PAPERBACK INFERNO

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Volume 5 Number 2 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas, Room 9, 94 St George's Square, Pimlico, London SW1Y 3QY, United Kingdom, this issue containing reviews by, apart from yours truly, Roy Macinski, Ann Collier, Ian Williams, Andy Sawyer, Chris Morgan, Martyn Taylor, Brian Smith, Dave Langford, Chris Bailey, John Hobson, David Penn, and Mary Gentle. And we start with a "Blood On The Racks" column from Roy Macinski....

BLOOD ON THE RACKS -- Roy Macinski

If you're anything like me, you will have made a handful of New Year resolutions, but I wonder how many of them you kept? Of those I made, I have ended up keeping only one.... It had occurred to me sometime just before the New Year that whilst I had been an SF fan (in the sense of being a dedicated reader) since my early teens, and had read an incredible number of books, I had never really picked up and regularly read the magazines -- which is strange considering that, in theory at least, the magazines should be a breeding ground for new talent and a show-place for new stories by established writers. So you can guess my resolution....and sometime later I happened to mention it to Joseph Nicholas at one of the BSFA's Hammersmith meetings. He, reduced to reading only _F & SF_ for lack of both time and interest, proposed to me that he would cover that if I was willing to cover _Analog_ and _Isaac Asimov's_; and I was enthusiastic enough to go along with his idea that for this first column I cover all the issues of both from the beginning of 1981 to the present. But I swiftly realised that I had bitten off more than I could chew, and so am instead focussing on the four-month period May-August.

So -- over this four-month period (which, because of their publishing schedules, produced 4 copies of _Analog_ and 5 of _Isaac Asimov's_), how much of what has been printed can be termed of a really high quality? In truth, very little; to be exact, one story by an established writer, two by a new writer and two semi-factual articles. Let's consider these in detail.

The story by the established writer was "H-Tec" by Charles Harness (_Analog_, May). It centres around a musician by the name of Carlton Miller who, in the middle of the night, calls an old lawyer friend, Quentin Thomas, enthusiastically insisting that he comer over to his workshop right away. On his arrival there, Thomas finds Miller to be obsessed with flames and fire, over which the musician demonstrates he has psychic control, translat-

ing them into music with the help of some experimental equipment. He then shows the lawyer one of his proudest inventions, a device called the H-Tec, which is basically an energy generator capitalising on the thermal differences between a focal point somewhere in time and space and the ambient temperature of the room in which the equipment is housed. As the story unfolds, we learn that one of the prime reasons the musician called in his old lawyer friend was for his legal advice, for he intends to patent the machine. At first, the lawyer is sceptical about the practicalities of this idea, but eventually agrees to fly with the musician to the Central Patent Office in Washington DC. But the musician has stage-managed this journey in order to return unexpectedly and kill his wife and her lover, after which he then flees through the H-Tec to where the focal point in time and space is located. From the clues sprinkled through the story, the reader may have guessed already that it is located in Hell, but it transpires that there is one obstacle to this otherwise elegant escape -- Hell isn't open to just anyone, you have to be invited, and the musician is thus an unwanted guest. To prevent his eviction, Miller calls the lawyer through the H-Tec to defend him in a court of law, located in Hell, against the Devil.

Harness builds this story into a quietly funny piece, peppered with realistic characters, and rounds the whole thing off with a truly chilling edge. In some ways, part of the subplot echoes the central concept of Harness's earlier story, "The Rose", for one of the musician's driving ambitions is to unlock the secret of Beethoven's unwritten 10th symphony, believing that it was never written because it formed a total musical encapsulation of the basic truths and realities of the universe. Nevertheless, "H-Tec" is an extremely well-written, amusing and often chilling story, and could possibly rank as one of the best things Harness has produced in recent years.

The two pieces by a new writer are "Gift Of Fire" (Analog, August) and "Wind Instrument" (Isaac Asimov's, June); the writer in question is Steven Gould, and a particularly interesting aspect of these two stories is that in style and tone they are about as completely different as could be expected.

"Gift Of Fire" deals with the attempts by a detective to unravel the mystery of how a gangster and his family were incinerated in their penthouse flat; the temperature was so great that it turned the ornaments into pools of liquid metal. At first sight, there are no clues as to how this act was performed, and the story evolves into the classic dead-man-in-a-locked-room mystery -- which might not sound like particularly promising material, but Gould manages to build it into a convincing tale with a realistic, if somewhat predictable, climax involving the power of the sun and the angled mirror windows of a nearby multi-story building. In many ways, the story's style and tone match that of Bob Shaw's when he tackles mysteries; and while it does not particularly tax the reader, it nonetheless remains an entertaining and well-written one.

"Wind Instrument" focuses on the attempts of a highly gifted conductor and an experimental musician to find the perfect environment for an aeolian harp consisting of a series of columns from which are suspended a number of wires of varying lengths and thicknesses. The whole structure is mounted on a pivot and placed in a wide open area so that various combinations of wires can be played by the wind. After much thought and deliberation, the two central characters decide upon the ampitheatre in which to locate the instrument -- a bowl-shaped depression in the desert called Sprague's Hollow where, in 1883, a number of people were brutally murdered and where, it is said, their screams can still be heard. The hollow is also said to have many bizarre and unusual acoustic features; and, predictably, once the harp is installed and the recording apparatus set up, mysterious and eerie things start taking place. Gould skillfully constructs some very unnerving atmospheres and deliberately leaves things very ambiguous: are the strings being played upon by the spirits of the dead or is it merely the unusual acoustic properties of the hollow? As the tension and suspense builds, one looks forward to a truly impressive climax; but this, sadly, never materialises -- indeed, mush of the story's power and strength is devalued by its extremely weak and uninventive ending, in which the hollow turns out to be nothing

more than a meteor crater below which is located an alien artifact, lying dormant for many millions of years while awaiting the trigger of complex music to spark it back into life.

Despite these two stories' many flaws, there is enough in them to cause one to feel that, given time and allowed to blossom in his own way, Gould could develop into a powerful new talent. In whatever direction his career may go over the next few years, it should be an interesting one to watch.

The two semi-factual articles came from the pen of Avram Davidson and are part of a contuing sequence called "Adventures In Unhistory". The first, "Who Fired The Phoenix?", appeared in the May issue of Isaac Asimov's and the second, "An Abundance Of Dragons", in the July edition. In both, Davidson skillfully blended fact and fantasy to unearth the origins of these two elements of ancient and contemporary mythology, and they were in many ways the most enjoyable things to read in either of the magazines over the period in question -- both were beautifully written, engrossing, and continually entertaining.

But if these four items are the best of what was published, what of the rest? Well, the best of the rest was probably Bob Shaw's "Conversion" in the August Isaac Asimov's. It was set on an island in the middle of the Bering Sea, where is located one of the two focal points of a time and space vortex; the second was left to wander through the depths of interstellar space. The object was to exploit the temperature gradient between the two focal points in order to use the energy thereby created to drill deep sea oil wells. Predictably enough, since the supervisors of the vortex have no control over its position in time and space, it was only a matter of time before it picked up and transferred more than energy: to whit, a beast known as the "taker", which is not so much malevolent as an unconscious agent of entropy. So the race was on to destroy it before it could leave the island and wreak havoc on the rest of mankind; and while the story was written with Shaw's usual skill and flair it can't be considered as anything particularly special....although it does nevertheless contain one moment of truly genuine terror.

Of the other stories published, two spring to mind not because of their high quality but because of their lack of it. Gene Wolfe's "The Woman The Unicorn Loved" (Isaac Asimov's, June) returned to the characters who originally appeared in his earlier "The Woman Who Loved Centaur Pholus" (Isaac Asimov's, December 1979); in it, undergraduate Julie Coronell attempts to catch and tame a genetically engineered unicorn which strays onto the university campus one day. As far as it goes, it is reasonably entertaining, but completely lacks the stamp of literary authority we have come to expect from Wolfe. The same is true of Gregory Benford's "Exposures" (Isaac Asimov's, July), in which he juxtaposed the private and professional lives of an astronomer; I'm sure the story was intended to take the reader somewhere, but because of the clumsy fashion in which it was written, the destination must remain a mystery.

There were, obviously, many more stories published than I have mentioned but, to be quite honest, they were either so mediocre or simply so downright bad as to deserve neither my attention nor your time.

Editorially speaking, Isaac Asimov's seems happy to continue its middle-of-the-road course, taking few if any chances and appearing unwilling to publish anything that isn't conservative (and probably with a capital "C"). Meanwhile, Analog continues its plunge into right-wing extremism, typified by Jerry Pournelle's "The Alternative View" in the August issue and Reginald Bretnor's guest editorial, "Thinking The Unthinkable" in the same, which was nothing more nor less than a thinly veiled rallying call for the free forces of the Western world to come together and stamp out the creeping blight of communism.

But surely, by anybody's standards, two stories of reasonable quality, two that were merely entertaining and two superbly-written semi-factual articles must rank as an extremely low score, and I am left with one question rigning around my head -- just who is it who buys these magazines in sufficient quantity to keep them alive and (if only in a financial sense) well? Are they all literary masochists, to put up eith so much dross?

Brian Aldiss -- CRYPTOZOIC! (Avon, 191pp, $2.25)
Reviewed by Chris Morgan

Brian Aldiss is contemporary science fiction's great innovator. For the past twenty years, amazing (and bemusing) readers with his originality of style, approach and subject-matter. Not that his work has been universally applauded; some of it is far too outrageous for the majority and has been attacked by reviewers and critics. Cryptozoic! (also know as An Age) is highly original, often peculiar and sometimes disconcerting, yet it is still entertaining and enjoyable. It is a surrealistic view of time and time-travel, with travel into the past being achieved by the power of the mind. The protagonist (Aldiss is not the kind of author to go in for heroes) is Edward Bush, an artist who has the ability to travel far into prehistoric eras -- farther than anyone else. There are marvelloud descriptions of the wolrd of the past ("Bush had never liked the Jurassic. It was too hot and cloudy...") and of the odd people from our future who, like Bush, prefer to live in the past rather than under the dictatorship of their own time. Towards the end of the book Aldiss tries to wrap it up by making the reader believe that time flows backwards rather than forwards; brave though the attempt it, it's doomed to failure, and tends to mar the novel. Even so, Cryptozoic! is an exceptionally fine creation, one of the author's best.

Charles Sheffield -- HIDDEN VARIABLES (Ace, 360pp, $2.75)
Reviewed by David Penn

This is a collection of fifteen short stories written between 1977 and 1980, many of them originally published in Analog and Galaxy. Most of them rely on the reader's interest in some sort of gadget and a mystery revolving around the nature of the gadget. Their protagonists come to very far-fetched conclusions, after appearing not to know anything for twenty or so pages, based on flimsy but spectacular evidence. To reach this conclusion, a style consisting of rapid scene-changes, television-type flashbacks and a lot of dialogue is used to detail the activities of a handful of people you wouldn't know from names in a telephone directory. In between the dialogue is sometimes something resembling descriptive prose....in fact, some of these stories are astonishingly bad for a published writer (any published writer). Sheffield's comic writing, in "The Deimos Plague" for instance, consists of wet incidents told in the semi-serious lippy tone of a sixth-former. A more high-flown effort like "From Natural Causes" displays borrowings and echoes of everyone else's use of a borrowing of a borrowing from Barbara Cartland.

Worse than his style is his blundering lack of moral insight. In "The Man Who Stole The Moon", the Heinlein story re-upholstered for the eighties, he attacks "bureaucratic stifling of initiative", and as an alternative to trying to do it through the blocked legitimate channels, his hero gets money to build a moonbase by joining a criminal organisation based on drug-peddling and murder. In "Legacy", a man accidentally turns into a horrific member of an ancient extraterrestrial race, and his friends hop about in ecstasy at the prospect of seeing what aliens are like. There's no need to go into the finer points of these episodes to demonstrate that the assumption behind them is that any human misery or evil can be ignored or even utilised as long as it benefits space exploration or science.

When I think of the man who wrote these stories, I don't see an unprincipled hack, blasting away at the English language with an electric typewriter loaded with big cheques, or a pig-headed, technocratic ultra-conservative. With the help of his many afterwords, I think of a young chap who grew up on science fiction, reading Clarke, Asimov and Heinlein, got hooked on physics and went to Cambridge, then realised a dream when he went to the States, and realised another when he got stories accepted by Galaxy and Analog. He's pleased with his work, takes pride in it, even subjects it to harsh tests in a writers' circle and honestly believes he's a good writer. He writes a lot of afterwords because he's full of himself in his new role as an author, and makes sure that "the historians of the field", for in-

stance, know that although not originally conceived as such, "Legacy" eventually became part of Sight Of Proteus. He writes that a critic in England said that "The Deimos Plague" was "pointless and rather disgusting", and assures us that this was exactly the reaction that he had been hoping for, as though critics were just a gaggle of buffoons and writers have to prod and irritate them to put them in their place. But the story is pointless and rather disgusting, and there's nothing else to it.

The horror of it all is Sheffield's naivete. He's obviously not trying to deliberately destroy the written word, but only in science fiction could a writer so obviously callow and inept be induced to believe that he is actually a talented artist. "Up there with Niven and Varley", says Isaac Asimov's; "writes science fiction like an old pro", says Library Journal -- praise which must have turned his head.

Sheffield is the SF equivalent of a rather inexperienced Mills & Boon writer: the only thing peculiar about his position is that only within this genre could many readers, reviewers and editors elevate him to the status of an imaginative, exciting talent. The science fiction nest, with its uncritically adulatory audience and its illusion that it seriously assesses its idols, is so comfortable that it's possible to write as badly as this and not only get away with it but be congratulated and flattered for it.

Garry Kilworth -- SPLIT SECOND (Penguin, 191pp, £1.50)
Reviewed by Mary Gentle

A few decades in the future, an amateur archaeologist hires a machine that can put flesh on the bone-fragments of his Paleolithic discoveries, thus opening a window into the past. While the machine is operating, the archaeologist's son accidentally comes into contact with it and, while his body lies presumably brain-damaged in hospital, finds himself sharing the mind of a prehistoric youth.

This is a theme that opens up wide possibilities. Unfortunately, Split Second fails to take advantage of them. Nothing is examined in real depth.

The Cro-Magnon tribe here depicted are the stock primitives of fiction: they worship sea, earth and sky giddesses, yet have a male-dominated social structure. They are periodically invaded by Neanderthal tribes; their cave walls are decorated with religiously-inspired paintings. Perhaps on the basis that there should only be one unusual thing in an SF novel, the author declines to show us any unorthodox view of the past. But then nor does his future-Cyprus setting come across as original; there are a few technological props lying about the stage, but that's about all.

The boy, Richard, is a passenger in the Cro-Magnon's head, rarely able to influence him. Yet when the situation is reversed, Richard "recovering" and leaving hospital, the Cro-Magnon, Esk, remains quiet. Not much is made of this opportunity to mirror the 20th century -- it's just assumed that, since it's so far outside his comprehension, Esk won't even panic. Neither of the two boys is really altered by their experiences.

There is a curious paradox about this novel, which has both adult and teenage viewpoint-characters: the adults are seen from a child's attitude, and the children looked down upon from an adult height. Split Second can't quite decide if it's aimed for the adult or young adult market. There is some interaction between the archaeologist's middle-aged lover, her teenage daughter, and her ex-husband on the run from organised crime, but none of it convinces. There are killings, kidnappings, sex and violence; but all of it is hazy-edged. No one is emotionally affected by what happens to them -- and if they're not, why should we be?

The book's style is uneven, with occasional touches of good writing and humour, but falling down lamentably when it comes to future teenage slang. Like everything else, it's never allowed to surpirse the reader. The flavour is bland. Only once does the book wake from its trance, when Richard sees "a butterfly, filling the world with its slow, lazy movements...It covered all horizons, menacing in its gossamer hugeness. An aerial archway was formed as the butterfly dragged its wings along the surface of the sea. Mount Olympus could have passed beneath without touching the harp of gauze."

A fantastic vision: are we about to be confronted with some unconventional turn of plot? No, it's Richard seeing Esk's nightmares projected onto the material world, and they don't persist long enough to upset his mental equilibrium. You might wonder what effect contact with the past would have, and what would happen to one boy if the other died, and what effect the future would have on the Paleolithic. Will it happen again? What will be learned, what use made of it? What changes have these events caused?

Split Second answers some of these questions -- but not to the reader's satisfaction.

Hilbert Schenck -- AT THE EYE OF THE OCEAN (Timescape, 224pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

The cover sports a buxom young lady on a galloping black stallion; and that rather sets the tone for this story of Abel Roon, born on the eastern seaboard of early 19th century America with an uncanny affinity for the ocean currents. Like the Greek gods of his childhood reading, "a person possessed, given a vision, holding a gift or power", Roon is drawn to the "Eye of the Ocean", a kind of mystical navle of the world. He smuggles escaped slaves to freedom, learns the Water Speech of the Polynesian islanders, guides a whaler to a record haul, and courts and marries the beautiful Hope Mayhew on his return from the Eye of the Pacific.

All a bit of a mixture. Flavours of SF, historical romance, whaling epic, even a strong current of feminism as Hope, after her marriage, hobnobs with New England bluestockings (depicted as early women's liberationists) and finally ends up demonstrating the Water Speech to a meeting of eminent scholars and lecturing in front of Queen Victoria! There's plenty of violent action as Abel engages in conflict with agents from the slave states, and great gobs of passionate-cum-mystical sex written in that peculiar tone found in the more "daring" romances: "He was so strong, strong and gentle together, that my body melted against him. His soft touch on my face, my neck, was a scorch of shivery delight. But of course Abel was the perfect gentleman, always..."

Of course. Always. And that's the trouble. Abel is about as convincing a superhero as something off a cornflake packet. The story lurches about trying to give the impression of Harriet Beecher Stow and Herman Melville having a genteel tea-party with Barbara Cartland and Marilyn French and never gets anywhere worth getting. It has all the ingredients for a rousing story, even if of the bodice-ripper rather than the SF genre (and it may well have been more interesting if all the pseudo-science-fictiony guff about mystical ocean vortices had been cut out altogether), but remains fundamentally boring, a testimony to the fact that you cannot graft worthy ideas onto an unconvincing story.

Stanislaw Lem -- TALES OF PIRX THE PILOT (Avon/Bard, 206pp, $2.95)
Reviewed by Dave Langford

This five-story collection is minor Lem, promising and sometimes delivering "adventures on the lighter side of tomorrow" (cover blurb). Pilot Pirx himself is a solidly likeable fellow, at first recalling the more annoyingly dim Sheckley heroes, but growing into a very human person -- competent enough, but prone to daydreams and often in need of luck to win through.

The first story, "The Test", is enjoyable, dealing with Pirx's first solo flight ("Where the hell was orbit B68, anyway? That must be it there!") in the face of such obstacles as a lost cribsheet and randy flies prancing about the spaceship controls: simultaneously tense and amusing, with a routine twist done about as well as such a chestnut can be. Next comes "The Conditioned Reflex", a broken-backed effort containing bits of two stories ("Pirx Vs The Sensory Deprivation Tank" -- jolly good -- and "Mystery Suicides On The Moon"), yoked together by lengthy descriptions of the journey from one story to the other, and of inefficient Moonbase-building by English and Canadians. The final 20-odd of 70 pages introduce and explain the "mystery", whose solution is salutary (cautionary tale of You Can't Trust Them Machines -- or your own instincts either) but infuriating

to any SF or detective fan who expects fair play from the author. Lem does just the same thing in "On Patrol", a better-told story with a still more groan-provoking "solution": what is the mysterious UFO on Pirx's screen which he can't catch up with, no matter what? The final page and a half of pseudo-scientific explanation is all the more unsatisfying because it boils down to the obvious first-guess solution after all... "The Albatross" is a plotless "translation" into SF terms of what might just as well have been Pirx in the QE2 radio room, listening to attempted rescuse operations on a sinking ship some miles away. "Terminus" opens with more nautical translation: Pirx is taking over a tramp spaceship in a hilariously revolting state of decrepititude, and once there was a tragedy aboard, and ghostly tappings are still heard along the plumbing... But the story is definitely SF, thatnks to Terminus, a doddering robot whose presence allows a nice ambiguity about the ultimate cause of the ghost messages: and, thankfully, this one doesn't end with two pages explaining how it merely happened that a defective relay was coincidentally tapping out Morse code.

The main trouble with all too many of these stories is that Lem, normally a supremely competent writer, appears to think that because this is more or less "comic" SF, the denouements can be as arbitrary or as contrived as he chooses. I disagree.

Jeffrey A. Carver -- PANGLOR (Arrow, 268pp, £1.50)
Reviewed by John Hobson

At last a new American author with potential. Whilst Carver's first novel, Star Riggers Way, was an acceptable short story enlargement all too typical of the conservatism of seventies' American SF, with Panglor he is beginning to use the trappings of SF in a more imaginative and readable way than most of his contemporaries.

The eponymous hero begins the tale as a doubt-filled adolescent angst identity figure who also happens to be a space merchantman pilot on a blacklist. His new employers offer him a one-way charter: to condemn the crew of another ship to the void of hyoerspace where not all ships which enter will exit. As he prepares for his mission at a space station, Panglor acts like a panic-stricken misogynist, spending his time avoiding human contact and suffering from a persecution complex. But Carver is cleverly hoaxing the reader; by the end of the first two chapters, the stereotype casting is dismantled as Panglor reminds himself how he ended up in this mess, and he is neither the space virgin nor the soft-shelled victim he thinks. Rather, he is the author of his own misfortune, placing trust of friendship in no one but a flying cat which is both his pet and comforter. This cat is the counterpoint to his insensitivity and paranoia, Carver avoiding the cloying sentimentality which fawning furry beasties usually inspire in their creators. Panglor himself is a well-rounded figure, although the female who stows away aboard his ship (a really hoary plot device!) and begins to extract his personality from its shell reveals a less sure touch about women.

Needless to say, Panglor sends his victims off into limbo, and then joins them on the planet of Dementia, a graveyard for ships as illusionary as the hyperspace in which they have been lost. The mad thrive on Dementia because they do not see the world correctly to begin with; otheriwise, the planet appears to disintegrate and swallow up the survivors. Panglor meets a mentally unbalanced alien, fish who float in the air, and numerous other things before realising that he can escape from the illusion by creating a competitive one of his own, which he does.

Thereafter, unfortunately, the novel becomes just another routine SF thriller with the obligatory revenge and marrying-off chapters. But Carver has nevertheless proved that he can inject life into the most threadbare of plots, and without recourse to Tom Wolfe journalese for the telling. The style is very reminiscent of the fifties: easy-chair comfort, humourous but understated, with a number of nice touches, as when Panglor runs away from an encounter with a "lady": "A cool sheath slipped down over his enraged feelings and after a few moments he had control again." (p. 28)

If Panglor is ultimately tied too tightly to its roots to be first-rate,

Carver shows enough promise to be worth watching in future.

Octavia E. Butler -- SURVIVOR (Sphere, 187pp, £1.25)
Reviewed by Ann Collier

There is something quaint and folksy about this book which ill suits it concern with cultural clash and adaptation. Because of this, it is a curiously muted novel which, in places, suggests Octavia Butler's talent without fully displaying it.

The survivor of the title is Alanna, an orphan who learns to fend for herself, living wild. She is adopted by the leader of a missionary cult and his wife, and manages to adjust to way of life and the beliefs of the missionaries whilst always knowing that she is regarded with suspicion and disapproval by some of them. When they set off to spread their word on another planet, her survival skills again come to the fore as she makes contact with the Garkohns, a humanoid tribe with a strictly hierarchical social structure. It is a tribute to Butler's ability to write convincingly that one becomes quite at ease with their thickly-furred bodies, their capacity to camouflage themselves so effectively that they are almost invisible, and their way of conveying emotion by changing the colour of their fur. The Garkohns' befriending of the missionaries is, however, only the first step in gaining control of them, partly through making them physically dependent on the adictive Meklah fruit, and the missionaries are remarkably slow to realise what is happening to them. Indeed, Alanna is the first to gain a forced enlightenment when she is kidnapped by the Garkohns' enemies, the Tekohn. There, once more, she has to unlearn the way of life with which she had become familiar and adjust to another set of values. All goes well until she is chosen as a mate for Diut, the leader of the Tekohn, whose giant stature and generally hunky appearance fill her with dread. The remainder of the story deals with her return to the missionaries, her struggle to free them from Garkohn domination, and her divided loyalties when her adoptive parents cannot accept her choice to remain Diut's mate. It is a novel packed with events and with descriptions of the humanoids' lifestyle, and its strength is quite simply that of a good story with few pretensions.

One is, however, meant to share Alanna's initial horror at becoming Diut's mate and to understand her parents' rejection of her because she has, according to their fundamentalist beliefs, not only committed bestiality but makes a deliberate choice to continue committing it. I have difficulty, however, in viewing Diut as a beast -- he is articulate and, learning that brutality towards Alanna to show her who is boss is ineffective, becomes considerate and gentle, risking his life to save her and her family. Moreover, Butler chooses to portray their relationship as a classic love story, initial suspicion and hostility giving way to the development of a deep bond of mutual trust and sensitivity. If Diut were portrayed as a slimy green octopod, one would be more sympathetic to her parents' reactions, but while he is not to everyone's taste -- admittedly hairy, prone to over-enthusiastic love-bites, with the physique of a body-builder -- he is not shock-inducing either.

Alanna is an outsider who nonetheless manages to find some acceptance wherever she goes. She derives some heroic status from not really belonging anywhere and certainly gains the reader's sympathy for her plight, particularly from the opening first-person narrative relating incidents from her adolescence. But throughout the book, there are frequent changes of narrator, which achieve little, and this bitty effect is further aggravated by constant flashbacks. One is never actually confused about who is speaking or when, but the overall impression is rather disjointed.

The atmosphere of the book is a pioneering one, where life is harsh and stark and primitive emotions predominate. Much play is made of child-bearing, sexual jealousy, and the rivalry between the leaders of the humanoid tribes who are destined from Butler's first mention of them to have a showdown and a fight to the death. There is little place for subtlety and finesse. But, having read reviews of several of Butler's other works, I was looking forward to this one, only to be disappointed. If the reviews are to be believed, she has written better books both before and since _Survivor_.

Richard J. Barnet -- THE LEAN YEARS: POLITICS IN THE AGE OF SCARCITY (Abacus, 349pp, £2.50)
Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Apart from calling him a "distinguished economic and political analyst" and mentioning the titles of some of his other works, the blurb of The Lean Years has little to say about its author, which thus makes it somewhat difficult to assess his qualifications for writing it and the veracity of the statements he makes in it. But the voluminous quantity of references listed in the bibliography means that we can at least be certain of the facts he offers; and staggering facts they are too, because this book amounts to nothing more nor less than a crushing indictment of our conspicuously overconsumptive western way of life and the crises -- in energy, minerals, food, water and, because of the suffering they induce, human skill -- we in consequence now face. The drawback, however, is that Barnet, being an American, tends to concentrate too much on the American experience of and response to these crises, presumably from a sense that it's in some way applicable to the rest of the western world; but the governments of Britain and Europe, for example, have more influence over the industrial sectors of their economies than the US government, and the multinational corporations he accuses of having done so much unchecked (laissez-faire) damage there have less of a role to play here. A more serious failing is that the book in no way lives up to its subtitle, being more concerned with how things got the way they are than with what we can do about it now or what's likely to happen in the future; such solutions as he does propose seem, although not necessarily unworkable, universally naive and idealistic, and it seems odd that they should be voiced by a man as incisive as his marshalling of the facts makes him out to be. Unless, perhaps, it's because we're already so far advanced along the road to our doom that there can be no solutions anyway....but I recommend this book regardless.

Robert Heinlein -- CITIZEN OF THE GALAXY (Penguin, 263pp, £1.25)
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Trapped somewhere within the verbose, maudlin lecturer that Robert Heinlein has become lies a storyteller of considerable talent, able to create situations, people them with characters who, if not Dickensian in their scope, attract the sympathy of the reader, and start the ball rolling until it reaches a satisfactory conclusion. The problems begin when he stops his story dead in its tracks to indulge in a stern, measured monologue on the meaning of life, the universe and everything. The unfortunate fact is that the cosmically scaled extrapolations of his experience can be misleading -- the experiences of Robert Heinlein are not exactly relevant to this side of the Atlantic, let alone on Betelgeuse 5.

In Citizen Of The Galaxy, a boy, Thorby, is sold into slavery, being bought by a beggar (!) who is, of course, more than he seems. Once this beggar, Baslim, falls ~~terminally~~ foul of the Sargon authorities, Thorby is smuggled off-planet by a family of Free Traders who are, conveniently in Baslim's debt to the extent of having no option but to accept his adopted son. Eventually, Thorby is accepted into the hierarchy of the family, only to be quickly transferred to the Hegemony of Earth by his second adoptive father, Krausa, who knows that Baslim must have had a very good reason to force him to accept such a breach of tradition. This reason is a report that Baslim has hypnotically implanted in Thorby's brain. Once returned to Earth, Thorby discovers that not only is he immensely rich and that the source of his wealth is (surprise, surprise) tainted by the slavery on which he was once part. The final third of the book deals in a very perfunctory manner with his discovery (and quick dismissal) of true personal love and his fight to save the universe.

There are the regulation Heinlein jibes at those things he dislikes or does not understand. An unsympathetically described anthropologist is called Margaret Mader in a crude reference to Dr Margaret Mead (a person of considerably more significance in the real world than Robert Heinlein). Qualms about killing are dismissed as "unintegrated thinking", whatever that might be. Thorby is said to "miss Sisu, but a ship with no women was simpler to

live in" -- simpler maybe, but no more realistic than the kibbutz societies Heinlein holds up as examples while libelling the nuclear families in which most of his readers live.

This is a juvenile work, but one wonders at what age group Penguin are aiming in reprinting it today. Thorby's age seems indeterminate, but is given as 18 towards the end of the book -- and any 18-year-old will have tears of amazed laughter in his eyes at the naivete of much of the prose, while younger readers will be lost among the byzantine business and familial structures Heinlein sketches and then makes central to the plot.

Within Citizen Of The Galaxy can be found all those elements that make Heinlein such an infuriating writer -- his talent slowly drowning itself in his loathesome chauvinism and half-baked philosophical pontificating. The book is a fair mix of what once was, what sadly now is, and what might just have been.

Paul Begg -- INTO THIN AIR (Sphere, 186pp, £1.25)
Reviewed by Chris Bailey

"Every year an alarming number of people vanish off the face of the Earth", burbles the blurb, "Where are they now?" If the vast numbers who buy similarly-promoted books by the likes of Charles Berlitz are thereby enticed into puchasing this volume, hoping that they will be offered "definitive proof" that all the missing people were, say, atomised by an Atlantean death-ray still functioning beneath the waters of the Bermuda Triangle, then they will be disappointed, for Paul Begg's aim is to do an efficient debunking job on some of the more outrageous guff we have been fed over the years.

Hear hear, say I, and the only pity is that he did not make a better job of it. He has prosaically divided his book into three sections, involving disappearances on the land, at sea, and in the air, which only goes to point out the sheer vastness of his enterprise, but the book is just 186 pages long, including a bibliography and an index, and this when discussing a subject which to be done honestly must involve the consideration of a large amount of data. So is he selective in the causes he chooses to examine, and if so then the doubts start to creep in -- how is his selection any more objective than, say, Berlitz's? By way of answering that one, he tends to stick to a few old favourites, steering a sensible course through the ocean of theories about the Marie Celeste and doing an excellent job on the Flight 19 story which started off the Bermuda Triangle nonsense. He is at his best when gleefully demolishing some of the dafter ideas which have been spawned by these two incidents, and these few exhaustively discussed cases betray the evidence of a great deal of scrupulous research, though again the wary reader will still harbour reservations as to whether all the evidence has been presented in a balanced manner in a field where fortunes have been made by narrating a three-quarters lie in a sufficiently lurid fashion. This is obviously a particular bugbear of the author's, and he is if anything over-zealous in some of his background research and insufficiently discriminating in sorting out the wheat from the chaff, though collectors of ephemera will have a fine time: I now know the personal histories of most of the crew of the Marie Celeste, the difference between carvel-constructing and clinch-building a ship and how to identify a hermaphrodite brig.

In general, Into Thin Air was not the horrid experience I was expecting. The author makes use of common sense and statistical information where appropriate -- for instance, when pointing out that the high number of disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle are not unusual considering the fickle weather conditions, the type of shipping, the high incidence of piracy and the sheer volume of maritime activity in the area. If the book has a fault, it is that it steers no particular course; in amongst the detailed cases are sprinkled a few more which are treated in a more cursory manner, from which the author draws no conclusions, in effect sitting back and saying "well, that really is a mystery". The last sentence reads: "As for BSAAC, the Corporation soon ceased to operate and was absrobed by BOAC" which, besides being rather untidy, leaves the impression of a lack of commitment of the author's part and goes some way towards diluting his argument's effect on the reader.

Arsen Darnay -- THE PURGATORY ZONE (Ace, 240pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Brian Smith

I have to admit that this novel is much more subtle than I gave it credit for being at first glance. It seems to be one of those novels that are best appreciated after the last page has been turned, and the story considered as a whole with the aid of hindsight.

It is set early in the 21st century. The day of the city has passed, and been replaced by the agrarian commune, the citizens of which are bound loosely together in a telepathic union. Atavistic impulses are trained out in childhood, and war and crime have consequently become unknown. The only flies in this utopian ointment are the "retrogrades", those who are isolated mentally and despise the tranquillity of their culture, yearning for the heroic days of the past. Ravi Shannon is one such. Driven by frustration and rage, he takes the only escape possible for a retrograde: a one-way trip in the Time Van to the parallel universe of his choice -- the Purgatory Zone. But as soon as he gest there, he is swept up in a nightmarish chain of events involving many counterparts of people he has known in his own world, only in frighteningly different guises.

This is a story of self-discovery. As the name suggests, the Purgatory Zone is Shannon's testing ground, wherein which he will either find himself or die, depending upon how he reacts at the various crisis points which confront him. The novel's weak points are the beginning and the end; the scene-setting is short and hurried and the tying-up os loose ends is somewhat glib, but in between the story is briskly told and quite compelling. The final resolution becomes fairly obvious (if not actually inevitable) long before it arrives, but the story is no less interesting for all that. It has about it a brooding, claustrophobic atmosphere, with dense yet deftly-handled symbolism. Darnay has many telling points to make on such topics as the myth of the Golden Age, the nature of the self-martyred Byronic hero, and the role of the individual within society. All in all, this is one of the best psychological novels I've seen in quite some time, and one which I feel will repay whatever afterthought the reader might care to give it.

David Langford -- WAR IN 2020 (Sphere 242pp, £1.50)
Reviewed by Roy Macinski)

Over the last few years, Dave Langford has been one of British fandom's most outstanding characters and writers. In that time, he has built up an enviable reputation for writing, in a very erudite and witty manner, about practically every subject under the sun. He has produced a copious amount of material, but it is only comparatively recently that he has become a full-time writer.

War In 2080 is his first book to be published through a major firm, and in hardback was greeted with wide-ranging critical acclaim. It is easy to see why. Before turning to full-time writing, he worked as a physicist at the Government Weapons Research Centre at Aldermaston, and so is in a very authoritative position to write about military technology.

The book covers the entire gamut of potential conflict, dealing with biological and chemical warfare and such esoteric possibilities as climate control and the practicalities of harnessing the force and destructive powers of earthquakes and volcanoes. The focus is largely on the hardware of the past, present and future than on the software, and in looking at the full range of potential weaponry, Langford delves into some of the more commonplace imagery of SF, such as space-borne energy weapons, and in doing so quietly diffuses many of the myths and misconceptions about such armaments.

There is a tendency at times for the book to feel somewhat superficial, but I think this is more a consequence of Langford's writing style, which is easy and light, than of the actual contents. Indeed, when looked at closely, one of its most outstanding aspects is just how detailed and comprehensive it is -- and, given its ample illustrations of mankind's continuing and almost suicidal obsession with grandiose forms of destruction, is surprisingly optimistic and positive in tone. In fact, Langford persuasively argues that armageddon will never come to pass, which is quite a refreshing thing to read

these days.

All in all, War In 2080 is an informative, engrossing and entertaining volume -- I read it in one sitting, and there are not many books with which I can manage that.

Piers Anthony -- MUTE (Avon, 440pp, $2.95)
Reviewed by Ian Williams

This isn't so much a book as a product, a shelf-filler just like books by Ron Goulart, Tanith Lee, Roger Zelazny and Harry Harrison. It's looked upon by publishers not as something of intrinsic worth but as a reliable commodity designed to make a reasonable profit -- they know that there are thousands of Anthony fans out there who can't wait to part with their money for another book of his to pop on the shelf along with his thirty-off other novels. I wouldn't be surprised if the editor hadn't even bothered to read it: he'd just look at the size of the manuscript, work out the price they'd charge and the money they'd make, and send Anthony a nice but not huge cheque.

I'd run out and catch the book now, if I were you; it certainly won't be available in any other edition but this. As most of his novels haven't sold over here, and this is interchangeable with any of them, I doubt if this one will either. Forgive me if I sound cynical and tired, because I don't mean to be; it's just that I think this book is a perfect example of everyone's couldn't-care-less attitude to the buying public. It's a guaranteed seller, like identikit Simak, Vance, Anderson, Chalker, Foster, and all those others. They don't give a damn about the quality, they just know it will sell. And I sometimes wonder if the authors themselves begin to count the pages in terms of the amount of money they'll make....and when I look at the size of this thing I begin to believe it.

So what's it like, you're beginning to wonder? Ace stuff! Great fun! And very, very long. Anthony's technique is to take a good idea, develop it with merciless logic, get hold of a couple of characters who like to talk a lot, wind them up and set them loose. Several hundred pages later, having thrown in everything including the kitchen sink, he types "The End" and starts plotting a sequel.

Knot (ever noticed how all of Anthony's heroes have names with only three to five letters in them?) is a mutant in a galaxy-wide civilisation that needs mutants but doesn't like to have them living next door or marrying their sisters. He's a physical mutant in that he's excessively lopsided but also has a secret mental power: an hour after leaving someone's company, they forget all about him. (No, this isn't a metaphor, it's a Piers Anthony novel.) Well, the bad guys want to destroy the Co-ordinating Computer that runs the galaxy, so the Computer gets a beautiful assistant, a telepathic weasal and a clairvoyant hermit crab to enlist Knot, who isn't too sure that the Computer is a good thing and needs to be convinced: cue for pages and pages of dialogue. Needless to say, he is duly convinced, and valiantly sets off with girl, weasel and crab to do the dastards down. Along the way, there's a fair bit of fun and wicked punning -- you see, nearly all animals have mutated physically and mentally, and have a collective mind; on the planet Chicken Itza, for example, the collective is called the Clucks Clan. Later on, Knot is carrying around some telepathic bees in his pocket, and asks their names. "Just call us bee one, bee two..." they say; instead, he calls them niacin, riboflavin, and so on. There's planety of gratuitous violence, too -- "I don't enjoy this", says the villain while graphically torturing someone to death.

All this and a cast of thousands of weird and wonderfully mutated humans and animals....but don't worry if you miss it, because there'll be another one along soon.

Richard Matheson -- WHAT DREAMS MAY COME (Sphere, 264pp, £1.50)
Reviewed by Mary Gentle

"A novel of life after death" the cover rather flatly proclaims; and so it is, chronicling the experiences of one Chris Nielsen, TV scriptwriter, after his death in a road accident, his adjustment to "heaven", and his attempts to

help his wife Ann after she commits suicide.

The religious viewpoint is a Spiritualist one: the "next world" is another, finer-grained level of existence. Death is the "third sphere". Attainment of the seventh sphere brings about a merging with God. Spirits learn wisdom by continual reincarnation. The spirits of the dead are present to help the living. Matter is only a state of mind....

For the implications of its theme, this is a very pedestrian book. A novel that deals with life after death can either be of the author-sees-the-light variety, or it can use that framework to illuminate the present world. From his remarks in the introduction, Matheson would appear to be attempting the former. Everything in the book is the product of research, he says, and only the characters and their relationships are fictitious. The latter is all too obvious -- Chris and Ann are a loving couple, good parents, well-off middle class Americans....it's all there but, as in a Hollywood back lot, the supports are visible: it's all front and no depth.

Chris's muddled reactions to finding himself dead are credible, but might have been more interesting if he'd been anything other than a Gallup Poll don't-know in denomination. I might believe that third-level Heaven is a state of mind; I don't credit the Hells Chris sees, shown around by his cousin like a second-rate Dante and Virgil. Is there still no better image for the inferno than a lunatic asylum raised to the nth power? That harks back to the mediaeval idea that the mad were morally responsible for their insanity; so here the bad, evil or misguided are rewarded for their sins with Bedlam. Ann is condemned there on the basis of suicide (a dubious ethical point), but all's well; she's rescued in a Disneyesque bout of sentimentality, proving again that all you need is love (and never mind Divine love), and the two soul-mates are off to meet each other again in different incarnations....

Matheson's hypothesis is that a soul can incarnate in a body at any time from conception to six or seven weeks after birth -- which thus ignores the questions this poses about abortion, and about the state of the "unsouled" child: is it animal, vegetable or mineral? The soul, he goes on, doesn't integrate fully until about age 21, or maybe middle age, or maybe not at all... which is a rather simplistic explanation for human immaturity. But his central concept reduces the universe to the level of a lab tachnician's rat-maze, for souls are said to embark on an endless game of spiritual snakes-and-ladders, in which even free will is mechanistic in operation. There is little that is transcendental in this -- Heaven is thus tolerant enough to enfold all other religions, and only the atheistic are Hell-bound. This view sidesteps the idea that a hypothetical god, in creating spirits, must necessarily have created their limitations -- which is rather like building an indoor swimming pool and then complaining that you can't go hang-gliding in it.

All right, Matheson says; God created limited spirits so that through the exercise of ree will they could <u>learn</u> to be perfect. (Why he couldn't create them perfect in the first place I don't know -- either they have the capacity to become perfect or they don't, and either way the omnipotent God is still responsible.) Leaving that aside, the game is still rigged, for the definition of "perfection" is handed down by the Highest Authority, and if you decide that you have an alternatuve goal you want to evolve towards then bad luck, you're Hell-bound again.

From an aesthetic viewpoint, the book fails: the writing is poor, the phrasing sometimes grotesque, the whole could do with being cut by a third. You may feel that something so essential as a religious truth doesn't need to be presented aesthetically, and that it's variety should be enough; but that reduces it to the level of propaganda, and even propaganda must be competent (and to some degree entertaining) to succeed. <u>What Dreams May Come</u> is too insipid to make converts; it has none of the sheer allegorical invention of C. S. Lewis or the inspired fantastic logic of G. K. Chesterton, nor has it the powerful if obscure narrative that a Charles Williams novel has, nor -- to descend to the lunatic fringe -- the pure nutty fanaticism of T. Lobsang Rampa. Matheson is merely a competent but uninspired writer tackling a subject for which inspiration is surely the first requirement. No wonder he fails.

Charles Sheffield -- SIGHT OF PROTEUS (Arrow, 282pp, £1.60)
Reviewed by Dave Langford

It is the 22nd century. Body transformation is all the rage, people plugging into convincingly circumstantial computers (Sheffield is a physicist and a mathematician) to change themselves by "bio-feedback", and implausible and hazy business (Sheffiled is a mathematician and a physicist), into any form not "forbidden" -- taboo forms apparently being ones with as much as a 5 per-cent chance of not being able to change back, though forms with "life-ratio 0.2" (get five years older for every year you stay that way) are fine, and DIY form-change kits are sold by the million, with 78,000 resulting deaths each year, and babies three months old are expected to prove themselves human and non-retarded by the silliest test yet to have come out of SF -- a human is someone who can manage "purposive form-change" using bio-feedback, of course! The complicated plot involves (a) illicit experiments by a great and nice scientist wishing to develop (forbidden) forms suitable for start trav-el; (b) the Logians, whose planet is now the asteroids: there are Logians, as you might expect, but their DNA lingers on and people exposed to it tend to form-change into these hyperintelligent, supremely rational nonhumans who ac-cidentally detonated their planet 16 million years back; (c) an investigator unravelling all this -- unravelling being the word, since the book starts wound up promisingly tightly but seems to run out of tension as more and more is explained. It's enventive enough, and pretty good for a first novel; but the prose is flat and as for the characters....the only halfway memorable touch concerns a chap who, changed into a Logian, is distinguished from his former and non-hyperintelligent self by an inability to pronounce the letter "L". Which, as you might imagine, quick'y becomes into'erab'e.

Brian Aldiss -- GALAXIES LIKE GRAINS OF SAND (Granada, 188pp, £1.25)
Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Originally published in incomplete form as The Canopy Of Time -- with some of the stories dropped and all the linking material designed to stitch them to-gether as a history of man's future evolution thrown away entirely -- this is a reprint of the later American edition....which was itself incomplete, since its roster of stories was again altered and the linking narrative, although present, similarly cut. But a modified reprint, for a rewritten version of one of the stories out from it has been reinserted and its linking narrative similarly rewritten. No matter: the stories are good early Aldiss, working in the "traditional" mid-Atlantic mode of the fifties but with his own voice coming through clearly, and the introduction by Norman Spinrad (itself re-written from a later American edition -- so that makes four distinct editions in all!) of much interest and value.

Okay. There are no prizes for guessing why this issue was expanded to four-teen pages: the inventory had grown to somewhat huge proportions during the two-month gap since the previous issue, and if I hadn't increased the page count I'd have had even more reviews left over than the last time. Might be able to swing an extra page for the next issue, too, if I play my cards right -- but we'll have to wait and see. In any case, the next issue will have stuff by Mary Gentle, Chris Bailey, Chris Morgan, David Penn, Andy Sawyer, Martyn Taylor, Brian Smith, Roy Macinski, plus newcomers Ray Owen and Nick Lowe, plus whoever else turns up (there's a lot still outstanding, guys!), plus a "Blood On The Racks" column by yours truly, concentrating on F & SF. In the meantime, here's a partial list of some of the stuff we've also re-ceived: Nigel Robinson & Linda Wilson -- THE TOKIEN QUIZ BOOK (Star, 115pp, £1.25); John Wyndham -- THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS (Penguin, 272pp, £1.25); A. Merritt & Hannes Bok -- THE BLACK WHEEL (Avon, 296pp, $2.50); Keith Laumer -- RETIEF OF THE CDT (Timescape, 191pp, $2.25); Michael Moorcock -- THE LAND LEVIATHAN (Granada, 173pp, £1.25); Norman Spinrad -- AGENT OF CHAOS (Corgi, 186pp, £1.25); Randall Garrett & Vicki Ann Heydron -- STEEL OF RAITHSKAR (Bantam, 180pp, $2.25); George Zebrowski -- MACROLIFE (Avon, 284pp, $3.95). One of these days, I might even have room to publish the index a few of you have requested....