVELLERS STRICTLY CASH (Ace, 200pp, $2.25)

You probably know (or can guess) what I think of Spider Robinson; so rather than tell you as much all over again it's clearly incumbent upon me to demonstrate why.

There's his style, for a start. Described by John Clute in the Nicholls Encyclopedia as "easy" and "conversational", it seems to me irritatingly pseudo-hip and down-home folksy, reminding me of nothing so much as a group of aging hillbillies drinking moonshine on the porch of a Saturday night -- an image that might be to Robinson's taste, given his rpedilection for pun-laden shaggy-dog stories set in bars (half the stories in this collection belong to the interminable "Callahan's Crosstime Saloon" series), but which is nevertheless totally fake, the product of a manufactured nostalgia for the lost innocence of the hippy sixties (or earlier) than any sincere attempt at communicating the eternal verities of life, and inculcates a slovenly prose to boot. ("Dog Day Evening", for example, begins: "It absolutely had to happen. I mean, it was so cosmically preordained-destined-fated flat-out inevitable that I can't imagine how we failed to be expecting it", which is so repetitious as to almost send one to sleep.) Then, for another, there's the emotional and intellectual thrust of his work, which doubtless derives from the above-mentioned fake nostalgia and can best be described as possessing a heart of mush: more schmaltz and tears than anything of Sturgeon's, it overflows with a sentimentality so treacly as to make a marshmallow taste bitter and, in the same morally irresponsible vein of Anne McCaffrey and hundreds of other SF writers, suggests over and over again that all life's problems are but figments of a warped imagination and that the blinding power of love and trust is sufficient to overcome them. (This is best demonstrated by "God Is An Iron", in which a female wirehead -- of the Larry Niven variety, which says a lot for Robinson's originality -- is cured of her addiction by a man who came to burgle her apartment but stayed to shout at her a lot and tell her that life isn't that bad; its primary tone is one of adolescent self-pity and the whole is embarrasingly inane.) And then, of course, there's his criticism....

Robinson, as you probably know, prefers to call himself a "reviewer", thus shying away from any responsibility for literary and artistic judgements and allowing irrational subjective prejudices and opinions (the last refuge of the intellectual scoundrel) to determine his pronouncements. He actually confesses to as much in the introduction to "Spider vs. The Hax Of Sol III", a reprint of his first-ever book review column for Galaxy: "...a critic is someone who evaluates books in terms of the objective standards of serious literature. A reviewer is someone who believes those standards to be either imaginary or irrelevant, and evaluates books in terms of his own prejudices". If this doesn't amount to condemning himself out of his own mouth, then nothing will....although his admission in the body of the column that he uses unwanted review copies as fire-starters for his woodstove comes close -- his motives may be different, but doesn't he realise that totalitarian regimes indulge in much the same activities?

This collection also includes "Rah Rah R.A.H.!", his eulogy to Heinlein against which I inveighed in passing in "Blood On The Racks" on Vol 4 No 3,

and which — well, look at it, for Christ's sake. Having claimed that Heinlein virtually invented modern science fiction" (thus implicitly assuming that the SF of the forties is the only "true" kind and that everything that's happened since is of no consequence), Robinson then lists some of his most famed works, calls them definitive, and adds that "If you could copyright ideas, every living sf writer would be paying a substantial royalty to Robert Heinlein". Really? Well, not Ballard, to name but one. Nor Disch, to name a second. Nor Priest, for a third. Nor LeGuin, for that matter. Nor — but why go on; you need only name one author for this idiotic claim to fall flat on its face.

What's most interesting about this shamelessly adulatory piece, however, isn't the idiocy of the unsubstantiated claims it makes on Heinlein's behalf but the amount of space (14 out of 26 pages) it devotes to defending him against the charges that have been made against him in the past 20 years — because, surely, if, as Robinson claims, these charges are meaningless, then why does he have to spend so much time denying them? Robinson has, clearly, failed to think through the implications of what he's doing — which isn't surprising, given the grasp (or lack of it) of logic and reason evinced by his denials. Here's a few:

> '(3) "Heinlein is a closet fag." Now, this one I have only run into twice, but I include it here because of its truly awesome silliness, and because one of its proponents is Thomas Disch. In a speech aptly titled "The Embarrassments Of Science Fiction", reprinted in Peter Nicholls's Explorations Of The Marvellous, Disch asserts, with the most specious arguments imaginable, that there is an unconscious homosexual theme in Starship Troopers.' (p.102)

Of course, of course; because Disch said it, it therefore must be wrong. (And here, it should be pointed out, he is not defending Heinlein but attacking Disch — because Disch got a more adulatory entry in the Nicholls Encyclopedia than Heinlein. I kid you not.)

> '(6) "Heinlein can't write sex scenes."' (The defence here seems to consist of the explanation that most of Heinlein's work was written in accord with the unvoiced taboos of the field or for juveniles, thus failing to address the charge, which is directed at his later work; but, suddenly....) '....what you are left with as of 1961 is two novels and two short stories, all rife with sex.... In 1961, with the publication of Stranger In A Strange Land, Heinlein became one of the first sf writers to discuss sex at any length, and has continued to do so since.'

The fact that Heinlein might discuss sex at length and thus doesn't answer the charge as he's stated it seems to have passed Robinson by — or does he imagine that nipples going spung! is the height of adult sensibility?

> '(8) "Heinlein lectures at the expense of his fiction." Here, at last we come to something a little more than noise. This, if proved, would seem a genuine and serious literary indictment.... Look: nobody wants to be lectured to, right? That is, no one wants to be lectured to by some jerk who doesn't know any more than they do. But do not good people, responsible people, enlightened citizens, want to be lectured to by someone who knows more than they do?' (p.111-112)

If this is intended as a serious refutation of the charge — further "refuted" by an explanation that I Will Fear No Evil, Time Enough For Love and The Number Of The Beast are full of talk because their plots demand it — then Robinson clearly has bo conception of the rigours of rational debate.

And I decline to continue, really; it's so easy to demolish Robinson's arguments that the exercise rapidly becomes extremely boring. The only point requiring further comment is his attitude to critics, here expressed as philistine near-hysterical denunciations of everything they stand for (an attitude common to many American SF writers), and for some time I've been puzzled as to why. Doesn't he realise that one of criticism's main functions is to assist the reader: to provide overarching literary and cultural contexts in which the works may be placed, to expose and analyse their inner meaning and thus allow greater and deeper insight into and appreciation of them. to

establish criteria by which may be judged whether or not they have succeeded in their aims and whether or not the aims may be worthwhile anyway? Perhaps -- but then, reading George Zebrowski's "Books" column in the April 1981 issue of F & SF, I came across the following, which in discussing the work of Stanislaw Lem might just explain all:

> 'The resentment toward Lem among some of our most respected professionals seems quite virulent, even though it's quite clear that their fears ate groundless. Lem is critical of SF, but no more so than Bester, Blish, Knight and many other of our best critics. The fear of Lem seems to exist in the growing move toward a genuinely critical discussion of SF; whole careers may be subject to reassessment. Worst of all, an outside view now exists in the person of a major figure who is "not one of cur people". The base of SF is being widened by the publication of all these books by foreigners; SF can only benefit and grow, as it acquires new traditions. This happened during the 1960s, with similar reactions from the rigid among us.' (p.58)

There it is is, so obvious that it's a wonder we ever missed it: "whole careers may be subject to reassessment". Here are all these critics, tearing down the ghetto walls and introducing specifically non-SF criteria into the debate, throwing away the received wisdom about "acknowledged classics" and "great authors" and holding up everything to be judged in a new, cooler, more rational light -- and isn't it obvious that in the face of such Heinlein et al will not merely be dethroned, taken down from their pedestals, but kicked right downstairs into the cellar? And isn't it obvious that the fear of critics and criticism by Heinlein et al derives from their very knowledge of this impending "reassessment", and that they are running scared of it, working themselves up into ever greater paroxysms of rage and hatred in their attempts to rebuild the walls and keep the critics out?

No wonder SF is so safe and undemanding, so tedious and unimaginative, so childish and irrelevant -- it not only hasn't grown up, it doesn't even want to, and if Robinson and his ilk continue their efforts for much longer they'll have all but ensured that it ultimately never will. Think about that, people.

Arthur C. Clarke -- OF TIME AND STARS and ISLANDS IN THE SKY (Penguin, 205pp & 208pp resp, £1.25 each)

You don't even have to be me to pull some sarcastic line and claim that these two books demonstrate the inherent juvenility of most SF, for they were both first published under the Puffin imprint -- for younger readers, yet. Either kids are now growing up faster, or everyone involved has finally got the true measure of the audience (given the stuff that's on this year's Hugo shortlist, I rather think that had a comicbook been eligible it would have done even better in the voting -- "the Golden Age of SF is thirteen", as Terry Carr once said). Bitchiness aside, Of Time And Stars is a collection of Clarke's most representative shorter fiction, culled from his other collections and a good introduction to his work in this length; but Islands In The Sky is a mind-numbingly awful juvenile about a precocious 16-year-old who wins a TV quiz and takes as his prize a trip to an orbiting space station. Lots of fun for fact freaks, as lectures on spaceflight and astronomy and such promptly take over the book until a contrived subplot about a runaway spaceship intervenes towards the end in an attempt to provide some belated excitement. But to no avail: I'd fallen asleep.

Richard H. Francis -- BLACKPOOL VANISHES (Granada, 191pp, £1.25)
Reviewed by John Hobson

What are the criteria you use to define a good SF novel -- consistent plotting, believable characters acting within a clearly described and imagined environment? Finding books which fit that description resembles the search for the Holy Grail, so fellow Percevals will find much solace in Richard Francis's debut novel.

Whimsical is a much devalued term, but none other adequately sums up the oh-so-British qualities of this slice of modern post-industrial England where

Blackpool disappears one fine summer's day. What happens next is narrated through a minor galaxy of finely sketched characters, ordinary folk who live out their lives before box and bar, and it is Francis's realisation that nuke-bomb fodder is more interesting than the absurd hero-figures which abound elsewhere which lifts the books far out of the quagmire.

There is no major character, the book being recounted from each person's perspective in turn, thus allowing the reader to view the narrators from all sides. There is Tom Standish, an escapee from a decaying Wodehousian London club, who leaves polite inertia behind him but is still trapped in a gentlemanly fog as he stumbles about trying to relocate Blackpool; Robertson, the BBC Rugby League and Jeux Sans Frontiers commentator who rose to fame after writing an existentialist study of the game, which he thought was a serious work; Stone, the silent and morose drinker at Blackpool's "Abandoned Baby" pub who has spent his life watching miniature UFOs reconnoitering the city and holds the key to the mystery; the aged Watts, on their annual pilgrimage to the north's Mecca, having forgotten why they keep returning; and that's only a small selection.

Francis's acute observation has rarely been surpassed in SF; the male reaction to the busty Bunty Aldridge is just one of the many subtle elements which gives the book its warm inner glow, despite the velvet punches that keep its plot moving at a rattling but nicely-paced rate. Sex forms a prominent part of the story, entwined throughout as in life rather than layered on as it usually is in SF. But the book does have a more serious side; the characters are all as isolated within their own worlds as Blackpool is in its abstracted one; the real world impinges only in a few instances, and then the change is probably fleeting; Standish doesn't really get the girl at the end. This internal exile is beautifully illustrated when at the end the good citizens of Blackpool return to their homes to watch what has happened to them on Nationwide.

This is one book that you would be unwise to miss.

William Hope Hodgson -- THE GHOST PIRATES and THE NIGHT LAND (Sphere, 139pp & 419pp resp, £1.10 & £1.50 resp)

Ah, but how I enjoyed The Ghost Pirates when I were but a lad; and how oddly painful it was to re-read it recently, seeing from an older and wiser perspective its stilted, creaking, implausible silliness, all originally overlooked. Hodgson, a journalist of some minor descriptive ability rather than a full-blown prose artist, was never able to invest his creations with the reality they needed to be truly terrifying, and the flat, emotionless narrative technique he adopted for this novel -- the story of the last voyage of a haunted ship and the fate that befell her, told by the sole surviving seaman to the captain of the ship that picked him up -- robs them of all chance of ever being so. Much the same goes for The Night Land, although here he takes his prose to the other extreme entirely, writing in a preposterous mock-antique, supposedly the journal of a seventeenth century gentleman who saw the whole thing in a dream: a style and a technique which irreversibly distances the reader from the action and renders the book almost unreadable. Set in the last, dying days of Earth, when the sun has gone out, the remnants of mankind have retreated into a giant metal pyramid called the Last Redoubt, and the world has been taken over by monstrous, half-seen creatures waiting for The End, it tells the staory of a man who -- well, he leaves the Redoubt, goes all the way out and then comes all the way back without ever finding anything. Nothing much happens, in other words; all we ever get is a succession of fantastic images each more impossible than the last and whose symbolic meaning to Hodgson we can only dimly guess. If you never get to the end, no one will blame you.

Almost the end, with a pile of stuff -- by Mary Gentle, Chris Bailey, Ian Williams, John Hobson and me -- left over. In the next issue, there will also be reviews by Ann Collier, Martyn Taylor and Dave Langford (for sure), plus material from others who have yet to receive anything from the pile of books at my side. Don't ask me to name any titles, because I'm running out of room. Well, it is the last page, like....