

PAPERBACK INFERNO

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Volume 5 Number 6 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas (Room 9, 94 St George's Square, Pinlicko, London SW1Y 3QY), this issue containing reviews by Dave Langford, John Duffy, Judith Hanna, Andy Sawyer, Eve Harvey, Paul Kincaid, John Hobson, Kevin Smith, Phil Palmer, Sue Thomason, Brian Smith, Ray Owen and yours truly, plus a "Blood On The Racks" column by Yours Truly Again. The entire contents are copyright 1982 by The BSFA Ltd on behalf of the individual contributors, to whom all rights are returned.

BLOOD ON THE RACKS -- Joseph Nicholas

It's probably a familiar refrain by now, but even so the overwhelming impression with which the past six months' (January-June 1982) issues of Fantasy & Science Fiction have left me is one of despair -- muted at times, but still despair. It arises not so much from the irredeemable awfulness of one or two of the stories (such as Steve Vance's crass and contemptible "Last Night On Dugan's World" (May), about a bunch of spacemen on shore leave and the drunken antics in which they indulge -- God help us, it even took the cover) as from the sheer leaden unimaginativeness of the majority. Here's Timothy Zahn's "Houseguest" (January), for instance, a tedious alien ecology story of the kind where the author has patently worked out the answer to the puzzle before dreaming up the plot; or there's Stanley Schmidt's "Mascots" (February), an alien social customs story of the type we thought we'd seen the last of when Horace Gold left Galaxy; and what about Barbara Paul's "Scarecrow Duty" (March), a dull human/alien spacefleet-standoff tale of the kind you'd hoped Fredric Brown and Robert Sheckley had killed off long ago; and so it goes on. What really hurts about it all is the amount of effort that some of the writers have clearly put into them -- Andrew Weiner's "Station Gehenna" (April), for example, has some fine and observant writing, but the idea (psychiatric investigator trying to find out who or what killed a crewmember of the terraforming station on the eponymous planet) is so lame and creaking that it goes completely to waste. It's almost as though, contrary to received wisdom, good writing and a fresh approach can't rescue and remake the most hoary and cliched of ideas after all.... But although F & SF is nowhere near as bad as Isaac Asimov's (still trying to determine how low the lowest common denominator can really be), the seemingly rising tide of mediocrity in its pages does our critical sensibilities no good at all -- there's bound to be the odd nugget of gold

amongst all that dross, but how much of it is genuine and how much only seems so by comparison?

That, perhaps, is a question to which we can return later -- for now, let's take a closer look at those odd nuggets of gold....

Joanna Russ's "Souls" (January) has as its setting a convent and its surrounding village in the France of the so-called Dark Ages (specifically, in this case, the ninth century AD), watched over by the kindly, learned, wise and (in her youth) well-travelled Abbess Radegunde, who is one day roused from her normal duties by the arrival of a party of Viking raiders led by one Thorvald Einarsson, whom she met in Rome many years earlier. This, and her subsequent attempts to both protect her charges and convince the Vikings of the error of their ways, are seen through the eyes of her "adopted son", Radulphus, an orphan boy who lives within the convent and is now writing up the events from the standpoint of his old age; and a quiet and moving evocation of a good woman trying to do the best for everyone it is too, eschewing the mere piling-on of verisimilitudinous historical detail for an exclusive concentration on the characters, bringing them so subtly and surely to life that if the biographers of real historical personages could do half as well they'd still be gnashing their teeth with envy. Radegunde in particular, as the focus of the story, is so real and rounded that the monologues on sin, evil, grace, holiness and what God is not she directs at Thorvald emerge not as dull lectures but as a natural part of her character: weary of the world, old before her time, yet still glad of someone to whom she can talk and pass on her knowledge. Not that her monologues are of any avail, of course, for Thorvald still needs gold and slaves to maintain his warrior band; and so are introduced the story's fantasy elements, building so naturally on what has gone before that they do not jar for a moment. Radegunde, or so it appears to Radulphus, has the power to control and alter the minds of others, in the process changing her own manner and being labelled by those about her as a demon: but rather than using the power to drive away the Vikings en masse, she leads Thorvald and Radulphus to a secret spot in the forest behind the village, where a group of shining, ghostly "saints" wait to accept her as one of her own. Before departing with them, she at last takes her revenge upon Thorvald: "Henceforth be not Thorvald Farmer nor yet Thorvald Seafarer but Thorvald Peacemaker, Thorvald War-hater, put into anguish by bloodshed and agonised at cruelty. I cannot make long thy life -- that gift is beyond me -- but I give thee this: to the end of thy days, long or short, thou wilt know the Presence about thee always, as I do, and thou wilt know that it is neither good nor evil, as I do, and this knowing will trouble and frighten thee always, as it does me, and so about this one thing, as about many another, Thorvald Peacemaker will never have peace." And Radulphus, although still wondering who or what she really was, knows the strength of her revenge: that to be truly conscious of the world's suffering and yet be powerless to cure it is a greater and more lasting pain than any other, and one that raises all manner of important theological questions -- such as, trite though it may sound, how a God who claims to love the world could permit such horrors in the first place

In comparison with this story, the other good ones rather pale. Tom Disch's "Understanding Human Behaviour" (February) is another of his ironic little fables about the sheer ordinariness of life, in which Richard Ree, a man who has had himself erased and so remembers nothing of his former existence, sets out to have his time over again, perhaps in the hope that he'll make more of an impact on society than he did before. Continuously expecting some sort of revelation, he instead runs into a woman who claims to be his former wife, whom he erased himself to forget, but who is in fact a neurotic who says the same to all erasees; ultimately, he marries her, joins the New Focus commune to help them build their pyramid (without saying why to either her or us; but those who their Disch will get the joke), and ends by buying a new car, feeling as he drives it away "that this was what it must be like to be completely human." Irony indeed!

Also in February, Garry Kilworth's "Almost Heaven" chronicles the discovery and subsequent settlement of a deserted alien town by a group of colonists who have split off from the main planetary settlement and marched

inland to found, one assumes, an utopia of their own. The town -- which seems akin to those idyllic Greek or Italian mountain villages the travel brochures are always enthusing over -- at first appears just such a paradise, but within days its peace is shattered, for concealed throughout it are numerous ingeniously designed boobytraps intended to deliver instant, unexpected death to anyone who sets them off. Some of the colonists leave again, but most stay, declining to seek out and dismantle the boobytraps because they know that they will need them just as much as the aliens who constructed them -- without something to occasionally break the rhythms of life and thereby keep everyone on their toes, an utopia would be insufferably boring. In itself, this isn't a new idea -- it's a major subtheme of Cordwainer Smith's "Instrumentality" series, for instance -- but Kilworth's story succeeds where those by Zahn, Schmidt, Weiner *et al* didn't because, unlike theirs, it is not made the central hinge on which everything else depends. It's also much better written, as the economy and grace of its final lines attest: "We could all grow old and die in our beds -- but there is a chance, just a chance, that one of us will die young and beautiful. Such things dreams and stories are made of. Such things are written in songs. To be remembered is immortality." There is much truth in this, and it forms a neat contrast with Disch's story.

It's also the last of the really good stories -- three out of the past six issues' total of fifty; not a very good average at all -- although there are a number of others which begin quite promisingly yet peter out somewhere in their telling. Richard Mueller's "The Chains Of The Sea" (June), for instance, tells of the rescue, one dark and stormy night, of the crew of an off-course space shuttle from the coastal waters of the Pacific by a US Coast Guard lifeboat; a truly dramatic plot, in all senses of the word, but although well-conceived and well-written it is ultimately undermined by the none-too-subtle thriller-like intrigue with which it ends -- they have to let the Air Force, from whom they received their orders, sink it rather than do the Coast Guardly thing and salvage it because it's carrying nuclear or bacteriological weapons. All of which is very trite, particularly so considering how easily the author has his characters sidestep any questioning of the morality of carrying such weapons into space, and detracts a good deal from the highly atmospheric passages with which the story opened -- Mueller once served in the Coast Guard, apparently, and has clearly brought his own experiences to bear on the sequences describing the lifeboat ploughing through the waves; I wasn't exactly on the edge of my seat with excitement, but I was absolutely convinced that this was what it must be like.

Then there's David Redd's "The House On Hollow Mountain" (May), concerning an establishment that specialises in saving people about to suffer fatal accidents by teleprting them from the sites of same, telling them that only major surgery can save them and then, having "cured" them, offering them the chance to realise their secret ambitions in a "second life" elsewhere. This is a highly altruistic theme, but it is let down by two separate factors -- in the first place, the eventual revelation of the aliens who run the place and who, themselves altruistic, cannot suffer to see anyone die, for whatever reason; an idea that Philip Jose Farmer has trivialised to the point of absurdity, and although Redd's treatment of it owes nothing to his, the story never quite transcends the limitation such an association places on the idea's acceptance. And, in the second place, the story as a whole carries no conviction: although it's written in the first person, the detachedness of the auctorial viewpoint is clearly apparent throughout, and we are never properly involved in the events described. The introduction to the story states that he's been wanting to write it for twenty years; frankly, I think he'd waited too long to start, and in consequence it all went cold on him.

Lastly, there's Phyllis Eisenstein's "Nightlife" (February), whose protagonist, a confident, successful female business executive can find truly satisfying human contact only in her dreams, wherein she meets someone who can dream as vividly and as satisfyingly as herself. Tracking him down, she finds him immobilised in a hospital bed, kept alive by machines and written off as a vegetable, taking refuge in an internal, surrogate

reality where he can be as whole and as capable as he likes; without further ado, she takes over the payments necessary to keep him alive, and they dream happily together ever after. It's an intriguing idea, well-written if a shade too long in its telling, striving to suggest that a retreat into one's dreams may not be as irresponsible and as morally reprehensible as is commonly painted, but is let down by the colossal implausibility that lies at its heart -- to wit (and as anyone who can remember anything of their dreams will know), dreaming is not remotely like the ordered, linear progression of events that Eisenstein presents.

To return to my earlier question, then: how much of the good stuff is perceived as such only by comparison with the rubbish that surrounds it? Answering this question on an issue-by-issue basis, as one actually reads the stories, is not easy -- ideally, one would be engaged in a constant analysis of them but, apart from the outside distractions and interruptions to which one is inescapably subject, hindsight will often undo that analysis. As, perhaps, it should, for only with hindsight is one properly distanced from the subjects of that analysis, enabled to view them in a more impartial light. And only thus will the good shine through, establishing themselves on their own merits rather than by comparison with everything else; and I feel confident, therefore, in recommending the above three stories by Russ, Disch and Kilworth as those which possess genuine merit.

Frederik Pohl -- SYZYGY (Bantam, 248pp, \$3.50; Corgi, 248pp, \$1.25)
Reviewed by Dave Langford

There was perhaps space in SF for a book using the pseudoscientific "Jupiter Effect" (mythical 1982 planetary line-up causes vast upheavals) as reality: this isn't it. Another not too crowded niche awaited the book which tackled the appealing unlikelihood of crescent panic as a nonexistent horror predicted by pseudoscientists draws near: again this isn't it. Not content with missing the pseudoscience bandwagon (even Von Daniken isn't doing so well these days), Pohl tries to have his threat both ways, debunking the Jupiter Effect and deploying some remarkably sketchy and unconvincing human panic, corruption etc., while at the same time manipulating the readers into spurious tension by sinister little paragraphs of interpolated italics, variously threatening earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, hurricanes, CO₂ pollution, liquid natural gas explosions, floods, meteorites, solar flares and supernovae, none of which materialises. Messages from outer space do creep in at the end, but these have no relation to the main thrust of the book, which after all the paraphernalia of apocalypse boils down to a weak plea for people to be careful and not buy houses in major earthquake zones. The whole thing does Pohl's reputation little good, but little harm either, since it leaves almost no impression on the memory. The same goes for the characters (cast of thousands) and the plot (deducible from the above by joining the dots). Pohl can do better than this, and so can your money.

Steven E. McDonald -- THE JANUS SYNDROME (Bantam, 264pp, \$2.50)
Reviewed by John Duffy

Kevven Tomari, given to vast lengths of self-indulgent thought and equipped with the most unamusing sense of humour, is one of a race of highly trained agents working for the Builders, a race of mysterious aliens. Area fourteen, "home" to Tomari, is a space-base built (what else?) by the Builders, and one of millions scattered through the universe. These bases, however, are constantly under attack from murderous creatures known as the Enemy(!), and it is the agents' job to rid the cosmos of them. So much is outlined by Tomari (a negro, but you'd never guess) in a tired colloquial manner, revealing in his own words how pissed off he is with the set-up. I gather that this speech is supposed to be entertainingly dry and humorous; it isn't either.

He begins by rescuing the Princess Moheilan H'jura ka Opul (in a chapter entitled "How To Kidnap A Princess"), having her bite a bullet (literally!) and pop out of existence, arriving back on the space-base. It cer-

tainly beats "Beam us up, Scotty", but sets the standard for the rest of the book, in which Tomari and the Princess, plus a few token aliens, burst through fight after fight with startling monotony. All of which is a good hint at its juvenility: the way the action (for want of a better word) is just plastered on. Yet I am certain that "young adults", at whom this is obviously aimed, would be perturbed -- to say the least -- by single combats lasting up to eight pages, because of both their pointless length (it might not be were McDonald good at writing fight sequences, but he isn't) and their extreme violence -- one such fight lacerates Tomari's gums, breaks his nose, smashes his jaw, fractures his skull and shoulder, and haemorrhages his stomach. All of which is cured, and the man healed, in 50 seconds. If someone's been through all that and survived, then I don't care what happens next; whatever it may be, it certainly won't hurt him.

Tomari finally discovers that the Enemy are robots, built by the Builders to fight the agents and prevent them from getting bored. The 8-page fight through which Tomari was put was intended to hammer home the moral that "there is no trust"; he now learns that the fight was a waste of time because there is trust, since only his trust in his fellows brought him to the final explanation. But since Tomari cares for his fellows, he is special; and now we get pages of analysis showing how clever McDonald was to make him such an endearing chap -- unimpressive, patronising and smugly written. The essence of all this is that the Builders can now go home happy, sure that the cosmos is safe in Tomari's hands. Hah! I might forgive this if the author had made some attempt to consider the ethics behind the battles, had the characters bothered to find out why they were fighting. As it is, its childish prose, moronic fights and implied references to Star Trek are wearisome in the extreme, and if this novel is typical of McDonald's writing then it can best be described by the simple expedient of erasing the "J" from the title.

J. G. Ballard -- THE UNLIMITED DREAM COMPANY (Granada, 200pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

On first reading, I found this a stunningly powerful pagan dream; on second reading, I found it the ravings of a paranoid megalomaniac.

There's a lot I could say to justify that sentence. Unfortunately, I don't have five pages in which to do it, and a book of this quality needs such space: space in which to think about it, to discuss with myself the reactions it sparks off. Ballard is a writer who inspires a good deal of critical attention and there are certainly many more expert commentators on his work than I. I shall resist the temptation to produce an essay.

Blake, the messiah (or megalomaniac?) who is the narrator, is a self-confessed failure, a probable psychopath who hijacks a light aircraft and crashes it in the Thames near Shepperton. His resurrection from the river is marked by waking dreams and union (both mystical and sexual) with the town's inhabitants. Even less of a conventional novel than most of Ballard's works (and more akin to a Symbolist prose poem), his control of imagery in The Unlimited Dream Company has rarely been more exotic. Blake's metamorphosis to a new plane of consciousness is marked by physical signs -- the sudden appearance of tropical animals, the sprouting of tropical plants from Blake's liberally-dispersed semen. Trapped in the town, "the everywhere of suburbia, the paradigm of nowhere", Blake becomes a "household god", liberating the population with his fierce pansexuality and passing on his ability to fly.

Many of Ballard's previous techniques are replayed in The Unlimited Dream Company; changes in the environment reflect (and, by a process of feedback, magnify) changes in inner space while the hero enthusiastically embraces his transformation. The key image throughout the book is that of the aircraft crashed in the Thames and Blake's "resurrection": images Ballard has used in other guises in many another tale though rarely so effectively as here. Events focus and dissolve: by a kind of constant slow motion action replay we see this image and all its reverberations teasing out its symbolic meaning. Admirers of Ballard will know what to expect.

Intense and magical, The Unlimited Dream Company is also a tropical forest of a book, a shining mirror which can dazzle rather than reflect.

It has the deep structures of dream -- sudden epiphanies, flight, sex, power; alchemical fusions with the Elements -- but like dream, the ambiguity of the book itself tends to slip away when you focus on it. As a work of literature, it is a magnificent creation, but as yet I'm reserving my judgement as to what there is underpinning that creation. I think that it is altogether more nihilistic than the yorrent of praise on its back cover seems to imply. Then again, Ballard has never dealt in comfort.

Arthur C. Clarke -- DOLPHIN ISLAND (Berkley, 188pp, \$2.25)
Reviewed by Phil Palmer

No sooner has he stowed away on a gigantic freight hovertransporter than little Johnny is shipwrecked in the middle of the Pacific. Fortunately, a herd of dolphins are on hand to save the book from being very short and untitled, and they rescue him by pushing him 500 miles on a packing case to Dolphin Island. Here Professor Kazan and Dr Keith are engaged in scientific research that will enable them to communicate with these "people of the sea".

The mask of the author now slips. While Brian Aldiss wrote The Dark Light Years as an indictment of our anthropocentric chauvinism, a questioning of the nature of communication between cultures and an attack on cruel experiments conducted on dolphins, Clarke sidesteps all these problems by means of a communicating machine strapped to our boy hero's wrist. Tellingly, this box is limited to a vocabulary of "NO, YES, UP, DOWN, FRIEND, RIGHT, LEFT, FAST, SLOW, STOP, GO, FOLLOW, COME, DANGER! and HELP!", to which PLEASE and THANK YOU are later added. Even bearing in mind the fact that all the lewd and fanciful combinations have had to be left out of something that children are going to read, the resulting man/dolphin dialogue remains somehow in keeping with the rest of the book -- that is, totally unimaginative. And when the scientists do get round to sticking electrodes into brains, they do it a killer whale, one of the bad guys, the operation being performed with very little sign of ethical qualms. If you want an example of how avoiding involvement with any kind of issue makes Clarke routine and pedestrian, then it is the way that this treatment is only described as frightening because it would be a bad thing to do to humans, and not because it is a bad thing to do to killer whales.

And so to the sugary ending, the heroic dash across hundreds of miles of sea on a surfboard pulled by a pair of faithful dophlins. I should confess that this book was a part of my childhood, but even then it took second place to the likes of Arthur Catherall, Ronald Syme and Hugh Walters. I do wonder, though, about the expectations formed at that age of what a book should consist of, and whether you learn to associate the final chapters of whatever you're reading with the most unbearable gunge simply so that you can recognise it when it's finished.

I suppose it's not Arthur C. Clarke's fault that he's the president of the BSFA, but all the same this is one book that won't bring the members flocking in.

Rose Deaking -- MICRO-COMPUTING: EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW
(Sphere, 172pp large format, \$2.25)
Reviewed by Brian Smith

'Not,' I hear you scream, 'another Zen And The Art Of Etc...?' But no, it's a book about micro-computing. 'In that case,' you rejoin swiftly, 'what is it doing in a BoSFA magazine?' I haven't the foggiest. I am but a humble critic who knows his place, etc..

Meanwhile, what we have is that lowly form of life which we in the trade term a Noddy guide. There are certain ground rules to Noddy guides. You are entitled to assume that your audience can read and count on its fingers, but beyond that things get rather iffy. The audience for this specimen seems wuite clear cut. It comprises those parents possessing 8-year-olds who can talk about 16K RAM packs with an expertise which they themselves, at the same age, could only have brought to bear on lollipops. The sort of people who think that the last byte of the PROMs is that TV show from the Albert Hall where everyone sings "Land Of Hope And Glory."

And, for such as these, this is not a bad book. The author is a self-confessed novice who came into micros the hard way (from social work). This is a distinct selling point -- many of the uninitiated look upon computing as one of the Black Arts, and the knowledge that someone has not only done it from scratch but also written a book about it can only be encouraging.

And Deakin does cover some very sensible topics -- Chapter 2, for example, "What Can You Do With A Micro-computer?". An appalling number of people buy micros without first asking themselves this question. Also Chapter 7, giving details of the system performance vs. price equation -- an equally appalling number of people behave like rabbits on the M1 at the word computer, and wouldn't know the difference between a Sinclair ZX81 and a Nascom 2 (about £400+). In fact, most of the information Deakin gives is of a practical and therefore useful nature, which is only to be expected from one who has obviously clawed her way up from the bottom. Certain entries in the glossary show tinges of cynicism which speak of much suffering and long debugging sessions. If your 8-year-old is starting to embarrass you in public, don't hesitate. Otherwise, try your local remainder bookshop around December -- after all, micro books are quite common at the moment, but how many Rubik's Cube books have you seen this year?

Gene Wolfe -- THE CLAW OF THE CONCILIATOR (Arrow, 301pp, £1.60; Timescape, 255pp, £2.75)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

In this second volume of "The Book Of The New Sun", Severian continues his journey from the walls of Messus towards the city of Thrax; he meets again Vodalus the outlaw, enters the House Absolute where he encounters the Autarch and rejoins the company of actors (Dr Talos, Baldanders the giant, Jolenta the most desirable woman in the world, and Dorcas, whom Severian loves), and is wooed by the Undines, the giant underwater women who once saved him from drowning in Gyoll. One could easily, if lengthily list what happens, but what it all adds up to remains a riddle. The narrative is supple and subtle, laying down snatches of apparently irrelevant incident which many chapters later may snap into place. No straightforward plot, this, punching towards a snappy ending -- this is Severian's account of his life as it's caught in his memory, where nothing fades. But it's not just an account of events, it's also Severian's perspective as he looks back over his life at the way things happened, a kaleidoscope of incident which occasionally hints at destiny, more often a random accident on which order is imposed only by the thread of chronological causation and by the intentional and introspective activity of Severian's ranging mind.

Wolfe has avoided the conventional traps of fantasy -- the world which is a mere distortion of some aspect of our own, the focal character defined by one or two distinctive cliched features walking through set-piece scenes following the dictates of a plot whose only point is its ending. The freedom Wolfe allows Severian to digress from events or reflect on his place in the scheme of things makes this not only a novel of subcreation in which the protagonist seeks to come to grips with the world's complex conditions but also a novel of character in which the character's ideas are integrated with his reality and thus part of his world rather than imposed by a moralising author. Counter-examples abound -- Vance, Donaldson, Tolkien....

The character of Severian is the key to Wolfe's achievement. The torturer is a reasonable man -- disciplined, sternly humourless but not immune to pity and love, an idealist, a product of his upbringing in the citadel of his guild -- pragmatically responding to the conditions which confront him, presenting to us the reasoning underlying his actions and his view of the world. He is because of his profession a marginal individual, excluded from participation in ordinary everyday life. His company is other marginal individuals (actors, Dorcas, Vodalus), the criminals he is from time to time employed to execute, and those figures of authority who may wish to make use of his services. His profession makes him an agent of authority, enforcing order by means of pain and death, supposedly impartially and impersonally; but he is a failed torturer, unable to accept atrocity impersonally and, for interfering in the excruciation of the Chatelaine Thecla and giving her release from pain, expelled from the citadel and sent on

this journey to Thrax. - Yet he still takes pride in his craft, his expertise at bestowing clean, swift death where ordered. The executions are public spectacles; the audience, ordinary people who shun him, become excited by the entertainment he provides for them, and he thus becomes the glamorous performer who fulfills their perverse fantasies, their lust for atrocity. He is also the (accidental or destined?) possessor of the Claw of the Conciliator, a healing jewel, a relic of supreme religious significance the precise nature of which is not yet revealed to either he or us. Thus is introduced a religious element which we may expect in future volumes to counterpoint the so far dominant theme of the permutations of authority and suffering; self-conscious and self-questioning, Severian cannot escape being concerned with all the intricate implications of the death and pain he exists to inflict when commanded. But this heavy theme only underlies, not dominates, the book; Severian's eidetic memory does not deal in the types and moralising generalisations of which didacticism is made, but in faces, sayings, vivid enactments of the varied scenes into which he has wandered.

Because Severian questions his world, we are presented with the answers at which he arrives. Because Severian's discourse is convincingly individual and convincingly a producer of his world, the narrative for all its unlikeness to our own experience carries conviction. Because Severian is intelligent, no less so than Wolfe, his creator, this is an excellent, intelligent book.

Anne McCaffrey -- DRAGONQUEST (Corgi, 324pp, £1.75)
Reviewed by Ray Owen

The "Dragon" stories have reached the status at which they spawn not only sequels but appendices. Although I have never felt any great empathy for McCaffrey's Pern, it is easy to see why many people do. The idea of Dragons and Riders bound together by a relationship no outsider can understand and charged with the task of flying to intercept the invading Threads has an admirable simplicity, much of the attraction of which is perhaps due to the fact that the whole set-up is an almost perfect abstraction of the "Battle of Britain" spirit.

In fairness to McCaffrey, she does attempt to deepen her world a little by trying to examine the emotional facet of the Dragonrider's world as well as the sociological significance of the creation of such an elitist group. Both of these aspects come across strongly in Dragonquest, firstly with the discovery of fire-lizards, ancestors-cum-relatives of the dragons themselves, and secondly in the rivalry between the modern Riders and the Oldtimers who have been brought from the past to aid against the less predictable Threadfalls.

Doubtless a fine sequel to Dragonflight, and one to be much savoured by dragophiles. (Indeed, if they get as much of a charge from this as the author, judging from her readings at conventions, seems to, then they are in for a truly traumatic time.) On the other hand, I don't think that it will persuade many outsiders to sample the further delights of Pern.

Frank Herbert -- GOD-EMPEROR OF DUNE (New English Library, 454pp, £2.50)
Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

"The long-awaited sequel to the Dune trilogy", proclaims the cover, causing me to wonder just how many people have been waiting for it. And how disappointed they will be by it...because it is in truth a pretty turgid and impenetrable story, clearly manufactured to capitalise on reader-demand and as hollow and pretentious as all the other Dune books. It apparently revolves around the desire of the immortal half-sandworm Leto Atreides II -- now, 3000 years after the events of Children Of Dune, ruling the galaxy from a changed and verdant Arrakis -- to regenerate the evolution of the human race by (it says here) the breeding of new qualities into the species; he will know that he has succeeded, it seems, when he is killed. Clear enough? Yes, of course -- but that synopsis was lifted from the interior blurb, not directly from the plot, which is a structural mess: the typical chapter begins with a character sitting in a room somewhere recalling the

supposedly important but nevertheless offstage events of a few hours before, which flashback may contain yet another flashback; the result is that one rapidly loses any idea of the order in which things happened -- and, considering this confusion, even what happened. Then there's Leto's ponderous and overblown "wisdom"...cryptic utterance piled upon cryptic utterance, and none of them of any worth whatever. By the time I'd reached the end, I'd lost all patience with it, and could hope that the framing device with which the story is begun and concluded, set innumerable thousands of years afterwards, would serve to kill off the whole damn saga for good; but I've since heard that Herbert has recently signed a contract for a fifth Dune novel. God help us.

Russell M. Griffin -- CENTURY'S END (Bantam, 260pp, \$2.25)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

I read the first chapter, then turned back to the publishing history. There it is in black and white: copyright 1981. I don't believe it. The first chapter is the sort of kaleidoscope of characters and impressions popular in the 1960s, only it tended to be handled better than. As I persevered with the book I began to feel that I'd got hold of something that was lost in time. It is an unsettled work, flickering constantly about a large cast of ill-realised characters, including a bunch of weirdos that believe in a mystical flying saucer cult, have names like Moonrose and Starbud, and speak the sort of stomach-turning slang that hack writers always seem to put into the mouths of wild youth. In case you haven't caught on yet, these are just latter-day hippies, part of a milieu that incorporates very nearly every 60s' theme imaginable. There is the ecology gone wild -- in this case the mid-West turned into a dustbowl. There is the belief in Tarot cards and witchcraft -- in this case on an institutionalised level. There is the fake religion -- Dr Love, a TV evangelist turned presidential contender. And there is the conspiracy theory of big business -- Dr Love again. It is all a terrible mish-mash of the cliched and just plain familiar. I suspect that Griffin was intending to take a few satirical swipes at modern America, but the satire is deflected by his attempts to build up a realistic and panoramic picture of near-future America. He falls badly between two stools, and the result doesn't come together at all.

The book is supposed to be set in 1999, less than 20 years from now, yet it presupposes social changes of such a scale that we would be aware of the process by now. For instance, we are told that unionised witches and Tarot card readers are regularly employed as business consultants and personal advisors, yet for them to have secured such a prominent place in the life of the country a movement to make witchcraft respectable would have to have made considerable headway by now. That there is no such movement is one factor among many that shatters any pretensions that this is a serious glimpse of a possible future. Worse, Griffin laces these massive social changes with glimpses of a culture that appears to have frozen sometime in the last decade, or perhaps earlier. Where you would expect changes, they have not occurred -- indeed, even changes that we know to have occurred over the past ten years appear not to have been taken into account.

There is a certain amount of narrative drive: things happen with sufficient regularity to prevent you from growing bored with the complete absence of other saving graces. And if ever things start running down too much, or even Griffin realises that it is getting too silly, then he shifts the focus. This is obviously an attempt to delude the reader into thinking that Century's End is a big novel covering a lot of ground, but the characters all have a one-dimensional sameness that makes it difficult for the reader to comprehend that he's actually talking about someone else.

No, I am afraid that Century's End does not possess anything remotely resembling believability, and its cock-eyed vision of the future is presented with such a total lack of descriptive power that the reader is forever left wondering what on Earth the author might be whittering on about. A synopsis of the plot would be of little assistance, instead making it all seem even more ludicrous than it already is. But it is a book to avoid, of that you can be certain.

John Brunner -- THE INFINITIVE OF GO (Magnum, 154pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by John Hobson

John Brunner's reputation was made, I believe, by his SF thrillers, short and sharp novels endowed with sufficient wit and style to attract attention and readers. But he wanted to be taken seriously, and from Stand On Zanzibar onwards has produced a series of what I feel are pompous, dull and overlong novels which the public appears to have shunned: hence their current unavailability in the UK. As a result, he has been forced to return to the previously maligned world of the SF thriller, and throughout The Infinitive Of Go his condescension for it is barely concealed.

The plot is built around dreary old matter transmission machines which in this case transport people into other dimensions. Brunner sidesteps the scientific absurdity inherent in the concept by having computers invent the transmitters because, he tells us, mere man cannot conceive of the blueprints. This seems a modern variation of the "there are some things man was not meant to know" line beloved of the pulps, and perpetuates the myth of the computer as a self-contained thinking entity; but a computer is only as good as its program, and if the programmer is human then the program will be written within the limits of our perception: the computer cannot create a perception for itself.

Ignoring these threadbare foundations would be possible if the novel was written with the same verve as his earlier ones, but Brunner compounds the paucity of his ideas by setting the story in the post-oil-age American wasteland he depicted, to numbing effect, in The Sheep Look Up, resulting in an atmosphere that congeals like treacle. The characters are the usual stock figures of American SF: power-crazed millionaires, war-mad Pentagon generals and honest scientists, but special mention must be made of the co-inventor of the transmitter, Cinnamon Wright, a black female and a lesbian, and thus a token minority group for every occasion.

What action there is revolves around the other inventor of the transmitter, Justin Williams, who is transported into a dimension in which Cinnamon is a nymphomaniac; in a classic piece of wish-fulfillment, a black woman rapes a white male. Then, while our hero explores the slightly altered world in which he is now trapped, an English-speaking baboon pops up in the transmitter and proceeds to tell dirty jokes. In his world, apparently, baboons inherited the Earth and homo sapiens are the equivalent of the baboons in ours; but since God is an Englishman, the baboons have ended up with a world exactly parallel to our own, Shakespeare and all.

By now, whatever logic the book might have possessed has entirely disappeared, and it reaches instead for new and more surrealistic heights. Although the baboon's existence is kept secret, six thousand people visit the labs to discuss the impact he will have on the world, holding forth in the "instant city" that has arisen outside. The baboon eventually has a coming out party, except that the guests are too busy drinking to pay him much attention; meanwhile, all those refused an invitation lay siege to the place and, as they finally crash their way in, everyone seems somewhat surprised that the baboon has turned neurotic and that word has leaked to the press.

The book comes to an abrupt end (coincidentally at the 50,000-word mark), leaving the reader wondering how this travesty of literature ever crawled out of the slush pile. It may be intended for the easy-to-please mass market, but it shortchanges the reader on entertainment, originality and value. Perhaps Brunner doesn't care -- and, certainly few readers will.

Poul Anderson -- CONQUESTS (Granada, 250pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Kevin Smith

I promised myself, before I started reading this book, that I would take no notice of Anderson's political beliefs: no John Hobson, I. I would even try to find something to like about it, to annoy Joseph. I can say that I tried; I really did. I began at the beginning, with Anderson's foreword, and for the first couple of paragraphs I thought I was going to make it. But by the end of the first page (within, say, 300 words) my hackles had risen and my resolution had gone out of the window.

Conquests is a morally objectionable book. Anderson sees war as inevitable. This is not so unusual; there is a huge history of war, and to deny it would be foolish. So a lot of people would quite likely be in agreement with Anderson, so far. But then he decides that if there's going to be war, we might as well enjoy it, and give it some glorification too. So he's cobbled together seven stories, purportedly about war, which, written between 1955 and 1964, support his view.

I say "purportedly" and I mean "purportedly". A war-monger reading this collection would be disappointed, if he could get beyond the big words, like "entertainment", on the second line of the foreword. In addition to this, Anderson has written a short introduction to each story, explaining how each supports the foreword. Well, the first couple do, but then they seem to drift off the theme; ~~the~~ last story has nothing to do with war at all. They are action and adventure stories, and some of them mention war, but they are not concerned with war in the way that Anderson says they are. War is a backdrop for a gimmick story in "Inside Straight". It has been abolished in "License", but at the cost of having a society in which organised crime is legal, and the criminals have two trades unions whose initials are AFL and CIO (a little American joke, there) -- which is actually contradictory to his thesis! And war plays no part at all in "Strange Bedfellows", which is merely a kidnap and conspiracy story.

This is plain dishonest. Never mind that I find his views reprehensible; I might just have found some respect for him from somewhere if he'd presented his case in a proper manner, but he didn't, and so he forfeits all respect. I say again, this twisting of the interpretation of his stories is dishonest. It is a discredit to science fiction. It is a discredit to literature. He's a little bugger, that's what he is.

I haven't said much about the individual stories, but I'm not going to -- each one is flawed, each one is gimmicky. Every story has a little lecture in which one person instructs another in things he already knows but the reader doesn't and has to. Anderson is damn cunning here -- he knows that this is what he's doing (which a lot of skiffy authors don't), so he tries to disguise it, thus: "Forgive me if I repeat obvious facts", "Forgive me if I repeat what you already know", "Pretend I haven't read (your report). Pretend I don't even know deep-tap procedure. I'll tell you why, later on, but right now go ahead and talk". Pretty good disguise, eh?

Dreadful book! Pustulant! Nauseous! Excremental! Every copy should be gathered together and burned with the author securely roped down in the middle of them!

(So much for critical standards. At the first opportunity, it's straight back to basic abuse. Oh well....)

Jack L. Chalker -- MIDNIGHT AT THE WELL OF SOULS (Penguin, 360pp, \$1.75)

Kevin O'Donnell -- WAR OF OMISSION (Bantam, 260pp, \$2.75)

Reviewed by Eve Harvey

For some time, I've been convinced that a reader's impression of a book depends not only on its stylistic merits but also on whether it has been read in the right environment. Some novels are definitely better if read at certain times and places, and finding the correct ones is important. For example, authors like John Fowles, Angela Carter, J. G. Ballard and Gene Wolfe are better read in peace and quiet so that their poetic prose can be appreciated to the full; Len Deighton should be read in one sitting to obviate the necessity of recapping whole sections in order to remember the plot; space opera a la Doc Smith should be read in small doses while waiting for trains so that its repetitiveness is less obvious. Midnight At The Well Of Souls and War Of Omission are books to read while commuting, when what is required is sufficient plot to help pass the time and are not involved that you miss your train or want to continue reading in the office. As such, both novels are more or less successful.

Although at first sight they appear completely different -- Chalker's is set in the far future on an alien planet peopled by archetypal space opera monsters and O'Donnell's in the America of the day after tomorrow -- they are in fact surprisingly similar. Both are mild adventure stories, but both attempt substance by the inclusion of a deep philosophical moral.

Both are similar in their complete and utter failure in this sphere, and the tediousness of the morality detracts from the superficiality of the plot. Thus they both fall between stools, satisfying no-one.

War Of Omission has as its central theme the hoary old problem of revolutionaries using stolen weapons to further their aims with no thought for what their use may cause. Here, the weapon in question is a "Tisser" (Time-Space Separation Unit), which makes its target disappear. But the target isn't destroyed, it just ceases to exist and, as far as memory is concerned, has never existed. The subsequent confusion is well described -- once you've tissued somebody or something then, because it never existed, you don't know you've done it; when buildings are tissued streets suddenly end, making all the maps appear wrong; and so on. O'Donnell finds a reasonably acceptable solution to the problem by making the process reversible, but by doing so rather sidesteps the issue. Moreover, although the people are returned, their period in no-space has psychologically altered them, the alteration being dependent on their frame of mind when tissued and the length of time they remained tissued. So far so good, but the happy ending in which the revolutionaries are working hard to repair the damage they caused and rebuild society, is nonsense -- what kind of revolutionaries are they, to backtrack so?

Midnight At The Well Of Souls is less innovative; in fact, Chalker has mixed a cocktail with ingredients from many other novels. The recipe would read something like: take one cops and robbers theme, add a dash of good/bad guy, spice with elements of Gateway and TV's The Fantastic Journey, and add Heinlein's Lazarus Long to taste. Shake, but do not stir, and you get secret gateways in space built by a long-forgotten race which transport people to a strange planet divided into different sectors, each with its own climate and society. Somewhere on the planet is a secret which, if used improperly, could destroy the universe. With some baddies who want to use the secret for their own ends and the good/bad guy as the cavalry, you have the resulting plot, a tedious chase pepped up by the inclusion of a further twist -- when transported to the planet, the creatures are also transformed into different forms, so that we get batmen, amorous female centaurs, intelligent miniature dragons, sentient dolphins, the lot.

If Chalker had only left things there, then this novel could have been a harmless romp through the best-known skiffy cliches, but unfortunately his protagonist, Nathan Brazil, has been given a "terrifying secret" which has been erased from his memory and is only returning with numbing slowness. Yet the secret is patently obvious, in essence at least, from about page 100 in. Its eventual "revelation" reminded me of the climax to Soylent Green: "Soylent is people!" Shock! Horror! And my reaction was the same -- so what?

If, like me, you have a tedious journey into work each day, then these two novels could help relieve the monotony, but I'm not sure that I'd feel so charitable had I actually paid out money for them. With the spiralling cost of paperbacks these days, books like these are likely to find themselves in trouble. If you can find them remaindered, however, then they might give value for money.

Philip K. Dick -- THE DIVINE INVASION (Corgi, 244pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

After the baffling, schizoid puzzles and quasi-paranoid obsession of Valis, the relative calm and clarity of The Divine Invasion...in which God, thrown off the Earth after the defeat of the Zealots at Masada in AD70, is smuggled back there in the form of a baby born to a pair of colonists in the CY30-CY30B system, who are guided and aided in this by a man who claims to be the prophet Elijah. An accident shortly after their landing kills the mother and puts the "father", Herb Asher, into cryogenic suspension until he can be given a new spleen, and ten years pass while the child, Emanuel, grows up under Elijah's care, until he goes to a special school and... But summarising the book's plot will tell us nothing about its theme, with which it never seems wholly integrated; this, a main subtext of Valis (which it's not necessary to have read to comprehend, although at the very least it explains the basis of Dick's approach), is the supposition that God

is deranged, and that His obsession with the rooting out of Evil (personified here by an unlikely joint dictatorship of the Roman Catholic Church and Stalinism) and the judging of mankind before allowing us entry to Heaven will involve the destruction of much that, even in his own estimation, is beautiful and worthy of preservation. This dilemma is posed by Emmanuel's relationship with one Zina Pallas, sometime companion at the special school and later Adversary, with whom he trades quotes from the Torah and by whom he is tricked into letting Belial, the true Antichrist, in the form of a goat-thing from Sirius, out of its cage in the zoo. But there the really interesting part of the novel comes to an end, its issues left dangling and unresolved, as Dick veers off into a parallel Earth where Emmanuel and Zina contend for the soul of Herb Asher (and thus ultimate victory over one another) through the persona of Linda Fox (actually Dick's favourite contemporary singer, Linda Ronstadt, in slight disguise), who sings sixteenth century lute songs to a rock backing. (The quasi-autobiographical wish-fulfillment tone of this is quite interesting, since Dick did once state that he'd like to have been the man who discovered Ronstadt and signed her up; and in this alternate Earth, Herb Asher, patron of an audio equipment store (the sort of place where Dick once worked), is almost in on her discovery. Thankfully, Dick stops him short of actually going to bed with her.) Through some sleight of auctorial hand, she is eventually revealed as Asher's Advocate just before the novel closes; given that Belial-as-goat-thing-from-Sirius is killed at about the same moment, we have to assume that Emmanuel has won and that the Earth will now be destroyed: but the whole passage is so fuzzy in execution that it's impossible to tell which side Dick is favouring, and the central conflict to which the story ostensibly addresses itself remains as unresolved as before. It's almost as though, having set himself to tackle such a theme, Dick realised that he'd bitten off rather more than he could chew and tried to disguise his backing away from it by suggesting to readers that they should make up their own minds; but the unfortunate truth is that The Divine Invasion, although by turns exhilarating and mystifying, never quite lives up to its initial promise, and has instead to be regarded as an (immensely) interesting and frustrating failure.

Jack Vance -- SLAVES OF THE KLAU (Coronet, 126pp, £1), SPACE OPERA (Coronet 166pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

Not in Vance's usual pseudo-xeno-anthropological mode, these are two space adventure tales aimed at the juvenile reader: both reissues, both pretty mediocre, but worth some extended comment to bolster up this contemptuous dismissal.

Slaves Of The Klau (copyright 1958) tells how a formidable alien race is beaten hollow by the vitality and sheer gutsiness of the redneck US hero. As well as the baddie aliens, the Kalu, there are goodie aliens whose superior knowledge Barch uses to smash the Klau's control of their slave-labour-camp planet Magalak, and one of the goodie aliens is the beautiful golden girl, Komeitk Lelianr, who bears Barch's child, thus leading us into a standard Mills & Boon romantic finale. A commonplace of the sociological analysis of text is that it's at the level of mediocrity that fiction most clearly exposes a society's preoccupations (see, for example, Colin Wilson's Snobbery With Violence on the English murder mystery), for the author does not muddy the received stereotypes with any bias of original thought. Viewed as a product of contemporary American culture, Slaves Of The Klau, like a laundered Mandingo launched into space, seethes with xenophobic paranoia mixed with the thrill of miscegenation -- Barch can be seen as both "white man" in his skin colour and WASP destiny in winning out over the beastly blacks, and as "nigger" since he's a slave and lusts for the women of a superior race. It's a confusion of racist cliches which, given a spot of thought, might have been turned into some sort of statement about transcending racism, but flung naked before us with no more disguise than the threadbare action plot affords, it's downright repulsive.

Space Opera (copyright 1965) is perfectly innocuous, and achieves a lightness unusual for Vance. Ostensibly about a grande dame taking a grand

opera company to tour the stars, the title stands as the punch-line to the extended joke of the story, but like so many of Vance's other punch-line stories the joke rather loses itself along the way. In this case, the sidetracks are pastiches of Agatha Christie and P. G. Wodehouse. The cast of characters -- strongminded, rich, eccentric aunt; charming, feckless, penniless nephew hanging on her purse-strings; charming young gel with a secret -- are common enough to both, and the silliness of the events which lead to yet another romantic happy ending are reminiscent of Wodehouse flattened by Christie at her most plodding. I kept waiting for the body to turn up in the spaceship's library, but that anticipation remained unsatisfied; nor does the writing ever rise to the frothy rhetoric that is Wodehouse's great charm. Vance has pastiched the worst of both authors. Never substantial enough to become boring, it never rises to being actually funny. It's an extraordinarily bland sort of book, a soothing literary pabulum. I'd recommend it to those who like baby-food.

Phyllis Gotlieb -- EMPEROR, SWORDS, PENTACLES (Ace, 299pp, \$2.75)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Once upon a time, a small group of colonists landed on a world called Qsaprinel. On it was a fungus that affected their babies, retarding their development in utero and causing them to permanently resemble embryos once born. The villain, Thorndecker, swears revenge on Qsaprinel and its native population, a race of peaceful, philosophical crayfish. A motley collection of heroes, including the Emperor of the Qsaprinli, assorted humans (two coloured blue) and two bid red pussycats Save The World.

Another boring space opera, slightly more technicolour than average, you may think. But in fact this is that thoroughly enjoyable type of story that with only a slight change of genre could be truthfully described as a rattling good yarn. The plot is more or less irrelevant, which is a good thing since it's swamped by incident after incident, minor character after minor character, and a wealth of useless but fascinating information. (Did you know that there's a hereditary blood disorder called methemoglobinemia that turns people blue? It's not at all necessary to the plot, but two of the cast happen to suffer from it.) All this detail is needed to obscure the fact that the reader is required to swallow just about every convention that's ever been used in SF, with not a trace of explanation. FTL travel, a galactic bureaucracy, ESP as a standard method of communication, multiple intelligent alien races looking like crayfish, cats, onelegged chickens covered in leaves (I'm not kidding), and Indescribable Things which you don't have to worry about meeting because they always look like something else. Just take a deep breath, hold your nose, and suspend your disbelief.

Another entertaining but confusing device is that Gotlieb doesn't use chapters but divides her book into short sections given the title of a Tarot card. Events do more or less tie up with the accepted meanings of the cards to create an enjoyable series of allusions and an external structure to contain the author's rampant imagination. (My baser nature wonders if she didn't work out her plot by pulling cards from a deck.) Given this and the title, I expected the Tarot-reading character to be more important to the story than she actually was. But never mind; on with action....

In short, this is an unpretentious, fun story, pure light entertainment out of Piers Anthony's "Cluster" trilogy by Lloyd Biggle's Watchers Of The Dark, and recommended for a train journey.

One of these days, I shall learn to estimate lengths properly -- despite my usual worries about not having enough material and consequent urging of everyone to beat the deadline, I have a number of reviews left in the inventory. My apologies, then, to Chris Bailey, Ann Collier, Dorothy Davies, Chris Morgan and Kevin Rattan for being left out; they will appear next time, together with other reviews by Brian Smith, Ray Owen, Judith Hanna and little old me, plus a "Blood On The Racks" column by Roy Macinski (is that what they call a Heavy Hint?) and whatever else turns up -- there doesn't seem to be all that much coming out at the moment, which may or may not be some sort of blessing in disguise.... See you in August.