

PAPERBACK INFERNO



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Charles Sheffield -- THE WEB BETWEEN THE WORLDS (Arrow, 274pp, £1.60)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

This book possesses a modest notoriety in the fact of its strong resemblance to Arthur C. Clarke's The Fountains Of Paradise, having first appeared some six months after that book. In both volumes, the builder of the world's longest bridge undertakes the construction of a space elevator, using a machine called a Spider which spins silicon fibre. Both also carry an afterword from Clarke in which he is at pains to point out that the credit for the space elevator idea belongs to a Soviet engineer called Yuri Artsutanov and that, subsequently, it has been independently reinvented on at least three occasions. Presumably we are meant to imagine the idea floating unharnessed in the ether, as it were, ready to pounce at any time upon some unsuspecting individual who thereupon feels compelled to novelise it: thus is the unwitting reader's cry of "crib" neatly riposted. Clarke then bids us a cheery adieu: "As for the rest of you -- go right ahead. Charles Sheffield and I have just scratched the surface". I would suggest that between them they have done the space elevator to death but, should you be tempted, then beware the appearance in your book of haughty afterwords by eminent authors.

Of more interest than all this -- although it has to be admitted that Clarke's late flowering as a writer of apologies does exercise a certain fascination -- is the question of why one writer, let alone two, should have decided that the concept of a meccano Jacob's Ladder was a suitable frame upon which to hang a novel in the first place. One might have hoped that such books as Ringworld and Rendezvous With Rama would

have put the lie to the idea that immensity of technological vision is analogous to immensity of artistic achievement, but the sense-of-wonder boys, with one eye on the sales returns, are not to be deterred that easily. It is to the credit of Clarke and Sheffield, though, that they are both aware of the problem: they choose to tackle their unpromising subject-matter in different ways. The Fountains Of Paradise had an interesting formal structure, and Clarke put in much honest endeavour with his central character, but unfortunately could not prevent the end product from being somewhat stodgy. Charles Sheffield's solution, as in his first novel, Sight Of Proteus (he thinks up quite nice titles), is to bury his intractable idea beneath the avalanche of an unlikely thriller plot.

The novel opens with a dramatic flashback describing the death of hero-engineer Rob Merlin's parents in suspicious circumstances, and the rest of the book is given to solving this mystery. Merlin is employed by the reclusive billionaire Darius Regulo in order to build the space elevator; Regulo also employs Morel, who disposed of Merlin's parents all those years ago because of their knowledge of his sinister research projects which, with Regulo's connivance, he still pursues. Sheffield handles the development and resolution of this situation with some skill, but squanders this advantage by irritating the reader in a variety of ways. The only attribute of character bestowed upon both Merlin and Regulo is their obsession with engineering problems, and other characters are depicted throwing up their hands in despair as the pair feverishly launch into yet another scientific discussion, grounds where the author obviously treads confidently. Appalling technical posers are instantly solved in these chats across Regulo's pink-topped desk, which is covered in such snappy slogans as THINK BIG and ROCKETS ARE WRONG, two which the author would seem to think particularly witty considering the frequency with which he draws our attention to them. Besides interrupting the development of the book's chief asset, its quick-fire plot, all these chucking-asteroids-around lectures leave one feeling sated with immensities, to the extent that the actual climactic anchoring of the hundred thousand kilometre "beanstalk" to the Earth's surface comes over as small beer.

Sheffield shows that particular sort of narrow-mindedness, censured often enough in these pages, characteristic of the Analog school of writing. One comes from his book with the impression that there is nothing of moment happening on and around Earth other than the undertaking of megalomaniacal construction projects. He shares Larry Niven's love of high technology without that writer's willingness to explore the social consequences of new inventions. Society's attitude, to such a writer, is represented by the bleatings of a short-sighted imbecile like Senator Proxmire, without any room being allowed for such an opponent's arguments; here, dismissive asides are reserved for the agencies which control the movement of space traffic around Earth. Of course billionaires should be allowed to clutter up a hundred thousand kilometres of heavily-used space with their personal projects; that's progress, and its march is not to be impeded. Of course they should be allowed to land their "beanstalks" on Earth, endangering the lives of millions should anything go wrong, not that it ever does; the profits for the few outweigh the risks to the masses. Of course the space elevator is a good thing; it's so obvious that we're never told why.

The Web Between The Worlds represents an advance over Sight Of Proteus -- the prose is easier and some of the peripheral characters show inklings of variety -- but the author is still heading up the same blind alley. As I said above, it's nearly an enjoyable thriller, but the author's implicit arrogance sours it.

Michael Moorcock -- THE STEEL TSAR (Granada, 155pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

The first two novels in the "Oswald Bastable" trilogy, which was probably never planned as such, were written back in the early seventies; this

third volume seems intended to fill one of the gaps in Moorcock's vast "Eternal Champion" cycle, explaining how Bastable came at last to join Una Persson in the Guild of Temporal Adventurers (and thus also explain his presence as a minor character in several of Moorcock's other novels). It's set in another airship-dominated parallel world, in which Japan is at war with a Russia where Lenin never ousted the Kerensky government and which faces internal insurrection led by the eponymous Steel Tsar, an Ukrainian priest who in our world later took the name of Joseph Stalin, and I can't help but feel that much of this must have been inspired by the research the author did for Byzantium Endures -- certainly, it's full of the sort of insights into the Russian character that would have stemmed therefrom, and part of this seems to be an attempt to explain why Stalin had the charisma he did. Even so, it's all subordinated to the story of Bastable's adventures in the Great War of 1941, and said adventures are not particularly rousing; we're told over and over again how much Bastable loathes death and suffering and how total the war is, but we never really sense any of this -- the issues are never explored in any depth, and the novel fails to rise above the merely routine.

Robin McKinley -- BEAUTY (Pocket, 247pp, \$1.95)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

There are both advantages and pitfalls awaiting the author who chooses to retell an old, universally known story -- advantages, in that since the readership have known the plot from childhood, the author is free to focus his attention completely on the style; pitfalls, in that simply because the story is so very well known, any liberties which the author dares to take with it may completely jeopardise the success of the book. Fortunately, Robin McKinley is more than capable of exploiting the former to good effect and of avoiding the latter entirely.

As the title suggests, the story is that of Beauty and the Beast. In true once-upon-a-time tradition, the time and place of the setting are unspecified (although I would hazard a guess at 17th century Italy). The only major change to the basic story is that, here, Beauty is merely the heroine's nickname, she being in fact quite plain compared to her two beautiful sisters (possibly a little invented cross-pollination with the Cinderella story here?). In this way, the situations of Beauty and the Beast become essentially similar in nature, if not in degree, and the basic moral of "do not judge others by appearances" is amplified.

McKinley tells his tale with a good deal of strong visual imagery, often recalling Jean Cocteau's 1945 film, and good-natured humour, particularly in such touches as the Beast's marvellously anachronistic library. Fleshing out the story are a host of supporting players, all amazingly real. I find myself slightly awestruck by McKinley's ability with characterisation; he has the gift of making you believe that the characters were going about their business before you turned the page, until you find yourself wondering what they had for breakfast yesterday. They underpin the story from beginning to end, and without the slightest trace of sentimentality constitute a superb party political broadcast for such unfashionable qualities as compassion, love and honour.

And that is really what this book is all about. To look beneath the surface archetypes is to receive a guided tour through the finer nuances of the concept of "humanity". I might even go so far as to recommend this novel as therapeutic reading in our cynical times -- after all, this is the stuff of which magic is made.

Octavia E. Butler -- WILD SEED (Timescape, 256pp, \$2.75)

Reviewed by Roy Macinski

Doro is an ageless genetic mutant who for four thousand years has been collecting genetic outcasts to breed and interbreed them in order to bring their special abilities, such as telekinesis and telepathy, to their utmost peaks. Encountering the beautiful young black woman Anyanwu and discovering her ability to transform herself into any other living

creature, he tries to interbreed her with his menagerie but soon learns that for the first time he has met someone whom he can neither control nor kill -- her powers may be different to his in their scope and versatility, but they make her his match. And there is also a more fundamental difference between them: Doro is a destroyer, ruthlessly disposing of people once they have served his purpose, but Anyanwu is a healer, caring for those around her.

The stage is thus set for a grand conflict which spans the years from 1690 to 1840, and although Butler has an obvious feel for the period the book is badly flawed by its style, which is far too plain and matter-of-fact. I was continually aware that I was never anything more than an observer of the story's events: I never felt myself being drawn into them or becoming in some way involved with the characters, and because of this I found Wild Seed a very cold and unsatisfactory experience.

Brian Aldiss -- AN ISLAND CALLED MOREAU (Timescape, 158pp, \$2.25)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Originally published in Britain in late 1980 as Moreau's Other Island (a title which may be slightly more euphonious but which is also slightly inaccurate), this novel was in fact written back in the early seventies but consigned to a bottom drawer because, apparently, Aldiss felt that he had not been truthful to the spirit of H. G. Wells. I have to say that, although it's quite some time since I read Wells's original, I tend to agree.

Set on a remote Pacific island on the eve of an all-consuming world war in 1996, the novel details the discovery, by shipwrecked American Undersecretary of State Calvin Roberts, of the continuation (by scientifically more sophisticated means) of Dr Moreau's experiments on animals by the paranoid thalidomide victim Mortimer Dart. In the light of our present-day genetic engineering abilities, this could have been very stimulating and thought-provoking, but the philosophical problems such research raises are unfortunately addressed more in passing than directly, the plot concentrating mainly on Roberts's attempts to stop Dart's experiments and get back to civilisation. And even then there is little sense of any great ideological gulf between the two: we are told rather than shown that Roberts believes in a form of God and that Dart desires revenge on the society he holds responsible for his malformation; and those occasions on which they do attempt to probe each other's motives and thoughts seem unnecessarily brief and hence unsatisfying. It is in truth more of an adventure story than anything else, with much slambang midnight action and pell-mell chasing back and forth across the island; an extremely competent and well-written one, of course, but given the usual high quality of Aldiss's work nevertheless something of a disappointment.

Wilson Tucker -- RESURRECTION DAYS (Timescape, 191pp, \$2.25)

Reviewed by Ian Williams

Balloons come in all shapes and sizes. They can be shiny silver-coloured hearts, animals (cuddly or ugly), blobby people, or even faces; the variety is potentiall endless. Yet they all have one thing in common: a thin skin surrounding a lot of air.

With Wilson Tucker, expectations are high -- the horrors of The Long Loud Silence, the taut historical drama of The Lincoln Hunters, and the brilliant, bitter The Year Of The Quiet Sun -- but does the blurb of Resurrection Days entice the reader? "Owen Hall, killed in 1943, resurrected thousands of years later in a world dominated by women. The men are all automatons.... In just twenty-four hours, Owen wreaks havoc on this disciplined female civilisation.... Suddenly Owen must use all his cunning and guile against a horde of determined female warriors if he is to stay alive...." None of which sounds particularly interesting, and turns out to be fairly accurate.

The scale of the book, however, is considerably smaller than that implied: the actual location is one small town surrounded by a wilder-

ness. The women, using technology they don't understand, go around resurrecting males from remains in a cemetery. Owen Hall is brought back with his full faculties due to a mistake. And not once does Tucker give a credible explanation for all this -- indeed, there's not much he does explain. Like, for a start, how the society evolved, or how the hero has his own mind and memories....he just lets the chauvinist Kentuckian -- no, sorry, I'm confusing the hero with Tucker himself -- the chauvinist, wisecracking Indianan loose in this town full of thick, literal-minded women and merrily chronicles the chaos he causes before he walks off into the sunset with the woman with whom he has fallen in love.

This is a very lightweight book: not a satire, just slapstick fun without a trace of substance, just like a balloon. In fact, this novel wasn't written by Wilson Tucker, but by his alter ego, Bob Tucker, fandom's answer to George Burns. Come to think of it, I was right the first time: the book's hero is Bob Tucker.

Jack Williamson -- THE REIGN OF WIZARDRY (Sphere, 174pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Keith Plunkett

The ancient Greek legend of Theseus had him cast into the Labyrinth and having to kill the Minotaur in order to escape; in recreating it, however, Jack Williamson concentrates on Theseus's part in the fall of the Minoan Empire in ancient Crete, an empire ruled by a cruel religion and, he suggests, wizardry. In his foreword, he admits to his fascination with the mystery surrounding the cataclysmic destruction of the real Minoan Empire while in its prime, and thus feels justified in writing the story he has, in which speculation is given a free reign. The result, unfortunately, reads just like a novelisation of the screenplay of a 1940s Sinbad movie: lightweight and forgettable.

David McDaniel -- WHO IS NUMBER TWO? (New English Library, 141pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Jim Barker

Back in the sixties, more years ago than I care to remember, I was a fan of the TV series The Man From UNCLE -- I avidly watched all the shows and films, collected all the bubblegum cards and magazines, and read all the novelisations. Fifteen years ago, a novelisation meant an original story based on and using characters from a TV show, not the tawdry translation of a screenplay into prose as is practiced today. For the most part, the UNCLE novels were competent pieces of hackwork, but I quickly realised that one of the authors, David McDaniel, was just a bit different. His stories were marvellously inventive, dryly witty and crammed full of the little touches that delight those of us who enjoy literary games (I particularly recommend The Dagger Affair and The Rainbow Affair to anyone who likes detective fiction in-jokes). It was this which convinced me that McDaniel was really Philip Jose Farmer; in fact, his real name was Ted Johnstone, and as well as six UNCLE books he wrote one straight SF novel, The Arsenal Out Of Time, and this novelisation of Patrick McGoochan's Prisoner series.

Though NEL have published it as the third in the series, it was originally published in America as the second book, a sequel to Thomas M. Disch's original novel, to which there are several references. The plot is the standard formula for the TV series -- the Prisoner, having escaped from the Village, wakes to find himself back there; he meets the new Number Two, establishes the ground rules, and with a "here we go again" attitude immediately ~~starts~~ starts planning his next escape attempt.

Inevitably, the book will be compared to Disch's, and for me it doesn't come off at all badly. Disch's is undoubtedly the superior literary effort, but McDaniel tells a good story in a style almost totally consistent with the TV series. As usual, though, he tried to give you just a bit more for your money. There are literary snippets strewn throughout the book (one of which, "Now that I'm Six I'm clever as clever -- so I think I'll stay Six for ever and ever", has been running through my head ever since I finished reading it), and there's a stab at a logical explanation for the existence of the Village and the workings of the

Guardians.

It is, of course, no masterpiece, but McDaniel has been a favourite author of mine for several years and I wanted to bring him to your attention. Besides, the Alan Dead Fosters and the Brian Daleys of today could learn a lot from him.

Brian Aldiss -- THE DARK LIGHT YEARS (Granada, 159pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by John Duffy

Brian Aldiss always used to disturb me, so it was with slight reservations that I picked up this book. It is of course a reprint, and in earlier years I'd given it no more than a passing glance -- and, having said that, I now realise what a bad deal I've been giving myself in prejudging this wonderful little book.

It's an ingeniously written story, fresh and satirically funny; even after 17 years, the fun hasn't gone out of it (although some of the hard facts have become inconsistent with what is now history). With, as the cover quote from The Sunday Times puts it, "Swiftian humour", Aldiss tells us of man's encounters with an alien race, the Utods. The Utods are a gentle and sophisticated people, with a society very different from our own -- they are so deeply integrated with the ecology of their world that their excreta is highly revered. So is death -- or "carrion stage", to use the Utod term -- since both are viewed as the next ecological step in the utodampy cycle, the "ammop" being a kind of evergreen tree that thrives in the rich soil of the Utod home planet. And, in comparing this society with our own, it's not surprising that the Utods come out on top.

There's nothing hard or unpalatable about The Dark Light Years, and the strongly believable dystopias of his other works appear here only as fringe colouring; next to the tough building blocks of those works, like Greybeard, it seems like a nicecuddly toy. So if you didn't catch it when it first came out or were, like me, in hiding, go out and get it now: you'll thank yourself for it.

Somtow Sucharitkul -- STARSHIP AND HAIKU (Timescape, 207pp, \$2.50)

Reviewed by Jim England

A haiku, the author tells us, is a Japanese poem with seventeen syllables. For example:

"When a thing is spoken
the lips become cold
like the autumn wind". (sic)

What does this have to do with the novel? Well....

After the worldwide Millennial War, most of the formerly inhabited regions of the twenty-first century are now covered with fused glass. Japan, for some reason, has escaped the destruction and is now home for millions of refugees, who survive by drinking such as "protein mush...made from recycled strange corpses". Paper money has lost much of its former value, and people think nothing of leaving a tip of several million yen after a cup of "synthetic coffee" in restaurants. The moon has been shattered into fragments. Add the fact that an "abandoned prototype starship of the Russians", intended to take its passengers on a four thousand year journey, has been in orbit since the 1980s, that some children of the War now have various telepathic, telekinetic and other mental abilities, and that the whales in the oceans have begun to communicate with these mutants and you might imagine that you have all the ingredients for an exciting, if implausible, melodrama. But what you have, in fact, is a weird combination of Japanese poetry and the sort of the pulp SF churned out in vast quantities back in the fifties, complete with characters running around like overwound clockwork toys experiencing, in respect of their ESP abilities, "searing ecstasy" and "words that for humans can only be suggested as clumsy pictographs" (which Sucharitkul then proceeds to give us, meaninglessly, in several places).

The dialogue is often terribly stilted -- for example: "You are polluting the purity of the Ending, destroying honour! Have you no Japanese-

ness in you at all?" And, although the novel is crammed with metaphors and symbols and the author has a painter's eye for scenery, its credibility is reduced rather than enhanced: the overall effect is like watching a Japanese Noh play. In fact, there are several references to Noh plays throughout the book, along with frequent references to manikins, tea-bowls, samurai warriors, the pink petals of cherry blossom, the inscrutability of the Japanese mind, the aestheticism of suicide and self-immolation. It is depressing, with a note of repressed hysteria present in it almost from start to finish.

Jerry Pournelle -- JANISSARIES (Futura, 255pp, \$1.65)
Reviewed by Ann Collier

Had I given in to the temptation to throw this book at the wall, I fear it would have picked itself up and sidled out of the room, for it is so much at pains to avoid certain genre conventions of plot and characters that it is constantly side-stepping itself. It tells the story of a group of CIA mercenaries saved, by the timely arrival of an alien spaceship, from imminent death on a besieged African hilltop. Their future, however, is to be spent on the planet Tran, controlling the human population of a mediaeval society and ensuring that they gather a good crop of the drug-producing plant favoured by the aliens. Recovering from the initial shock of this frying pan/fire deal, the mercenaries dream of achieving power and affluence on Tran, won for them by their high-technology fire-power. An imperialist adventure yarn thus threatens to bore us all to tears, but this is not what Pournelle delivers, because on arrival on Tran the mercenaries demote and banish their college-boy Captain Galloway, who is thereby freed to make contact with the native population. Galloway uses his knowledge of military tactics to help the hill tribesmen stave off the immediate threat of invasion, but he settles for limited power and uses a benign authority to interest the tribesmen in the development of scientific and medical knowledge. Although Pournelle takes great interest in the battle scenes, this is not, then, a story which prides itself on the wiping out of primitive masses; similarly, its treatment of the two female characters tries hard to avoid simplistic stereotypes. Gwen is a brainy student who had thought herself unable to fall in love and who intimidates her male friends with her many accomplishments; then she meets Les and future bliss seems assured until he reveals himself to be an extraterrestrial human who is to pilot the mercenaries to Tran. Their oversentimentally-treated relationship turns sour when (guess what?) she becomes pregnant, and she then mopes around on Tran for much of the book, failing to resist the slippery slope to pregnancy-aggravated feminine moodiness and temperamental displays. The other female character, Tylara, treads a similar stereotype-shunning line -- of the raven-haired native princess type, widowed when scarcely a bride and a brave, resourceful, natural leader, Pournelle cannot leave it at that, and has to add that despite her proven experience in dealing with the warrior men who form her council, she seems "small and vulnerable, in need of protection". She can cope with the local heavies, but not with a creator who is clearer about what to avoid than what to aim for.

Such ideas as the book has rattle around in its empty head and exist as a rationale for the convoluted plot rather than of interest in their own right. The style is a boiled-down, bare-boned description of action with occasional forays into emotional matters tending to a highly romanticised treatment in which the reader's sympathy is expected to be the automatic response to the situation described. Lapses into metaphor and simile are so rare as to be threatened with extinction, and naturalistic dialogue is hard to find.

Pournelle throws elements into this book and then leaves their potential unexploited. The aliens are described in some detail but then fade out of the plot completely. There is the occasional fleeting reference to Imperial India or Vietnam but Pournelle, and thus the reader, can take or leave these political allusions; in contrast, Pournelle loses himself in quite confusing details about allegiances on Tran which are all the more

confusing because they come very shortly after one of the rapid scene changes which constitute all this book has by way of structure.

Should you be looking for a few tactical ideas for battles involving your varied collection of toy soldiers, then the chess-like descriptions of warfare in Janissaries may just be of some interest to you. If, however, you have progressed beyond the level of civilisation achieved by the primitive tribesmen of Tran, then I should not waste your time reading this rubbish.

Guy Gregory -- HEROES OF ZARA KEEP (Bantam, 197pp, \$2.50)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

Dungeons & Dragons is a fun game, right? Sort of like being in a book, one just like Heroes Of Sara Keep. Five characters endowed with rather neat powers find themselves dumped in a strange wilderness land where a mysterious wizard sets them up to (as the cover blurb states) "steal a mystic crystal from an impregnable castle ruled by a dark mage and his deadly dragon". Sound familiar? Dreadfully so. And that's about all there is to this story -- like most D & D adventures, it consists of a handful of plundered ideas or, rather, pretty details of fantasy trapping, used to dress up a standard all-purpose adventure story-line. Gregory, like so many other hack fantasy writers, should be paying substantial royalties to Tolkien and Donaldson; mostly to Donaldson, who in the Covenant chronicles combined the Tolkienian sub-creation-plunged-into-epic-struggle scenario with the hoary old device of plucking a modern man from our world and dumping him in the middle of that great struggle. By focusing on the exaggerated, soullessly modern Covenant, Donaldson produced a grim comment on the contemporary psyche and the functions of escapist fantasy of the now-traditional Tolkienian variety. For Gregory to have managed so close a copy of so grim a work -- mysterious old man in rags snatching up five modern American protagonists "from the jaws of death", the rather unsystematic sort of nature-magic they are separately taught -- while at the same time managing to skate glibly over any possible snag of thought-provoking depth is perhaps to be regarded as some sort of achievement. The one original element in the book may be the notion that each of the adventurers has a phobia connected to the form of death with which he or she was threatened; but since Gregory twice subjects his characters (cardboard cutouts, of course) to situations where, for instance, Lyca should have been gibbering with fear of fire or Jason with fear of heights without either showing any sign of trauma, he gets no marks for that, since such an idea works only if consistently held to. The only aspect of this book which merits even mild praise is a certain facility of style, which suggests that should Gregory think of something worth saying it might be worth printing; here, however, it does no more than make the book easily readable rubbish, and as such a sheer waste of paper, time and money.

Fritz Leiber -- SHIP OF SHADOWS (Granada, 256pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

First published by Gollancz in 1979 to commemorate Leiber's being joint Guest-of-Honour at Seacon, this volume collects together all (bar the novel The Wanderer) his Hugo-winning fiction (which "theme" is strangely not mentioned anywhere in or on the book), and having read it I'm left wondering why these particular stories should have been selected over any or all of his others, for none are especially outstanding and are in some respects wholly lacking in imagination. "Gonna Roll The Bones", for example, replays the old tale of the ordinary man battling the Devil for possession of his soul albeit via a game of craps than one of chess; but even so, so what? Then there's "Ship Of Shadows", a variation on the generation-ship theme of Heinlein's "Universe"; written in 1969, it was obviously striving for topicality by suggesting that the ship had been sent out to preserve the best of a pollution-ruined Earth, which might or might not have been the point of the story -- most of which concerns the

rather mawkish rehabilitation of a half-blind, amnesiac old drunk -- but the revelation of such information in its concluding paragraphs renders it all terribly passe. "Delsen Express", juxtaposing the horrors of Nazi genocide with the snug ignorance by ordinary citizens of present-day horrors, might have been better if it had concentrated on exploring the relationship between the two main characters instead of relying on deus ex machina fantasy events for its effects; and it in any case betrays a lack of structure and auctorial control by changing, in the middle, not only viewpoint but also mood and narrative presentation. A lack of structure is also present in the remaining two stories: instead of writing, with "Catch That Zeppelin!", an actual novel about a parallel Earth, Leiber has his two characters lecture each other over lunch on the details of its probable history, and the result is as boring as such stories usually are (and the semi-autobiographical nature of its conclusion, with the author meeting his son on the streets of New York and passing the whole thing off as a daydream, simply points it up as the wish-fulfillment exercise it is); and in "The Big Time" -- well, honestly, I thought that it was only in Heinlein novels that everyone talked non-stop and nothing happened, but this....it's ninety percent padding, so dully and ineptly written that I can only wonder how Leiber ever acquired a reputation as SF's premier stylist. The answer, of course, lies in his genre origins, in the generally appalling standard of writing prevailing in the genre even to this day and in the abysmal level of the criticism to which it is subjected: it's solely the lack of competition that has elevated him to such imaginary heights, and to compare him (as Harlan Ellison did in his piece about Leiber in the Seacon 79 Programme Book) with Kafka and Borges is simply absurd.

Samuel R. Delany (ed.) -- NEBULA WINNERS THIRTEEN (Bantam, 207pp, \$2.50)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

On the same evening that I read this book, Granada Television put out a dramatised documentary called Tiny Revolution, the story of the Czech professor Jan Kalina, arrested, interrogated and imprisoned for the crime of scripting satirical cabarets. For telling political jokes -- the "tiny revolution" of the title. In his introduction to Nebula Winners Thirteen, Delany mentions a question that one should ask of science fiction: "What social processes are seen as variables and what processes are seen as invariant?" After all, it has a reputation for being a genre that speculates, that poses alternatives, that questions the world in which we live. So surely SF is at least as subversive as a political joke? And I wondered which of these fearless unblinking observers of society might qualify for the 4.00 am knock on the door.

John Varlye's "Air Raid" is an after-the-genetic-war story, using time travel to kidnap physically fit people from 1979 and repopulating the future with them. Not the Earth, mind you, but a new frontier way out in space -- and it's an odd society that would spend its money on that rather than on curing its own ills. Even without the implausibility, this is just the standard Awful Warning. Also concerned with deterioration in life is Harlan Ellison's "Jeffy Is Five", but on a wholly personal level. Jeffy inhabits the golden country of the past, and gets blitzed by the murderous present; the story simply presents the modern world in contrast to utopia. What is subversive here is left subordinate to the emotional impact.

You expect a feminist writer to be by definition subversive. What's frightening about Raccoona Sheldon's "Screwfly Solution" isn't so much the story, however, as how easily it becomes credible. Perhaps this story reads according to the cultural upbringing that the reader has had, one seeing it as an aliens-treating-us-as-we-treat-insects morality tale, another wondering at the real reason behind the mass outbreaks of femicide. Whether Sheldon or Vonda McIntyre want to be regarded as subversive is unknown; there's certainly no such depth in McIntyre's "Aztecs", very much a sub-Delany story of starpilots. We're promised a world based on service, not production, but there's no intellectual or emotional appreciation of

what it would be like to live in such a world.

I've got a blind spot regarding dance as one of the arts, so perhaps that's one reason why I find the Robinsons' "Stardance" so unconvincing. On the other hand, I know nothing about pions, but still found Edward Bryant's "Particle Theory" interesting and enjoyable. It takes place outside of society, being concerned with the relationship between the individual and the universe, the cause of cancer and the cause of novae. But "Stardance" is your standard fairy tale -- which would be fine if that honestly was the authors' outlook on life. Spider Robinson has proved elsewhere, most recently in Time Travellers Strictly Cash, that he's a master of the backhanded swipe. To take an example at random, his comment that "the redneck clowns who chanted 'America -- love it or leave it!'" while they stomped me back in the sixties didn't have a bad slogan" shows that he wants to both hunt with the hounds and run with the hare and thus doesn't believe in fairy stories. Yet in "Stardance" we have the dancer who can't dance except in zero-gee, and to get to the space station she has to sell her body to the big bad millionaire, who of course drops her like a hot brick just when his investment is about to pay dividends in royalties ~~from~~ the tapes of her dances, and in any case the zero-gee is causing her body to degenerate (just hers, not anyone else's), and -- well, she dies while dancing these aliens out of the solar system....and if you think that gives the story some emotional impact ("it is a far, far better thing etc.") then steer clear of the novel this was inevitably turned into, in which the nasty aliens become nice, and the dead dancer isn't dead, and if you get to the telepathic love-in happy ever after ending without expiring from terminal saccharine poisoning, you'll be lucky. As for social comment, forget it -- "they didn't have a bad slogan". Here we have America going strong, and self-made men building space stations without a government hand in the till, and Western society triumphant.

And yet no one is likely to be put in jail for suggesting that the present system is not, perhaps, the best of all possible worlds. Jan Kalina might have been hounded and imprisoned (and then only freed due to ill-health -- the man is now dead), but Western authors don't have to worry about that happening to them. Well, maybe we do live in the best of all possible worlds, and the Pollyannas are right. The other alternative is that people here have ceased to believe that freedom of speech is important. You can put what you like in fiction: it's trivial. Most of the tyrannies we see today are fairly young nations, believing that the best way to keep control is to suppress disagreement. A cynic might say that there are better ways. It's a human trait to grumble, so let them -- let them have their satire and speculation because then, a cynic might say, having objected, ~~and~~ thus being under the impression that they've actually done something, the mass of people go back to sleep. They say, what wonderful literature! what daring speculation! And then, putting down the book, go back to living their unsatisfactory lives. The penalty is not for action but for inaction. In the USSR they imprison writers; in the West they give them Nebula Awards.

Brian Aldiss -- HOTHOUSE (Granada, 206pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Roy Macinski

For a number of reasons, but due mainly to critical and public acclaim, Hothouse has established itself as one of the minor classics of SF. So the first question to ask of it is: does it deserve its reputation?

Frankly, I don't think so.

The book is set many millions of years from now, with the sun pouring out vast amounts of hard radiation as it goes through its death throes. Together with greatly increased surface temperatures, this has a dramatic effect on the Earth's ecosystem, with almost all animal life being eradicated and plants becoming the dominant lifeform, mutating into a thousand hideous new forms and covering one entire face of the planet in a single tree, a banyan.

The story centres on a young boy, Gren, who leaves his home and shortly afterwards succumbs to a parasitic, intelligent fungus known as

the morel. Forced onwards by it, he embarks on a journey of discovery in which he encounters some of the many splintered tribes of mankind, the most memorable of which are the tummy-bellies. With wry wit and humour, Aldiss transforms these otherwise pathetic creatures into rather loveable and affectionate characters.

Easily the most outstanding aspect of the book, however, is his compelling and vivid realisation of the Earth's alien environment, with its contorted landscapes and venomous denizens.

As the story moves towards its conclusion, its tone shifts and in many ways the closing chapters echo Clarke's Childhood's End -- except that here it's plant life rather than mankind which is seen taking the first tentative steps towards a more important role within the life of the universe. For me, though, Clarke's is the better of the two, for Aldiss seems to lack Clarke's vision and, more importantly, he seems to lack Clarke's passionate conviction in the concept of an evolution that extends beyond mere Earthly significance.

And it is for this reason that I think Hot House doesn't deserve its reputation -- striving to be more than the gloomy romance it is, it at the last never quite succeeds in transcending its adventure-story limitations and is withal never really outstanding in either conception or execution.

Suzy McKee Charnas -- WALK TO THE END OF THE WORLD and MOTHERLINES
(Coronet, 246pp each, £1.25 each)

Reviewed by Brian Devere

Suzy McKee Charnas makes a powerful debut in UK paperback with two diverse, imaginatively charged stories, each self-sufficient yet linked by the presence in each of an unglamorous runaway slave girl called Alldera. Both, however, come in lurid red-black covers which misrepresent them as something akin to The Exorcist or The Omen; and, while the author isn't afraid to shine her torchlight down the dingy back-alleys of SF, her material is far more sophisticated than such psych-horror pulp.

Walk To The End Of The World is an action-packed several days both within and between two bestial urban patriarchies. Motherlines comes as a pleasurable sauna-shock, juxtaposing fairly liad-back glimpses of two nomadic matriarchies, and has a timespan of several years. Both books are fairly complex social dialogues with political forces largely embodied in the characters.

Picture the scene. An enormous war-bunker complex called Holdfast, originally the home of high-ranking officials and military men; outside, after the Wasting, there are no fish or animals left, and a question mark hangs over the exact nature of what might be there. The men, having sensed a silent disapproval of their actions emanating from their womenfolk, became angry and crazy with guilt and grief, and met the challenge by counterblaming the cataclysm on the women; as time has passed, their scapegoating has become institutionalised history.

In Holdfast, women are not second-class citizens or even slaves, but "unmen", creatures separate from humanity, pernicious and dangerous "soul-stealers", useful only as a workforce and in the Breeding Romms, with which impersonal brothel/factory-farm set-up the Senior men (hated and despised by the Juniors) neatly sever all knowledge of their bloodties. Walk To The End Of The World traces the quest of outcast Eykar Bek who, doomed because he knows who his father is, fears that if he doesn't fix pater then sooner or later pater will fix him.... Accompanied by two other freewheeling renegades, Bek goes information-ferretting, thus elucidating the mechanics of Holdfast's brutal two-tier society, an extreme throw-back of ancient Rome with its strict sexual separatism, age-distinguished privileges and homosexuality, along with ritualised suicide as a safety valve to dispose of anyone with any enterprise or dissatisfaction. One-upmanship is currency, and the entire assets of Holdfast, the people included, are the property of several large companies whose influence extends to incorporate education and policing.

When Bek and his companions encounter, for the first time, true "fen" culture in Bayo, they are surprised to find some kind of social organisat-

ion and a sense of power and intelligence; but Bek is smart enough to see that the witch-burning, bestiality and cannibalism enforced on the fems at Holdfast are punishments rather than natural happenstances. Before proceeding onward, the outlaws' ranks are swelled by the addition of the attractive but unassuming Aldera, and it's not until Charnas takes us into her mind that we can actually begin to see the intricacies and sophistication of the underground society that the fems have created.

Bek's search for his father finishes upriver in Troi, a heavily barricaded rival male stronghold ruled by a megalomaniac with his own special brand of scientific fascism. Primitive firearms have been rediscovered, together with the joys of battle conducted at a safe distance. Society seems about to go full circle. However, bedlam breaks out and Aldera, freshly-pregnant, escapes from the hustling claustrophobia into Wild, to emerge as the central character in Motherlines, so totally different in characterisation, style, scope and pace as to render the shift a bit like Alfred Bester passing the baton to Doris Lessing.

In Motherlines, there's another dialogue, this time between two femish cultures. Aldera first shares a tent with the Mares, a separatist clan who have a symbiotic relationship with their horses. These "Riding Women" have enough knowledge of cloning to be able to reproduce without men, but they can only reproduce themselves exactly, their society consisting of a set number of motherlines; so when Aldera gives birth to her "cub" in their midst there is hope of establishing a new bloodline.

Elsewhere, across the empty landscape, are the wagons of the "free-fems". Exclusively ex-Holdfast women, they have reduplicated the social patterns with which they grew up, with women in the male roles, but their numbers have stagnated due to a lack of escapees. They're irked that Aldera was originally picked up by patrolling Mares, but she proves an effective catalyst for the much-needed interaction between the two cultures from which can spring a healthy social and political model.

In these two books, Charnas highlights the motivational factors of the sexes with a use of extremes: the work-oriented yet goalless Holdfast where women are used, and made to be, like animals; and the Riding Women's matriarchy in which horses have achieved almost-human status. Although the dialogue in Walk To The End Of The World is a bit drab, Charnas has a lot of plot to shift and the complexity of her social construction leaves her characters with little time for polished repartee: they have far too much information to convey to each other and to us.

After Motherlines, the story remains open-ended. The patterning suggests a trilogy, and with a strong, carefully-considered finale it could amount to something quite memorable and special.

Jeremy Rifkin -- ENTROPY: A NEW WORLD VIEW (Bantam, 302pp, \$3.95)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

We're all aware, to some degree, of the Second Law of Thermodynamics -- that the available energy of a closed system eventually tends to a minimum -- but how many of us have ever tried to apply it to our everyday lives? Rifkin takes as his brief the idea that it is as much an integral part of society and culture as it of modern physics, and proceeds to demonstrate, by both well-chosen examples and closely-honed reasoning, how our modern outlook is founded upon an inapt and inaccurate paradigm -- that progress is both upwards and never-ending -- and why our high-technology, overconsumptive Western way of life, by attempting to fight against (and even ignore) entropy, is ultimately destined to expire at its hands. This of course makes the book sound no more than yet another slice of oh-so-fashionable doomsaying, but such isn't the case: in the first case, Rifkin is concerned to explain the reasons why our economic, political, medical, energy, transport, manufacturing, et al systems are falling apart rather than simply overwhelm us with a mass of statistics and then wring his hands in hysterical anguish over the awfulness of it all; and, in the second place, his message is in fact (and as a consequence of his explanations) one of hope, because only by understanding why things are going wrong can we ever begin to take steps to correct them -- which means, in

his eyes, not trying to patch up or "streamline" what we've got but throwing it all away and returning to a simpler, more pre-technological cultural level. (Space-freaks not excluded: as he points out, we'd consume more energy getting up there that we'd ever be able to garner from it.) Such a vision may seem closely akin to that propounded by William Morris, it's true, but Rifkin's reasoning is immeasurably more convincing than Morris's ever was, his arguments undeniably "right"; they certainly convince me, and I feel his message is one that we can no longer afford to ignore. If you only ever read one non-fiction book a year, then you'd better make it this one.

Jessica Rowena Huxley -- QUEST FOR THE GOLDEN SORCERER (Del Rey, 389pp, \$2.95)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

In this, the first volume of the "Saga of Jason Elfhorne of Chrystom", an astoundingly elastic plot gives great scope for our reluctant and unlikely hero, Jason Elfhorne, a failed bard, to display his somewhat embarrassing incompetence and ignorance to a vast incidental cast of flawlessly glossy cardboard cutout passersby (who seem to have strayed in from the pages of works by Zelazny, Leiber, Anderson, et al without noticing any change in their environment) who are uniformly saps enough to offer their aid to our lucky hero and deliver themselves of elaborately convoluted lectures about off-stage events, by which means we are informed of a "cancerous black tide of evil" let loose and orchestrated by the fearsome and malicious sorcerer Golchin the Foul. The quest which keeps young Jason bumbling along in valiant pursuit of his self-identity is for the hiding place of the semi-legendary, semi-crazy Malarquez, the Golden Sorcerer of the title, whose alchemical researches might possibly hold the key to the repulsing of of Golchin's monstrously complicated (indeed, Heath Robinsonian) machines of war; in accordance with the title, Jason doesn't actually find him, but then perhaps he will in the next volume. But then what more can one say about a book like this? It lies well within the weighty escapist tradition of Tolkien and McKillip, is as profoundly tendentious as Dune, and could even become something of a bestseller.

A. E. Van Vogt -- COSMIC ENCOUNTER (New English Library, 213pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Keith Plunkett

"The ice, which had probably cooled to 30,000 or 40,000 degrees below zero, began to melt...." Yes, well....

The setting of this awful, preposterous, unreadable novel is, firstly, the Caribbean and, later, the England of 1704. The "fabric of the universe" has collapsed, wiping out the future from that year on -- apart from a few people and robots, who are catapulted back in time to the said year. Why? Well, the author isn't sure, either.... Anyway, an 18th century pirate captain tries to resolve the situation, without success, because everyone's experiences are muddled by a series of time shifts whereby they relive the previous few hours or days while remembering what happened the first time around -- all very confusing, both for the characters and the reader. And the author, who seems to have decided that it's all due to sentient atoms.

If only the fabric of the universe would collapse, and take his typewriter away from him.

Sydney J. Van Scyoc -- SUNWAIFS (Berkley, 214pp, \$2.25)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

It is now some years since I mentally catalogued Van Scyoc as one who habitually writes a novel using only a short story's worth of ideas, and I find nothing in Sunwaifs to make me change that opinion. Once again she is plugging away at her standby theme of human colonists (these happen to be a religious minority -- you can tell by the way they have elders who speak basic Pilgrim Father) struggling to survive in the face of alien

ecosystems. Several centuries after its founding, the colony suffers from a rash of mutant births, caused by excessive solar radiation. The sun-waifs are the survivors, six viable mutations out of hundreds. The novel traces their lives from childhood, as they discover that each of them possesses a strange power, to adolescence, by when they are aware that their planet and its sun are sentient, possibly gods. And from that point, the story sinks slowly into a morass of woolly mysticism and fairly overt Unitarian polemic, gurgling fitfully.

There is an air of tragedy about Van Scyoc's work. Although on her day she can create some of the most convincingly alien lifeforms in SF, she does tend to give the impression of being unable to write her way out of a supermarket. This story (essentially the Midwich Cuckoos meet the People) might have made a decent novelette, but is interminably padded out with some of the most dreadful descriptive prose that it has ever been my misfortune to encounter. Anything liable to crop up more than once has its own little set-piece, which if not repeated verbatim is shuffled only slightly, producing an irritating sense of deja vu, which several times drove me into flicking back to find the earlier occurrences. For example, the sky is always "gold and lavender", lightning always appears as "tongues", "tasting" at things. And, for the life of me, I cannot imagine how a beard can contrive to curl "bleakly".

Her characters are little better. The story is told in the first person by two of the sunwaifs, in alternating chapters, and it was frequently impossible to tell which was which. No, this book is really a quite comprehensive dead loss, and I hold out little hope for improvement, since, Van Scyoc's style has remained unchanged for at least five years. Her case may not be entirely hopeless, but I for one have no intention of wasting my money on get-well-soon cards.

Arthur C. Clarke -- THE LION OF COMARRE/AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT (Pan, 188pp, \$1.50)

Reviewed by Jim England

A long short story and a novel, respectively, these were first published in 1948 and 1949, respectively. The latter work was later transformed into The City And The Stars, and some people prefer it to its successor; it has, in either form, been reviewed a number of times, and I feel disinclined to add to what has been said about it, but the former story, "The Lion Of Comarre", is one that I had not read before, and I found it a delight.

It is like a diamond, cut in accordance with the rules of the SF magazine editors of the time, and flawless by their standards. It is about a time, towards the close of the 26th century, when "machines bore the burden of the world" and "engineers and the great inventors belonged to the past", and it poses the question: how would we live (and how should we live) if we could choose to sleep our lives away, dreaming sweet dreams rather than facing life's realities. It is as profound a question as it ever was, and this consideration of it is packed with ideas and exciting climaxes.

Clarke has his limitations, like all writers, but this story illustrates his special genius, revealing his optimism, idealism, naivete and mystical yearning for the future. The writing has a certain prissiness and sentimentality, inherited from an earlier age; it may at times be twee and make younger readers smile, but is perhaps suited to Clarke himself -- J. B. Priestley once described him as "like a perpetual 14-year-old". But then there are good things about adolescence, after all....

The end of another spiffing issue, with only one of the reviews (by John Duffty) having been squeezed out by the pressure of space. In the inventory for next time are reviews by Paul Kincaid, Andy Sawyer, Kevin Smith, Phil Palmer and Judith Hanna, with more from Ann Collier, Ray Owen, Eve Harvey, Janice Haule, David Penn, et al expected RSM. I hope. Well, they'd better deliver, because otherwise I'll, er, um, you know....

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