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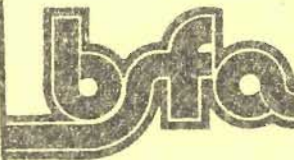

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Volume 5 Number 3 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas (Room 9, 94 St George's Square, Pimlico, London SW1Y 3QY, United Kingdom), this issue containing reviews by Brendon Gore, Nick Lowe, Jim England, Brian Smith, Ray Owen, Martyn Taylor, Chris Morgan, David Penn, Andy Sawyer, Ian Williams, Chris Bailey and Mary Gentle, plus a "Blood On The Racks" column by yours truly. The entire contents are copyright 1981 by the BSFA Ltd on behalf of the contributors, to whom all rights are hereby returned.

BLOOD ON THE RACKS -- Joseph Nicholas

Inherent in the schedules of a monthly magazine is the looming pressure of constant deadlines -- no matter how well or how effortlessly one is cleared, another remains to stare the editor in the face, and the knowledge that pages have to be filled come what may must surely result in him accepting for publication stories that in other circumstances would have been rejected or returned for rewriting. The result, of course, is that for every one good story a magazine publishes during any given year, it will publish a dozen or so that are at worst mediocre and at best only average. So it is with the past year's crop of Fantasy & Science Fiction.

I've pointed out before how, in relation to the more dogmatic strictures of the other magazines, it doesn't appear to have anything that can be termed "an editorial policy" and will hence print anything from whimsical fantasy to serious social extrapolation to comic space opera to.... and in this respect the only reliable guide we have as to why a particular story was printed is that Edward Ferman found something about it to like. But I'm moved to wonder, considering his length of tenure in F & SF's saddle, whether his taste isn't beginning to ossify with the years -- how else to account, for example, for the phenomenal number of stories with twist endings published during the past twelve months? (I haven't counted them, but at a rough guess there must be enough to fill at least three complete issues.) Such things are traditionally supposed to surprise or amuse the reader, causing him to regard the story he's just read in a different light, but in fact (and certainly in this preponderance) they give the impression that the writer couldn't be bothered to think -- or, worse,

is incapable of thinking -- his plot through to its logical conclusion. It's almost as though, two or three pages from the end, the writer realises that there's no way out of the corner into which he's painted himself and, panicking slightly, starts pulling rabbits out of hats and throwing in deus ex machinae in an attempt to wind the thing up before the reader gets wise to his predicament. Newer writers are perhaps more prone to this than established ones -- Dorothy Gilbert's "A Winter Flowering" (June) is undoubtedly the silliest of this type of story, converting its two central characters into trees without bothering to even hint at why; for the record, there's also Lewis Shiner's "Stuff Of Dreams" (April), drearily ripping-off Daniel Galouye's Counterfeit World without a shred of the overwhelming paranoia which made that novel marginally worthwhile -- and the sale of such stories is more likely than not to confirm them in their bad habits.....as, it would appear, Charles L. Grant has been so confirmed: every short story of his I've ever read (and I admit that I haven't read them all) has ended with a twist of some kind, and "Every Time You Say I Love You" (May) is no exception, positively exulting in its unnecessary and unnecessarily disgusting closing lines. And when writers who should know better start doing it too, it gets even more depressing -- the ending of George R. R. Martin's "The Needle Men" (October), for instance, with its tale of a struggling young writer wondering what happens to the people who seem to vanish from his apartment block whenever a strange black car is in the vicinity, is clearly intended to shock us; but it's so obvious that when he starts expounding his theory as to their destination to the female medical student (a medical student!) with whom he's fallen in you almost needn't bother to read any further (except, perhaps, to make yourself wonder why you bothered).

But enough of the bad stuff (for the moment; we'll be returning to it later); let's get on to the good.

Undoubtedly the best story of the year, at least for me, was Rob Holdstock's "Mythago Wood" (September), a moody, darkly hued tale of a young man returning from the devastated Europe of World War Two to the family home in Hertfordshire to find his brother carrying on his estranged dead father's work of exploring a nearby primary wooldand -- a stand of oak and ash untouched for thousands of years, impenetrable, rumoured to harbour within it wild boars and other creatures left over from the days before the Beaker People landed on British shores. Steve, the first-person narrator, has no empathy for or interest in this work, and can only watch, at first with irritation but later mounting trepidation, Christian's obsessive and increasingly irrational forays into the wood, paging through his father's notes the while and attempting to make sense of his almost incoherent scribblings on the subject of mythagos, the "myth imago", defined as "the image of the idealised form of a myth creature" that we carry deep in our racial unconscious and which can be activated by the interaction between our life-auras and these primary woodlands....

Which synopsis of course makes the story sound not only unnecessarily melodramatic but laughably contrived, and gives not a hint of Holdstock's sureness of touch, of the conviction with which he invests his story, of the overpowering sense of doom and ancient darkness which begins to creep across it as it nears its end. To say that Holdstock has a feel for such subjects as this is clearly redundant, as anyone who's read the sections on ancient monoliths and standing stones in his (recently reprinted) novel Necromancer will know; indeed, his "feel" seems to amount to nothing less than a deep-seated empathic identification with them, and his intuitive understanding of the woodland's age and power (based, so the introduction to the story tells us, on one near his own family home in Kent) is what most informs this story. I wish I could quote an extract from it, but for its atmosphere to come across such a quote would have to take up the rest of this column, so I can only recommend (most strongly) that you read it for yourself -- indeed, if you only ever read one magazine story a year, make it this one.

Given that "Mythago Wood" is the most outstanding story that F & SF has published this year, the other good material seems pale by comparison,

and to absolve me of any worrying about which is better than which I'll deal with them in more or less the order they were published....

Jane Yolen is more commonly known as a writer of children's fantasies, and has published several collections of her stories in the United States; many of them have previously appeared in F & SF, and in truth to label her work as "for children" rather demeans it. Straightforward "fairy tales" written in a clear, lucid prose they may be, yet like all worthwhile fantasy her stories deal not with telepathic dragons and dashing princes and all the other junk that clutters up supposedly "adult" fantasies but with the mythopoeic and symbolic "absolutes" that constitute their themes (and which were of course the basic point of such tales, recounted around the ancestral nomadic campfires long before the invention of writing), and hence probably have more to say to us than to a juvenile audience. "The River Maid" (January) is a case in point, telling of a farmer who dammed and diverted a river in order to increase his landholdings and of the river maid he thus robbed of a home. Penning her up in his home for a year, he got her pregnant; on a stormy night, she gave birth to something half-fish, and the river burst through its dam to sweep him and his house away and reclaim her and her child. The moral is of course the old one about never tampering with nature, and in particular a nature you don't know, in case you disturb the "balance of life", which may be simple and in some senses rather trite, but it was effectively and economically (her stories are never more than a few pages long) told. (She made a second appearance in September with "The Corridors Of The Sea", about an underwater research station's project to implant artificial gills in human beings; unmemorable in itself, and with a tacked-on pseudo-mystical ending, it demonstrated only that her fantasy is infinitely better.)

As an exercise, it's interesting to compare Yolen's fantasy with Tanith Lee's "Paid Piper" (July), a strange cross between the Sermon on the Mount and the Pied Piper of Hamelin, in which a piper comes to the village of Lime Trees to persuade it to abandon its worship of Raur, the rat god which protects them and brings tham wealth, in favour of life, love and freedom, worshipping nothing and doing nothing (we even get a reference to the lilies of the field). When the people of course reject him, he vows to steal away their children, and does so by visiting them with permanent sterility from the following year onwards, thus robbing the village of any future and ensuring its eventual extinction. The moral of all this was made explicit in the final paragraph, pointing out how the avarice and hatred of mankind results in their gods, even those professing a doctrine of love, becoming just as corrupted -- fair enough, but did it really need 25 pages of the sort of fake spring festival folderol beloved of hack fantasists everywhere before it could be said? And shouldn't it have been integrated into the body of the story rather than tacked on at the end anyway? I think Lee could well take a few lessons from Yolen as to how to better blend her theme with her plot, and at a briefer, more to-the-point length to boot.

Like Yolen, Keith Roberts also turned up twice this year, with "The Checkout" in February and "Kaeti's Nights" in October. The former is another (although it's been some years since the last one) in the series about Anita, the teenage witch who lives with her grandmother in a remote part of Northamptonshire but can't stop meddling in human affairs. What makes these stories is the thoroughly modern nature of these two characters: no tedious mock-archaic pontificating about the True Nature Of Evil and such, but Granny Thompson clomping about and sighing heavily and wondering what the younger generation is coming to (and in dialect to boot), and Anita roaming around as carefree as you please and not caring a damn for morality -- delightfully whimsical, in other words, although this story has a more serious purpose. It concerns Anita's befriending a supermarket checkout girl who, though not lacking in admirers, seems perpetually wallowing in misery and self-pity; this, it transpires, is because she's having an affair with a man old enough to be her father but can't move in with him because he's already married. So that the pair can do what they like without incurring the wrath of their fellow citizens, Anita persuades her grandmother to send them back through time to the fifteenth century....well, perhaps it's not that serious

a story: what is certain about it is that it is excellently and memorably written, full of wit and intelligence, with genuinely three-dimensional characters you feel you might one day meet on the street. "Kaeti's Nights", on the other hand, I'm less sure about: grimmer in tone, it's the story of a publican's daughter who contracts anaemia and eventually dies, but turns out to have become a vampire; she revisits her parents every other night, proving as feckless in undeath as she was in life and not at all inclined to bite people in the neck just because the legends say she should (and they're all wrong anyway). Eventually, Van Helsing's great grandson turns up to "put her out of her misery" and the publican, knowing the truth, has to stop him; after which the story collapses into confusion, with talk of the One and drifting backwards through the years and being outside Space and Time, none of which really makes any sense or has anything to do with the story, and the reader is left with a feeling of puzzlement undermining that of quiet satisfaction the story gave him in its earlier stages.

Come to that, there were a number of stories published this year which seemed to lose themselves in their final pages, or even from their halfway points onwards -- not so much twist endings as a drift away from their ostensible themes. An example is Lee Killough's "Taaehalaan Is Drowning" (August), concerning the flooding of an alien city by a Terran construction project designed to release water from an underground sea to refill the planet's oceans and thus keep it alive; the central character, a salvage engineer, naturally wants to save as much of the city's statuary and carvings as he can, but the alien inhabitants are more interested in securing their future than preserving their past and can neither help him nor understand his reasons. The story thus seems to promise us not only an interesting clash of attitudes and expectations but also some thoughts on how much of our history we should or should not sacrifice to progress; but Killough instead veers aside into the melodrama of an alien girl falling down a well and the salvage engineer diving in after her, with the stones of the square about having to be broken up and dropped in to raise the water level so that they can be hauled out. I presume that this is supposed to demonstrate that life, and the promise of life, is worth more than any archaeological considerations, but its very contrivance smacks so much of the author being afraid to get to grips with er subject that it does not convince for a moment. On the same lines (drifting away from the point of the story), there's Phyllis Eisenstein's "In The Western Tradition" (March), set in a time research establishment where historians and other interested parties can hire "bubbles" to send back into the past to record, from their late twentieth century vantage point, the events of the time: in this instance, the life of Wyatt Earp. Clearly well-versed in the period, Eisenstein seems set to give us some effective debunking of the myths that have grown up about him, but instead allows her story to descend to superficial emotional wallowing of the kind indulged in by far too many American SF writers: the central character's girlfriend falls in love with Jimmy Logan, one of Earp's associates, and spends all her time in the research establishment tracking back and forth through his life, so the hero tries to win her back by showing her the moment of his death, but it doesn't work and they end up shouting at each other a lot, and.... This isn't as bad as it might have been, given that the central character has rather more life and substance than he would had Vonda McIntyre or Joan Vinge (the foremost wallowers of the moment) written the story, but it nevertheless fails to live up to its initial promise -- and without the pressure of the deadline, could well have been returned for rewriting.

While we're on the subject of emotional wallowing (all right, so I'm drifting away from the point; but we'll get back to it), I could mention a few of the other stories of the type that have appeared this year -- none of them as hysterically awful as Harlan Ellison's "All The Lies That Are My Life" (castigated here last year), but all just as shallow and as lacking in insight into the human psyche (probably because, having hauled their characters' emotions out onto the surface of their personalities, the authors have left them with no depth or substance worth penetrating). Nicholas Yermakov's "The Orpheus Implant" (February), for example, is nothing more

than one long piece of telepathic Californian group therapy, conducted by means of electronic brain implants which force the participants to be totally open with each other, hiding nothing -- except, of course, that one of them does have some secrets she wishes to keep, which distorts communication between them and forces the others to spend the rest of the story working to uncover those secrets, ending in a welter of saccharine and ersatz tears as laughable and they're repellent. (Yermakov doesn't seem to have realised just what an invasion of privacy his invention constitutes, and his tone is in fact one of wholehearted approval for it -- what, I wonder would George Orwell have thought of it?) Warren Brown's "Last Song Of The Voiceless Man" (March) is worse: set in an orbital station where space-induced psychoses are studied and treated, it features a man who's lost his voice and has to communicate through the songs of his female companion and a female protagonist who spends every other page deriding herself for her attempts to give him back his voice and thus rob the woman of her songs; saccharine and ersatz tears again inform the ending. There's also Graham Petrie's "Bars: An Aspect Of Night Life" (July), firmly into the lecherous menopausal bracket with a middle-aged man who can't seem to pick up women; instead of tears, however, we get a twist ending which suggests that he's being driven to find them by someone or something else -- but what has the true love for which he's hankering got to do with the casual sexual encounters he'd actually get? Only in California would anyone have the nerve to suggest that the two really had anything to do with each other.

Getting back to the good stuff, however, we find another British writer, Ian Watson, hitting twice this year, with "Nightmares" in April and "The Call Of The Wild: The Dog-Flea Version" in October. The former story is the somewhat forgettable tale of manned probe sent up from Earth to drive away a vast hemispherical clutch of space-borne aliens that have covered its nighttime hemisphere; its ending, demonstrating how the mission failed and the aliens proved to be beneficial after all, is supposed to be ironic, but the piece is too short and rushed for the irony to work. The latter story, on the other hand....well, its title just about says it all: it's a wickedly accurate and adroitly executed spoof of Jack London's novel, featuring Buck Flea, the star of Aleppo's Flea Circus, and some alien fleanappers called Zogs, charting Buck's progress from lowly anchor position on a truffle-hunter's net to unchallenged master of the Valley of the Evil Flea. You may not laugh out loud, but you can't help liking it.

Edward F. Shaver's "The Killing Thought" (May) also involves aliens, although of a more enigmatic and destructive kind, who have conquered the Earth, exterminated much of its population and seem to use the remainder for sport, killing them (as per the title) with a bolt of telepathically-induced extreme pain. The protagonist, Harrison, is a born loner who hides out in the mountains and emerges from time to time to kill as man of the aliens as he can. In the opening pages of the story, he rescues a woman, Beth, from the attentions of one of them; the rest of it concerns both their developing relationship and his pursuit by an alien seeking vengeance for the one he killed, ending with a confrontation in which they reach some kind of understanding before he and Beth set out in search of a legendary human redoubt hidden far to the north. None of this is by any means original, and the ending is wholly predictable, but it works by virtue of both its characters and its prose -- Harrison, at first sight a typically super-competent Heinleinian male, has in fact as many weaknesses as strengths, and Shaver's carefully detailed observation of him results in his emerging as a fully-rounded, sympathetic individual (although his treatment of Beth is much less assured, and she often seems little more than the device he's using to draw out Harrison's personality). The prose, uncommonly for this kind of story, is measured, unmelodramatic, restrained, and at its best when describing the mountain landscape through the characters move; far from the tediously pastoral Simakianisms one might expect, with the scenery drenched in an inappriately romantic glow, Shaver strives to depict it as accurately and as unemotionally as he can, allowing its natural grandeur to speak for itself at all times. I'd go so far as to say that he seems to understand it as intuitively as Holdstock understands his primary woodland and is, I think, a

writer well worth watching.

Last of the good stories is Tony Sarowitz's "Dinosuars On Broadway" (S tember), an odd little piece which won the 1980 Transatlantic Review award and concerns the wife and mother of a family which, as a result of the husband's promotion, has moved to New York and is trying to adjust to life there. The title derives from the picture-book about the giant reptiles that she's bought her daughter; wondering about them and about her predicament -- her husband, perpetually tired, has little time for her; the manners and behaviour-patterns of her fellow citizens seem alien and frightening; her daughter seems to be speaking an entirely different language; she can't get a job; unlikely accidents are forever befalling her -- she begins to fear that she may become as out-evolved and as extinct as they; ultimately, she seems to achieve (the promise of?) a form of adaptation to her new environment. The theme of the story would appear to concern the alienating effect of city living on the human psyche; not a new idea, but I liked Sarowitz's treatment of it.

Almost the end, then. In conclusion, I should mention Stephen King's "Gunslinger and the Dark Man" series, the three final instalments of which appeared during the year (in February, July and November), which began quite promisingly with its first two instalments (in October 1978 and April 1980) but has become steadily more infuriating. Supposedly chronicling the search of Roland, the last gunslinger, for "the tower that stands at the root of time", the stories are jerky, lumbering, obscure and strive so desperately to be enigmatic as to drive the reader to despair. Reading all five in sequence merely adds to rather than clarifies the confusion; it seems plain that King wrote the first under the influence of a powerful image that couldn't be exorcised from his imagination, and went on to write the other four less to develop it than to try and explain it to his own satisfaction, with the result that they have the air of being made up as he went along, an arbitrary mess with ideas and incidents being thrown in at random, devoid of sense or purpose. They are shortly to be assembled into a book....and from the note at the conclusion of the fifth story, stating that it's but the end of "the First Cycle", there are clearly further instalments of the saga to come. I mention all this because King is held in high regard by many people I know, all of whom have urged me to read his novels at some time or other; I haven't yet, and on the evidence of these stories I'm even less likely to. It's an appallingly clumsy and unsatisfactory way to write a novel -- has he really no idea where the series is going? And if so, then why doesn't he sit down and think about it before writing any more?

Robert Silverberg also has a series running in F & SF: stories set on the world of Lord Valentine's Castle and intended, when complete, to be assembled as a collection entitled Majipoor Chronicles. The motive behind them is quite clearly a cynically commercial one, and the two tales that have appeared so far -- "Desert Of Stolen Dreams" in June and "In The Fifth Year Of The Voyage" in December -- are strongly reminiscent of the bad old hack Silverberg of the fifties: the briefest and most inane of incidents on which Jane Yolen would not have wasted a paragraph, padded out to ten, twenty, thirty times their natural length, devoid of colour, wit, character and depth, as boring as they are contemptible. I used to like Silverberg, for Heaven's sake, but the disdain with which he now treats his readers is quite intolerable.

So there you have it. That was the year in Fantasy & Science Fiction, and it certainly wasn't a particularly memorable one. About the only story I feel confident of suggesting for the BSFA Award is the one on which I lavished the most praise, Rob Holdstock's "Mythago Wood", with Keith Roberts's "The Checkout", Edward F. Shaver's "Killing Thought" and Tony Sarowitz's "Dinosaurs On Broadway" bringing up the rear; and that's substantially fewer than I picked out last time. (Your own choices will doubtless differ from mine, which is as it should be; just as long as you use your vote!) That a review such as this devotes more space to castigating the bad stories than praising the good is an ominous sign indeed, and with the circulations of the major magazines now in steady decline (for the record, F & SF lies third behind Analog and the market leader, Isaac Asimov's) Ed Ferman really must start getting his act together if he wants his magazine to survive -- soon.

David M. Alexander -- FANE (Timescape, 311pp, $3.50)
Reviewed by Brian Smith

David Alexander makes his intentions clear in his dedication -- "To Jack Vance, the writer whose prose and imagination I most admire", thus making it do double duty as a statement of intent. The dividing line between respectful tribute and fearful parody is a very thin one, but Alexander acquits himself quite well and generally keeps to the right side.

The story is a potpourri of the ingredients of a typical Vance science fantasy. The planet Fane is an abandoned Earth colony housing two warring human peoples, the Hartfords and the Gogols, and two non-human races. Technology has long since collapsed and been replaced by magic, produced by manipulation of the natural forces pervading the planet. The Hartford wizard Greyhorn is plotting with a Gogol lord to conquer all Fane, but makes the mistake of sending his incompetent nephew Grantin to collect a powerful magic ring from a Gogol agent. Soon Grantin is off on a long and perilous journey through all the adventure he's never wanted, and finds that a disconcertingly large number of very powerful people want him dead.

If that makes the novel sound overserious, be assured that it is not. No more than in Vance's own work is an undercurrent of wry humour ever very far from the surface. Grantin's odyssey through weird and wonderful landscapes peopled by intelligent dogs and talking trees, savage bandits and mad magicians, has occasional touches of pure farce. This forms a nice contrast with Alexander's treatment of the Ajaj, a pacifistic, downtrodden people being forced to at last turn and fight for their very survival.

But the book is of course by no means perfect. The exposition of historical background in the first few chapters veers between humane swiftness and downright artlessness, and on a couple of occasions Alexander succumbs to temptation and tries to turn Grantin into a copy of Cugel the Clever, inviting direct comparisons with Vance and coming off second best.

It is by no means clear where Alexander goes from here. Having shown that he can produce colourful, very readable fantasy (if not with the same deftness of wit as his idol), I would hope to see him try his hand at something less derivative. He certainly has the ability, and it would be a waste (not to mention the height of foolishness) to churn out pastiches of a still-living author. After all, who wants to become the new Otis Adelbert Kline?

Robert Silverberg -- THE SECOND TRIP (Avon, 192pp, $2.25)
Reviewed by Chris Morgan

The situation is this: in the early years of the twenty-first century, a young but world-famous sculptor, Nat Hamlin, has gone off his head and committed numerous rapes. (You can tell he was off his head, because he was extremely rich and never lacked willing female companions.) Caught and convicted, his personality has been clinically wiped out and a new one built up; at length, he returns to normal life as Paul Macy, full of false memories and with no knowledge of his nasty but talented former self. Almost immediately, he bumps into Lissa, Nat's mistress, whose telepathic abilities unchain the remnants of Hamlin's personality, lurking inside Macy's mind. Hamlin manages to converse with Macy, and even tries to take control of the body again.

Not awfully believable so far, is it? In fact, the idea is a very slender one, which could have been done as a novelette. There are only three characters in the whole book, and very little actually happens, but Silverberg has used a lot of slickness, plenty of emotion and no small measure of (mainly gratuitous) sex and violence to pad out the text to novel length.

One could be charitable and suggest that Silverberg was exploring the way in which modern society treats genius as dangerous and tries to tone it down to comfortable mediocrity. One could point out that Lissa's uncertain telepathic abilities and her fear of both having and losing them seem like a dry run for Dying Inside (the very next book Silverberg wrote, back in 1971-72). One could make all kinds of excuses, but The Second Trip remains a

lightweight, inconsequential book -- a fast-moving thriller with little to recommend it.

Gordon R. Dickson -- MASTERS OF EVERON (Sphere, 244pp, £1.50)
Reviewed by David Penn

I once read a short story by Gordon R. Dickson entitled "Jean Dupres": its prose was almost like Conrad's, its atmosphere like that of the best imaginative fiction of discovery, as Dickson carefully described an encounter by spreading Earth colonists with an alien culture. It may not have actually had Conrad's depth, but it was certainly well-written, probably as high a quality SF tale as you could ask for without looking for high art.

Not having read any other Dickson between then and now, I expected when I picked up Masters Of Everon to read not a novel of world-shattering literary impact but something well-written, something unpretentious, balanced and interesting -- what you might reasonably expect from any work of adult adventure fiction. I thought that I might be able to lock up my imagination in the book, if not all my mental faculties. But was I allowed this seemingly easy state of escape?

No. Instead, my intelligence and even my age were insulted, and I felt silly reading the bloody thing. I was subjected to an account of the adventures of Jef and his pet, Mikey the maolot, a sort of alien lion. Jef is as innocent as the day he was born, and always acts out of good moral sense and unselfishness. His pet maolot loves its master and always whines if there's any sign of danger. (If you can imagine a combination of Nicholas Nickleby and Lassie, that's how insipid this pair are.) The rest of the universe is of course harsh and cruel, except for one or two nice people who help Jef, who's visiting the home planet of his maolot, ostensibly to carry out research on the animal in its own environment but also to find the grave of his brother, who died there. He stumbles across some people who seem to know more about his brother's death than they'll reveal, some standard shanty-town tyranny, love-interest and weird fauna, and the cowboy-cum-nature melodrama unfolds.

The yarn is filled out with a lot of padding, consisting mostly of some pointless and long dialogues between characters and some fantastically long-winded passages about absolutely nothing at all, but also huge wads of waffle which appear to pose as character analysis. Dickson projects the most general human emotions and common ontological anxieties onto Jef, interperses Jef's own vapid moral reflections, and hopes it will pass as close attention to deep character and motives; but it is nothing of the sort, simply a vain exapnse of words.

At least the writing itself is literate, but this is small mercy when one considers the sheer inanity of the novel. If it had been marketed as for twelve-year-olds perhaps its only fault would have been its derivativeness, except that children should never be exposed to such a poor vision of the world; but in fact it appears to have been aimed at an adult audience.

Philip K. Dick -- VALIS (Corgi, 227pp, £1.25)
Reviewed by Brendon Gore

Valis is not an easy book to read, which is like saying Eeverest is not an easy hill to climb. But....

Set in San Francisco, the hippy mecca of the sixties, the book concerns one Horselover Fat and his theories about God, reality and perception. He believes, among other things, that God is deranged, that the universe is composed of information and that real time ceased in 70 AD and started again in 1974 AD. He also believes that these theories resulted from a beam of light fired at him from a satellite controlled by three-eyed aliens, or possibly the Russians.

The book is littered with esoteric references to all manner of philosophies and religions. Aristotelian logic and Zen paradoxes rub shoulders with Heracltius and the New Testament. Even Horselover's theories are collected in a journal -- Tractates Cryptica Scriptura -- which bears more than a passing resemblance to Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, in

style if not in content.

However, for all its wealth of information and ideas, the book has one important failing -- it does not make sense. Such sentences as "a perturbation in the reality field in which a spontaneous self-monitoring negentropic vortex is formed, tending progressively to subsume and incorporate its environment into arrangements of information" are simply meaningless. This incomprehensibility is not altogether surprising since the narrator, Horselover Fat, is insane. In reality, Horselover Fat is a schizoid personality that is actually part of Philip K. Dick, author.

The key to the book can be found outside it, in the "Dr Fox Phenomenon". Dr Fox was an actor who delivered three lectures on "Mathematical game theory as applied to physical education" in California in the early seventies. The teachers, social workers, psychologists and administrators who attended the lectures all said they were comprehensible and stimulating; nobody realised that it was in fact a fraud and that "Dr Fox" was talking nonsense. Dr Scott Armstrong, of the University of Pennsylvania, who has been studying the "Dr Fox Phenomenon", concluded that (a) nonsense will not necessarily be recognised as such by scholars, and (b) the greater the difficulty in understanding a piece of writing, the greater the respect it will command from its readers.

I have a sneaking suspicion that Valis is a spoof. All the big words and obscure references are designed to confuse the reader, not to help him. Like the Emperor's new clothes, there is nothing underneath. As Horselover Fat said, "Parsifal is one of those corkscrew artifacts of culture in which you get the subjective sense that you've learned something from it, something valuable or even priceless; but on closer inspection you suddenly begin to scratch your head and say, 'Wait a minute. This makes no sense.' I can see Rcihard Wagner standing at the gates of Heaven. 'You have to let me in,' he says. 'I wrote Parsifal. It has to do with the Grail, Christ, suffering, pity and healing. Right?' And they answered, 'Well, we read it and it makes no sense.' SLAM."

Well, I read Valis and it makes no sense. It will probably wind up being awarded a Hugo.

Ursula K. Le Guin -- THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS (Futura, 256pp, £1.60)
Reviewed by Mary Gentle

A critic doesn't often come across a geuine classic, and those of you who've read The Left Hand Of Darkness don't need me to tell you that that's what it is. But, assuming you're new to SF, or have spent the past twelve years down a coalmine, let me urge you to acquire this new paperback edition now.

"'I'll make my report as if I told a story'" begins the reflective, somwhat formal narrative of Genly Ai, first Envoy to Gethen, "'for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination.'" That sense of paradox and balance runs all through the book. It's not an easy novel to get into, however; to begin with, Genly Ai is inevitably ignorant of Gethenian politics, and his ignorance of what's actually happening carries over to the reader. Also, despite it being the Envoy's mission to bring Gethen into the Ekumene, the real shaper of events is the Gethenian Therem Harth rem ir Estraven. Genly Ai goes first to feudal Karhide, where they think him mad; then to bureaucratic Orgoreyn where they think him a liar and agent provocateur; he is sent to a prison farm, escapes with Estraven over the Gobrin Ice, and so returns at last to the final accounting in Karhide. The plot is deceptively simple, but tends (as in the real world) to be explained only with hindsight.

It will be apparent to those who have read Austin Tappan Wright's novel or Le Guin's writings on it that The Left Hand Of Darkness is in direct line of descent from his Islandia. In "Science Fiction And Mrs Brown", she says of Wright that he "created a non-existent continent, geology and weather and rivers and cities and houses and weaving-looms and fireplaces and politicians and farmers and housewives and manners and misunderstandings and love-affairs and all, for human beings to inhabit." The similarities between it and Le Guin's novel are many. In each case, a young man becomes diplomatic envoy to a strange new society, travels through it, becomes politically and

personally involved, and is an integral part of the change that's overtaking the society. Islandia must deal with the technological progress outside its agrarian borders; Gethen with the association of other, more mechanised worlds in the Ekumene. Convincing as the Winter society is, and for all the humanity of its characters, The Left Hand Of Darkness could well have been nothing more than Islandia-in-space.

The difference, of course, is the difference, the one that sets it apart from other novels of any genre: the Gethenians are androgynes. Neuter except for the few days of the month when they are in kemmer, when they may be male or female; their compelling needs and desires form the shape of their society. Because it was written in the late sixties, it will inevitably be regarded as part of the feminist entrance into the SF field, but Le Guin has described it as a thought-experiment. A Gethenian may be mother to one child and father to another, and therefore their society must treat them all equally -- take away the dualist male/female conditioning, and what differences, if any, are left?

This is all well and good, but the experiment is crippled at the outset by the restrictions of the English language. There is no animate equivalent of "it"; the only neutral generic pronoun is "he", but by that usage the Gethenians become men rather than menwomen. Only in the short story "Winter's King" is the pronoun "she" used with respect to them, and even there such usages as "king" and "prince" bring about mental jolts in every paragraph. In The Left Hand Of Darkness, the absence of anything other than male characters means that they come across not as male but as human; it's only the occasional appearance of such as Eowyn that bring about the realisation that they are now women here. The possible relationship between Earthman and Gethenian, as with Genly and Estraven, thus becomes something less than the ambiguous relationship between man and androgyne, resembling instead simple homosexuality. The Gethenians, too, are seen mostly in active "male" roles; there is no hint of the complications that would ensue if Estraven had become pregnant.

But here we have a unique novel, true SF in its biological speculation, but concerned (as SF all too rarely is) with the humanity of its protagonists. It's one that you'll enjoy re-reading.

Robert Silverberg -- LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE (Bantam, 447pp, $2.95, and Pan, 506pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Majipoor is a giant planet thronging with many species. It was colonised by Earthmen and others 10,000 years before this book opens, despite an already sophisticated indingenous population, the Shapeshifters. Over the intervening centuries, most of the star-hopping technology seems to have been lost, and Majipoor's billions of inhabitants have become the peaceful denizens of mega-cities benignly ruled by divinely appointed feudal lords. This happy situation is radically altered -- so we are told -- when the supreme feudal lord, Coronal Valentine, is evicted from his body and an imposter put in his place. For no good reason we are ever told, Valentine is exiled into another man's body; after discovering and immense innate talent (the sort that only the truly noble would have) he takes up with a band of wandering jugglers.

Up to this point, the book is almost interesting; the remainder is devoted to Valentine's quest to regain his rightful throne. In some hands, this could have been an exciting, all-action adventure story; Silverberg turns it into a boring travelogue. Valentine has a dream. Valwntine gets swallowed by a whale (sorry, sea dragon). Valentine has a dream. Valentine gets laid. Valentine has another dream. Valentine gets put back onto the throne. All these episodes are recounted with a monotonous tedium enlivened only by fleeting references to the wonders of Majipoor, residual technological as well as gargantuan natural. But Silverberg no more than whets the appetite with them.

Lord Valentine's Castle is a strain from page one. Valentine is a first-order wimp; his solution to every problem is to enter a dreamstate and overwhelm his opponents with the pure force of his kingly soul. For God's

sake! This is the twentieth century -- not even Barbara Cartland believes in the divine right of kings any more. There is not a shred of realistic characterisation in the whole book. Conflict, drama, and a realistic resolution too are all absent, but because it is Silverberg coming out of retirement it will sell and be acclaimed. In truth, it is boring, derivative, lifeless dross, the sort of junk that gives hackery a bad name. Every so often he hints that it's all a piss-take, then drowns everything in another gout of drooling royalist saccharine. Two sounds repeat themselves while reading -- those of the wool being pulled over the reader's eyes and of the author laughing all the way to the bank. Words are inadequate to express the numbing mediocrity of a book that goes on and on and on long after I gave up praying for it to end.

Gordon McBain -- THE PATH OF EXOTERRA (Avon, 175pp, $1.95)
Reviewed by Chris Bailey

This is Gordon McBain's first novel. First novels can be awkward for a critic, as it is easy to slip into a patronising tone, using such phrases as "shows promise for the future", or reacting with ill-concealed astonishment should the book turn out to be any good. The only honest course is to take the book itself strictly on its merits; and this one is unconscionably awful.

The naming of names can give an early clue as to the quality of a writer's imagination and control of language. Here, alas, we have Orion (handsome young prince), Stellara (lady starship pilot), Aquagran (a big sea), and so on. The writing in general is flat, metronomic and totally unenlivened by any unusual turn of phrase; hair is raven, eyes flash, the lips of the villain curl cruelly, the hero at one point awakens from a "drug-like slumber". Indeed, the prose occasionally resembles prattling nonsense: "'I was hoping you weren't counting on me piloting this shuttle,' Marseahna remarked with a painful grin, despite her sever pain."

The plot, a sort of debased Star Wars, concerns the struggles of the noble heroes of the Confederation and the crazed hordes of the megalomaniac L'Juntara to gain control of the Exoterra Stone -- "the crystals, when activated, could yield seemingly infinite power". The suthor's handling of the physical sciences is as fanciful as his story is witless; eventually, of course, the Confederation prevails and the peasant girl gets her telepathic prince.

I wouldn't trust Gordon McBain to fill in the speech-bubbles in a comic-book, and was therefore grieved to come across a strong hint on the last page to the effect that we can expect to see more of Prince Orion. Still, he seems a useful sort of bloke to have along at parties: "He gestured at the bottle with barely a flick of his hand. There was a popping sound and the cork floated free."

A. Bertram Chandler -- THE RIM OF SPACE and WHEN THE DREAM DIES (Sphere, 127pp and 123pp, £1.25 each)
Reviewed by Ian Williams

These are the first two books in Chandler's "Rimworld" series, which Sphere obviously intends to publish in its entirety. I've two objections to it: in the first place, the books are very short (most of them originally appeared as halves of Ace Doubles) and simply aren't value for money on any level -- it might have been better had Sphere printed them both in one volume at, say, £1.50. My second objection is that I think Sphere are ten years too late: I don't believe there's a market for this sort of Hornblower-inspired SF any longer, and if more than half a dozen of these books see print I'll be very surprised.

Fred Saberhagen -- OCTAGON (Ace, 272pp, $2.75)
Reviewed by Ray Owen

Octagon concerns a wargame called "Starweb" which (coincidentally) mentions Saberhagen in its adverts. On the first page, the author tells us that Starweb is a "real game" and, furthermore, what a jolly realistic novel this is. At the end, we are told when and where it was written and (in case we

had forgotten) who wrote it. In the course of the book, both Saberhagen and his "Beserker" stories are referred to. All this may be Saberhagen's idea of added realism; it happens to be my idea of an author on an ego-trip.

Leaving these minor irritations aside, what sort of novel is Octagon? In short, it seems to be an adventure story owing more to the traditions of James Bond than those of SF. The plot concerns one particular version of Starweb (an SF version of Diplomacy played postally with a computer as referee) whose players begin to die, supposedly mysteriously; but it isn't difficult to work out that the computer running the game may have something to do with these deaths. Each attack forms a neat sub-climax, giving the story much of the feel of an American TV movie -- indeed, it would probably work as such, for beneath a certain amount of jargon the plot is relatively simple. The novel includes all the usual TV things: cars, hotels, midnight swims, private jets, and an exciting ending where the good guys win with only seconds to spare.

Octagon doesn't set out to be anything more than a fast-moving adventure, and succeeds to a reasonable extent because of this. One section of the book (Chapter 19), giving the computer's view of the whole thing, is excellently thought-out and well-written; in other places, unfortunately, the book is shoddily written. Saberhagen can be very clumsy in expression: "she looked out to see Albie Pearson standing there garbed in rough work clothes. It was still quite early in the morning, and Caroline was in her newest and most favourite wheelchair." He seems to have a Heinleinian attitude to sex, a prime example being "What he really wanted was to grab that young waitress by one of her large, well-rounded parts the next time she passed by. That would be a no-no."

There are two major flaws in the plot. Firstly, we have to accept that two NASA scientists will unquestioningly drive a fully fuelled experimental rocket to a gaming convention on the orders of a computer; secondly and more importantly, the whole thing relies upon a coincidence that is completely past any intelligent belief. It is so bad that, if it didn't occur so near the end of the book, it would qualify as a classic shit-point (being the moment at which the reader says "Ah, shit" and throws it aside).

Not the greatest of novels, then. But I at least managed to finish it, which is more than I can say about some recent works by Very Famous Authors.

Adam Corby -- THE FORMER KING (Timescape, 244pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Jim England

Fantasy is not my usual cup of tea, and this is heroic fantasy, described as "Canto One of The Doom Quest of Ara-Karn", the mock-mediaeval style of which -- along with a few grammatical errors that included "it need not be....does it?", "neither....or", and "him who was" -- tended to remind me, at times, of TV's Ernie Wise and his notoriously bad plays. But, after a while, I fell under its spell, and found it to be a tale written with great verve and considerable skill on the compulsively interesting (and therefore easy) theme of gruesome violence. I liked the occasional, poetic descriptions of scenery when the eponymous hero and his band of followers were on their way from one scene of violence to another; if you like to read accounts of human and animal scarifices, castration, decapitation, poeple drinking mixtures of blood and beer, you'll probably like the whole thing. In a surprising climax, the "hero", who persuades his followers of the superiority of the bow and arrow over swords and spears, turns out to be not a hero at all but a worse villain than Idi Amin. How will he develop in future episodes of the saga, I wonder?

Thus the dangers of prediction: the reviews by Nick Lowe and Andy Sawyer promised you in the colophon have been squeezed out by pressure of space -- and I see from the rideout of the previous issue that I've forgotten to run the review by Ann Collier that I then promised. All three will appear next time....until then, belated congratulations to Mary Gentle for being accepted for a BA in Humanities at the Dorset Institute, winning over the selection panel with copies of reviews she'd had published in (believe it or not) Vector and Inferno! Who says the BSFA doesn't have a positive role to play?