

# PAPERBACK INFERNO



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Volume 6 Number 2 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas (at the by now familiar address of 22 Denbigh Street, Pimlico, London SW1V 2ER, United Kingdom), this issue containing reviews by....well, I have material on hand from practically everyone who's ever written for Inferno, so I'll be squeezing in as many different names as I can. The contents are copyright 1982 by The BSFA Ltd on behalf of the original contributors, to whom all rights are hereby returned.

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## BLOOD ON THE RACKS -- Joseph Nicholas

Once more into the breach, and once more I find myself on the verge of voicing my tediously familiar refrain about P & SF -- but since you're probably as bored with it as I myself, I won't. Nor will I simply pick out what I think are the best stories of the past four months' issues (July -- October 1982), since there are so few of them that this column would be over almost before it had begun -- never mind failing to demonstrate just why those stories deserve such an accolade. What I am intending to do, and which I think will prove much more interesting, is to make direct comparisons between some of the stories on offer with the aim of exposing one of the reasons for that aforesaid why; including, because it's partly by comparison with what is bad that we arrive at an estimation of what is good, why some stories are the failures they are.

I say "some of the stories" because I clearly haven't the space (or the stamina!) to discuss them all (a total of thirty-seven, just for the record) and I freely admit that my selection owes as much to personal taste as to a desire to reveal the why -- never mind the fact that I'll be approaching them from a perspective that may seem arbitrary but is nevertheless of paramount importance to our appreciation of good literature. What I wish to grapple with, in other words, is the matter of style -- a horribly nebulous concept, to be sure, since the essence of good style is that it should not draw undue attention to itself and should certainly not dominate to the exclusion of all else. Yet without good style there is nothing, for a work of fiction cannot possibly "live" if the author's choice of words is clumsy or infelicitous, if they do not evoke the necessary images and feelings in the mind of the reader. Its useless to claim (as SF readers are depressingly prone to) that the author's ideas (or characters, or whatever) can cover for this lack, for isn't it obvious that their impact depends intimately on the words chosen to express them, and that the less well they are described the

less memorable they will be? (Never mind the linguistic-structuralist doctrine that ideas cannot be separated from the ideas that contain them, and that what you have to say influences the way you say it (and vice versa)...)

On this basis, then, Larry Niven's "The Lion In His Attic" (July) and Glen Cook's "Raker" (August) are simply terrible. The Niven is another in his "the magic goes away" series, concerning a quest for a magical jewel in the deeps of a sunken castle whose upper stories, projecting above the waves, have been turned into a restaurant (God help us, but can you think of anything more unlikely?); the Cook is set in his "Dread Empire" universe, and concerns a mercenary company's attempts to track down and capture the eponymous rebel; and both have in common, apart from their casts of thousands and hither-thither plotting, a style one would normally expect to encounter only in the pages of the gutter tabloids -- short, punchy sentences with short, punchy words arranged in short, punchy paragraphs that gallop past faster than the eye can track them; breathless, superficial and signalling over and over again that the authors have absolutely no mental picture of what they're attempting to describe. Here's Niven, for example (his characters have just entered the dining room):

"The man who had called was tremendous. The huge platter before him bore an entire swordfish filet. Durily stared in what might have been awe or admiration. 'Merle, by all means! And can you be persuaded to join us?'

"'I would be delighted.' Rordray escorted them to the huge man's table and seated them. 'The swordfish is good --'

"'The swordfish is wonderful!' Merle boomed. He'd made amazing progress with the half-swordfish while they were approaching. 'It's baked with apricots and slivered nuts and...something else, I can't tell. Rordray?'

"'The nuts are soaked in a liqueur called brosa, from Rynildissen, and dried in the oven.'" (p.144)

Evocative stuff, eh? You're told exactly how big Merle is, how tasty the food is...are you hell; apart from his gluttony, you know as little about either as you did at the beginning -- never mind Niven's being so detached from his characters that he can't be bothered to work out exactly which emotion underlies Durily's stare. But here's Cook (his opening paragraphs, in fact):

"The wind tumbled and bumbled and howled around Keystrikt. Arctic imps giggled and blew their frigid breath through chinks in the walls of my quarters. My lamplight flickered and danced, barely surviving. When my fingers stiffened, I folded them round the flame and let them toast.

"The wind was a hard blow out of the north, gritty with powder snow. A foot had fallen during the night. More was coming. It would bring more misery with it. I pitied Elmo and his gang. They were out rebel hunting.

"Keystrikt Fortress. Pearl of the Salient defences. Frozen in winter. Swampy in spring. An oven in summer. White Rose prophets and rebel mainforcers were the least of our troubles." (p.94)

All I get from that is a sense that the author is struggling to describe something he's never seen and hoping that the repetition of certain key words -- wind, cold, snow -- will serve to get his meaning across; but it doesn't, and his sudden change of subject is an open admission that he realises as much.

(A more detailed comparison of these two stories, incidentally, reveals that whereas Niven has sufficient control of his story to let each item of information out as and when he needs it, Cook has none whatsoever: information spills out at random, a blitz of names and places so confused that one spends the first half of the story trying to sort out where one is, who and what the mercenaries and the rebels are, why they're doing what they do...by which time most of the plot has gone by and one has to return to the beginning and start reading all over again.)

I have a theory that the prevalence of this sort of journalese in SF owes less to the bad habits fostered by the incestuousness of the ghetto than to the supposed pre-eminence (in the pulp-derived American model, anyway) of ideas -- i.e., everything has been subordinated to the task of getting the ideas across to the reader in as clear and as unambiguous a manner

as possible, with the result that we not only don't get three-dimensional characters and properly realised backgrounds but we also don't get the sort of richly atmospheric prose without which these things cannot come to be: the language is so plain and unadorned and (in consequence) the story so lacking in depth and texture that there's nothing about it which draws us back to re-read it. But, whether this theory be right or wrong, there's no excuse at all for this sort of writing; it is glib, lazy and thoroughly detestable.

So improve your style and everything will be roses, eh? No, not in the least, because style alone is worthless: you must have something (no matter how cliched) to say, and a good (bad?) example of a story in which style has been allowed to dominate to the exclusion of all else is Avram Davidson's "Dr Dhumbo Singh" (October). Davidson has always been a self-indulgent writer, playing with words simply for the sake of it, but his natural wit usually has enough control of him to shape the words into a coherent whole, a story with a theme and a plot; but in this story the words just run away with him, and the result is an obscure, impenetrable mess. Here's a sample: "A slight shiver passes through Dr (he has neither right nor title to this title, but who would dare deny it him? The AMA? The last platform which they could have occupied together even in combat was also occupied by Albertus Magnus.) passes through Dr Dhumbo S.'s filthy, maugre frame. His tongue protrudes. (It is true that he can, when moved to do so, touch with it the tip of his rather retrousse nose; if it is also true that he can -- and does -- catch flies with it like a toad or chameleon, Mr Underhand has not found the matter meet communicating to me.) His tongue withdraws. 'In short, most valued customer, what is now requisite is a smell which will drive men mad.'" (p.43)

In isolation, this paragraph might seem but a minor aberration, not wholly opaque -- the first parenthesis completely disrupts the sentence in which it appears, and Davidson's use of "maugre" is quite incorrect -- but similar paragraphs crop up throughout the story. Almost every paragraph, in fact, is written in the same laboured, over-ornate manner, and while one might charitably suggest that the piece should be read again in order that its most important words (the "narrative words", if you like) can be brought out, such charity will not be rewarded; the theme is non-existent and the plot so slender that to inspect it at close range will cause it to melt away entirely. There is nothing to it, in short; nothing to which the words are seeking to give body, no images or feelings they are striving to evoke, and the inescapable impression with which I'm left is that Davidson, knowing it, is trying to cover for it by sheer weight of words.

It's a relief, then, to turn to someone who does understand the problem of style, who knows how to use words in such a way that they will convey the exact images he wants with the detail he needs: Brian Aldiss, who's experimented with many different styles throughout his career. "Door Slams In Fourth World" (October) is another in his "Zodiacal Planets" series, laid in a future in which Western capitalism has more or less collapsed, its survivors eke out a living in the artificial habitats orbiting the Earth, and Chinese Communists dominate everywhere else. You can't get much more bizarre than that, and this story -- concerned with the doings of brash American tourists in a Europe ("the Fourth World") devastated by war with the Arabs and under reconstruction by the Chinese -- plays it for all it's worth, with Aldiss's typical relish for the seedy and decayed well to the fore. Here's sample:

"They came to a kiosk labelled INFORMATION. A Chinese attendant directed them to a cab rank. Obediently, they traversed hot tarmac to where a thin line of people stood, emitting the squawking noise common to tourists visiting less favoured parts of the world.

"Battered B.M.s with biogas envelopes lashed to their roofs drew up and bore the travellers away. Azuranian and the Hemingways climbed into a vehicle with a German driver. He stowed their luggage in the boot. Beside the steering wheel on the dash was his photograph, with a notice assuring passengers in the four international languages that he was a morally irreproachable person." (p.120)

You can't help liking prose like that, not least because it's such an accurate rendition of the way things would be. But...although I said that Aldiss

plays it for all it's worth, he does so only with regard to the background and the mood his description of it evokes, since the actual story, the plot, exists independently of it. This concerns the half-hearted quest of a neurotic American woman for escape from her marital problems and her family responsibilities via dreary sexual adventures with others (by Marilyn French out of Erica Jong, or thereabouts); a modern American preoccupation, to be sure, and one that Aldiss was perhaps attempting to satirise, but if so he doesn't succeed, precisely because his style is so unsuited to it. Indeed, the style in question (as displayed in the above quote) evaporates almost entirely around the fifth or sixth page, leaving us with nothing but bare, colourless description and an unrewarding plod to the all-too-protracted finish.

Another writer who understand the uses of style is J. G. Ballard, whose "Myths Of The Near Future" (October) is part of a loose trilogy of stories with similar themes and settings (the other two are "News From The Sun" and "Memories Of The Space Age", the latter of which is strangely absent from his new collection). The themes are the breakdown, in various ways, of our perception of the flow of time and the settings are the abandoned (sometimes overgrown, sometimes surrounded by desert) launch pads of Cape Kennedy. An explanation for the breakdown -- that man, by penetrating beyond the atmosphere, disturbed a cosmological principle and brought time to a halt -- was advanced in "News From The Sun", but not in the other two; but this doesn't matter very much, since Ballard is concerned less with providing a plausible rationale for his ideas than with a piercing examination of what they actually mean, what vistas of the imagination they open up. The protagonist here is Sheppard, searching for an ex-wife he's been told is dead but whom he believes still lives because, he thinks, there's no real past or future: everything that has been and will be coexists at one and the same instant, and it's not so much that the flow of time has stopped as that we're beginning to break through to a supreme, timeless moment in which we will live forever. Opposing him is Martinsen, the man who last saw his ex-wife alive, and who is seeking to refuse this next evolutionary step by devoting himself to the reconquest of the air, hoping that the (supposedly) liberatory power of flight will cut him free from both space and time. Here's an extract:

"At dawn Sheppard fell asleep, only to be woken two hours later by a sudden shift of light in the darkened bedroom. A miniature eclipse of the sun was taking place. The light flickered, trembling against the window. Lying on the bed, Sheppard saw the profile of a woman's face and plumed hair projected onto the plastic blinds.

"Bracing himself against the eager morning sunlight, and any unpleasant phobic rush, Sheppard eased the blinds apart. Two hundred feet away, suspended above the cabins on the far side of the swimming pool, a large man-carrying kite hung in the air. The painted figure of a winged woman was silhouetted against the sun's disc, arms outstretched across the canvas panels. Her shadow tapped the plastic blinds, only inches from Sheppard's fingers, as if asking to be let into the safety of the darkened bedroom.

"Was Martinsen offering him a lift in this giant kite? Eyes shielded behind his heaviest sunglasses, Sheppard left the cabin and made his way around the drained pool. It was time now to make a modest challenge to the sun. The kite hung above him, flapping faintly, its silver wire disappearing behind a boat house half a mile along the beach." (p.62)

Such prose cannot be described as other than cool, restrained and straightforward, but it is precisely because it is so cool, restrained and straightforward that the images Ballard seeks to conjure up for us come through so strongly -- deranged, fantastic images, to be sure, yet the clinical exactness of their description, a literal transcription of what Ballard sees in his own mind, is what gives them body, makes them real. As, of course, it does with all the images that occur and recur in his fiction: the images to be conveyed prescribe the language in which they are to be described, and the language informs and crystallises the image. The two are one, and the result is writing of a kind that you savour as you read and return to again and again.

(Next issue, Andy Hobbs will be looking at Analog and Isaac Asimov's.)

Samuel R. Delany — THE BALLAD OF BETA-2, THE JEWELS OF APTOR, THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION and BABEL-17 (Bantam, 115pp, 166pp, 147pp and 193pp respectively, \$2.50 each)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

Delany is one of SF's major talents, The Ballad Of Beta-2 one of his minor, early works. Those interested in the development of Delany's writing will find in it a number of the themes dominant in his later novels, where they are explored with much greater subtlety and skill. Unlike any other Delany novel, this one sticks to its plot; and this, I suspect, is what weighs it down, for the keynote to Delany's individual voice is the liberties he takes with his plots, improvising around them as if they were jazz melodies, weaving complex chords upon the themes of myth and history, language and meaning, social freedom and conformity. The art is in the combination of these notes, but in The Ballad Of Beta-2 that falls flat. The resulting novel lies on the readable side of didactic, an undistinguished book whose reprinting is justified by the stature its author later achieved.

The Jewels Of Aptor was actually Delany's first work of SF, first published in 1962, when he was 20; The Einstein Intersection was first published five years later. Both are ambitious explorations of myth and of how "in myths things always turn into their opposites" and both show signs of a debt to Robert Graves's The White Goddess; but The Jewels Of Aptor, though readable enough, is perhaps more interesting as a precursor of The Einstein Intersection than for its own sake.

The Jewels Of Aptor is about a voyage from one, known, island, Leptar, to another, mysterious island, Aptor, which is said to be the home of the evil god Hama; a poet, a thief and a strong man are sent by Argo Incarnate, the White Goddess, to steal from Hama a powerful, "magic" jewel and her kidnapped daughter (who is also Argo Incarnate). Such are the bones of the story; that so much of the rest can be discarded as unnecessary to the plot is a measure of how little Delany succeeded in integrating subtle minor themes with its core. The outcome of the quest is neither clear-cut success nor failure; by playing around with the epic-blockbuster structural opposition between Good and Evil — personified by the white, female Argo and the dark, male Hama — Delany makes the yin/yang point that each term of the opposition is dependent on the other to define it and give it meaning.

I can conceive of no way to adequately summarise The Einstein Intersection; every incident contributes some significance to the whole. One can point out that it contains elements of various myths; the legend of Orpheus, for one, who almost managed to rescue his beloved from death — central to this myth is what Graves poses as the fundamental question a poet must tackle, "What survives of the beloved after death?" or, posed structuralistically, "How does love (human subjectivity) mediate between life and death?" Like Orpheus, Lo Lobey, the musician, tries to get his Friza back from Kid Death. Another legend is that of Christ, the crucified son of the Virgin — or is Greeneye, the one-eyed, more like two Norse gods, the one-eyed Odin, hung upon the World-Tree, "myself sacrificed to myself", to gain knowledge, and Baldr the beloved killed accidentally by his dark twin Nodr at the instigation of Loki the traitor just as Lobey, set up by Spider, kills Greeneye. A third legend is that of the Virgin herself, who is also Aphrodite, Helen of Troy and Marilyn Monroe, the embodiment of desire, and who, as Dove, is not just "all things to all men" but a hermaphrodite, "all things to all". Fourthly and finally, there's the legend of Theseus who, like Lobey, penetrated the labyrinth to kill a man-bull. One might liken the novel itself to a labyrinth; ~~PHALERA~~, the computer in whose cave Lobey kills the bull, says "I suppose you have to exhaust the old mazes before you move on to new ones"; but Delany shows, in The Einstein Intersection, that the "old mazes" are far from exhausted, for by recombination of the old archetypal elements he produces new and just as intriguing mazes. Project the old myths into a far-flung future, posit a race of "psychic manifestations, multi-sexed and incorporeal, trying to put on the limiting mask of humanity", linked to humanity only by their obsession with retreading our old maze as these myths define it for them — "We've had quite a time assuming the rationale of this world. The irrational presents quite as much of a problem", says La Dire. Delany is showing us a "reality" which is a new



prineval chaos, through which myth, like Ariadne's thread, unravels a fragile negotiable order, an order not inherent in the chaos of reality but a product of the process of human perception.

In The Jewels Of Apor, myth is shown as a structure of opposites which define and depend on each other; in The Einstein Intersection, Delany is concerned not with myth as an object but as a creative process of the human psyche. Whereas The Jewels Of Apor is a work of fantasy conforming to the stereotypes of the genre, The Einstein Intersection is as much a work about fantasy, in which Delany explores the archetypal mythic patterns which provide the roots of fantasy; by thus reflexively examining the materials of which it is built, The Einstein Intersection breaks through the conventional limitations of genre fantasy.

Babel-17 is equally as complex, perhaps more so. On one level, it's a space opera -- Captain Rydra Wong gathers together an improbably but convincingly gaudy crew to sail her spaceship, the Rimbaud, into the midst of an interstellar war between Alliance and Invader to track down a saboteur; and this space opera setting invites comparison with the later Nova, not only because both are space voyages but because the central character of Nova, Kachin, is a novelist absorbed in the relationship between history, story and myth, while Rydra Wong is a poet who finds herself balancing on the nexus between logic and subjectivity as two opposed components of thought embodied in language. On another level, Babel-17 is a mystery story, a decipherment set-up like Poe's "The Goldbug" or Conan Doyle's "The Dancing Men", but the answer is no mechanical substitution code and the saboteur to whose discovery the baffling language Babel-17 serves as clue is no simple villain. Babel-17 itself turns out to be a weapon, a language of pure and precise logic, its syntactic and semantic system so constructed that acceptance of its structure allows the language itself to take over and eliminate the personality -- a rather far-fetched hypothesis which stretches to the limits of reason the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that the forms of a language constrain the thoughts expressible in it, but nonetheless an immensely subtler exploration of same than, for instance, Vance's woodenly heavy-handed The Languages Of Pao. To some extent, Babel-17 is both the villain and the saboteur -- language not only as tool but also as antagonist. On yet another level, though -- and since this is the level which dominates the book's ending, perhaps this is the level which Delany intended as its dominant theme -- it's an exploration of the reciprocity of the opposed roles of Hero and Villain, of their symmetry and inescapable interdependence as the two poles of a dichotomy which, like the reflexivity between "I" and "you", is an artifact of the viewer's perspective. So you could read Babel-17 as a gaudy space opera with high-faluting interruptions mixed in with the action and a rather weak ending which never does explain how the sabotage was actually done, or you could read the space opera as an ornate setting-up of a metaphysical conceit which Delany, having outlined, leaves teasingly blank. Either way, it's worth reading.

Frank Herbert -- DIRECT DESCENT (New English Library, 186pp, £2.25)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

I suppose that most writers have a skeleton in their cupboard, something published early in their career which causes them to wake up screaming in the dead of night. This is Herbert's skeleton, clattering into the light of day in a large format, illustrated edition. What Direct Descent descends directly from is "Pack Rat Planet", a short story which appeared in Astounding in 1954, and is presumably one of the two "parts" which comprise this present volume. These parts are independent (albeit loosely linked) stories, set in the Galactic Library, an institution which occupies the whole of Earth some millenia hence. (Precisely how many is open to question, since an 81st century library which is both 8000 years old and descended from the Library of Congress would seem to be vaguely at odds with history.) In both parts, the Galactic Library finds itself threatened by the government of the day, first by a censor and then by the truly dreadful menace of government accountants. Being an academic establishment, both practically and constitutionally unable to fight, the Library is obliged to turn to subtlety and intrigue in order to defend itself.

Throughout his career, Herbert has been a novelist. He has never been a prolific (or, for that matter, good) writer of short stories. And, during the 1950s, some of his short fiction was, shall we say, written under a single specific influence. Flavour of the day here is Foundation, quite blatantly so. Galactic empires with menacing envoys, devious elder statesmen following obscure master plans, idealistic young heroes up against it -- this one has them all. And perfectly tedious they are too, even if a warmed-over Asinov plot peopled by warmed-over Asinov cardboard did rather stack the odds that way.

A word or two here in Herbert's defence; I gather that he intended to overhaul Direct Descent before publication but found that his hands were tied by the fact that he had signed the rights away. In that case, he has my deepest sympathy, since having his name attached to this book will do his reputation no good at all. Apart from being totally negligible by any conceivable literary criterion, it is also the worst rip-off to come my way in a very long time. Consider: two short stories, in a large print on a small page (ignoring the generously wide margins), and padded out with 69 redundant black and white drawings. It took me about 45 minutes to read, and I'm afraid that 5p per minute is nothing short of daylight robbery.

I think that the most positive effect this book can have is in the form of guidelines to budding authors. For example, do not copy Isaac Asinov, and always read the small print in your contract. And I was amused at the way that the hero of part 2 looks exactly like Paul Newman. There's a cameo appearance by Trevor Howard at the end, too. Obviously, artist Garcia was indulging in the time-honoured game of casting the movie -- but the only casting that Direct Descent requires is off the end of a long pier, with a brick tied to it.

Frederik Pohl (ed.) -- NEBULA WINNERS FOURTH (Bantam, 220pp, \$2.95)

Reviewed by Pascal Thomas

Why have these (more or less) annual Nebula Winners volumes? They do of course bring money into the SFWA coffers, dues which the union does not have to ask from its members. But since you're unlikely to buy this book as a fund-raiser, you'll want to know what's in it for you.

Firstly, a bunch of stories which, with the exception of C. J. Cherryh's "Cassandra", figure prominently in collections of their respective authors' works -- which you'd do well to get if you're interested in their writings. (And I'm not talking about the excerpt from Dreamsnake -- we need excerpts from novels like we need torn-off bits of Playboy centrefolds.)

Ed Bryant and Charles Grant both offer us visions of future entertainment which do not stray very far from what we know today -- SF versions of, respectively, Janis Joplin and the classical stage theatre. Like Walter M. Miller in "The Darfsteller", more than 20 years ago, Grant laments the demise of live actors (and does not convince me much; better to celebrate the struggle of a roving theatre company than that of a 19th century circus, a la Longyear, but still...). Bryant has done better in other stories, and the Janis Joplin mythos has also been put to better use in Michael Swannick's "The Feast Of St Janis" -- which also presents a picture of a decaying USA close to that portrayed in Gene Wolfe's "Seven American Nights".

Pohl's positioning of that last piece at the end of the book, along with Cherryh's "Cassandra" (a story which suggests she should drastically reduce the length of her sagas for quality's sake), shows where the editor's preferences lie -- and have me thinking that a much better anthology series would be the Nebula Losers. For one thing, it would reduce the overlap with the Best Of The Year volumes. Anyway, the luckless Wolfe novella is probably the best thing in the book -- as usual, Wolfe plays with modes of storytelling (tipping his hat here to Montesquieu's Les Lettres Persanes), and "subtle" is the word that best describes his writing.

We all know that Wolfe lost that year to John Varley's "The Persistence Of Vision", and if Joseph Nicholas were writing this now would be the time for the slaughter of Varley to the gods of Meaningful Prose. But, re-reading the story four years later, I still see no reason to condemn it. It has a questionable metaphysical ending, but after hundreds of writers have

striven to depict societies of superhumans Varley manages to describe a truly different culture by assuming a handicap -- and shows perception for their plight while resisting the lure of the Old Hippie syndrome.

But the question here is of the usefulness of the collection. The fact is that all these stories could be found in the Best Of The Year volumes a few years ago, and publicising the award has already been done (and overdone) by the publishers. So we're left with a handful of articles, not all of which make their first appearance here. Leaving aside Pohl's dispensible introduction, we get Asimov descending to Moskowitizian levels in his reminiscences of 1938, Sprague de Camp taking easy potshots at astrology, UFOs and gurus, and Spinrad promising SF writers that they can be the new gurus. I don't really see Spinrad stepping into L. Ron Hubbard's shoes, but then the last words of his piece ("a sense of humour") probably reveal a lot about the whole thing.

So there it is: fairly good stories packaged into a useless volume.

Jack Vance -- THE BOOK OF DREAMS (Coronet, 240pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Jim England

At his best, Jack Vance writes space opera at almost its best. He's been writing for a long time and, unlike many other writers, has improved over that period. He specialises in a light-hearted or humourless approach to what might be called "xenology", meaning the study of extraterrestrial societies and their customs. It is such a relief to come to his writing, after that of so many inferior writers, that it is tempting to say only: here is a craftsman who can be relied upon to provide entertaining, well-written space opera, free of grammatical errors and gruesome violence.

The Book Of Dreams is good, wholesome, escapist, enteratinment. It is the fifth and final novel in the "Demon Princes" series (following The Face, reviewed by Simon Ounsley in Vector 103). It begins with great verve and I found it hard to put down until about halfway through, when the evil fifth prince has managed to slip through Kirth Gersen's fingers, (thus having to be trapped all over again), and in consequence flags a little. But it livens up again towards the end, and climaxes excitingly, without gore. And, having chased the five princes (who killed his parents) through five volumes and seen them off, the hero may (as Vance hints) come to see the futility of a life dedicated to revenge -- he is a millionaire, after all, owning three spaceships and being attractive to beautiful women, and should be able to find better ways of spending his time.

The trouble with space opera, even when it is well-written and avoids the sex-and-violence option, is that it is not "serious" and does not take its xenology seriously. The imaginary societies Vance describes are not radically different from those of present-day America, particularly of the "anything goes" San Francisco Bay area where he lives (and where I lived for a year). There is the same rootlessness and cosmopolitanism (apart from humourously described rustic backwaters), the same set of crank religions, the same materialism, snobbery and status-consciousness, a tendency for people to be manipulative of other people, traffic in exotic foreign produce, crime, bribery, and corruption. The city of Pontefract, "notable mainly for its incessant mist", with its many-coloured houses, crooked streets, and restaurants beside Bottleglass Bay, is San Francisco. Every planet Gersen visits is, in some way, reminiscent of America, with its companies and corporations, banks and hotels, skyscrapers and newspapers, "law enforcement agencies" and something like the Mafia -- even schools with graduating classes and sophomores taught by professors. How else could societies be organised? Vance seems to be asking.

But he has no axe to grind; he just wants to enjoy himself and entertain others with his writing. He likes to invent amusing names for people, places and things (such as the villain's pseudonyms: Fred Framp, Kyril Kyster, Silas Sparkhammer, Wilton Freebus), to describe the colours and smells of places, how people dress and how their rooms are furnished. His most amusing scenes often involve strange ways of speaking; this, for instance: "Bah! Tonight we throw a blanket over theology, as we might cover a cantankerous parrot. Let us rejoice!" (p.159).

My sentiments exactly. Long may such light-hearted stuff continue.



I would have known nothing about Michael Shaara had not Algis Budrys reviewed this story collection in the May 1982 F & SF. Shaara is not mentioned in the Nicholls Encyclopaedia, but Budrys accords him a good deal of respect: "Few now remember Shaara, except as footnote, in the field where once he commanded significant attention over a longish term from the top publications of their day. It was felt then, by people with documented good judgement, that readers would consider this high-quality work".

So — a man of talent unjustly neglected? A man of some talents, yes, but the neglect is understandable and one wonders what prompted the author and publisher (unless it be rumours of a forthcoming novel) to release this anthology now — the stories, for the most part, first appeared in the early fifties — because many of them have a terribly dated feel. Certainly, Shaara's range is impressive, this volume encompassing stories of time paradox, robot intelligence, discovering-now-planet-and-getting-nasty-surprise, political comment, man's evolution, and more besides. But, competently drafted as they are, they hold few surprises — the trouble being that these are stories that are meant to hold surprises. Take his first published story, "All The Way Back" (1951). It is a good example of its kind, which is Clarkeian man striving for the stars/destined for greater things mode. We're told that man's ancestors reached and conquered the stars long ago and that their aggression forced other races to band together in an attempt to exterminate them, but after a mere 30,000 years man is back again and this time he really means business. This field has been bled thoroughly, and while a well-constructed story is timeless there are other and better examples from the forties and fifties that will represent it to posterity.

As I said, a good story should never die, but I think there is another reason for Shaara's neglect: his outlook on life as given in these stories is unlikely to find sympathy with today's reader. In Hemingway's phrase, there is a lot of "working the fat off the soul" — and this reference to Hemingway is not a careless one, for Shaara is of the school which believes that straightforward writing equals clean thinking. There's even a boxing story to point you in the right direction. The best adjective that I can find to describe Shaara's philosophy is the tired one of "macho", and while he never actually says that a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, he comes close: "Sooner or later a man must do a thing which justifies his life, or the life is not worth living". An extract from "The Book" gives a good measure of the mentality of the Shaara hero:

"He's been farther and seen more than any man you will ever meet. I want no cracks and no pity for that man. Because, listen, boy, sooner or later the same thing will happen to you. Why? Because it's too big ...it's all just too damn big. Space is never so big that it can't get bigger. If you fly long enough, it will finally get too big to make any sense, and you'll start thinking. You'll start thinking that it doesn't make sense."

Straight up. These are strong, silent men, and Thoughts don't come easily to them. And are to be lingered over when they do: "The ship was good to feel around him, dark and throbbing like a living womb. Just like a womb, he thought, it's a lot like a womb." Inarticulacy is the hallmark of the Shaara hero, and I don't believe that this sort of character is credible any longer.

Soldier Boy will interest SF historians and those who like their stories straightforwardly crafted in unflowery, if frequently banal, language with the bonus of a good, clear point at the end, but although I don't look for a happy ending and Shaara isn't prone to provide one, the lingering aftertaste of this book is a strangely bitter one. Men will rail against a universe they don't understand and which they therefore interpret as cruel and capricious, seeing their only course as to take life's punches on the jaw; admiring their resolution, one ~~explores~~ their refusal to comprehend.

even if the copyright information had been left out, the batch collected here would be of easily identifiable forties and fifties vintage. This is due as much to their jokey, confident style and the social attitudes revealed thereby as to their themes: spaceships and aliens predominate, usually in stories whose endings are intended as surprises but whose plots are so lacking in substance that they can be seen coming several paragraphs away. The stories also lack substance in terms of their length; many are vignettes of only a page or so, forgotten the moment they're read. Of the longer stories, only "Arena" remains in my memory, but more because of the distastefulness of its xenophobia than anything else; the rest have nothing to commend them either way (except perhaps the tedious male chauvinism of the title story, which is otherwise downright silly). All in all, this one is for completists only.

Jack Chalker -- EXILES AT THE WELL OF SOULS (Penguin, 335pp, \$1.95)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Okay folks: here to whet your appetite is a really neat piece of deathless prose. You'll love this:

"New Pompeii was a large asteroid, a little over four thousand kilometres at its equator. ((Radius? Circumference? Diameter?)) It was one of those few small bits that inhabit all solar systems that deserved to be called a planetoid; it was fairly round, rounder than most planets ((and that's pretty round, I can tell you -- I'm assuming that he means "spherical", incidentally, as my OED says that "round" is usually used to mean "circular", i.e., two-dimensional)), and its core was made up of particularly dense material, giving it a gravity of .7G when balanced against its ample centrifugal force. The effect took a little getting used to ((no, no, I'm used to gravity)), and people tended to do things faster and feel tremendous ((just like this was written?))."

There are two ways of writing yourself out of the problem of describing an alien environment -- one is to simply detail what can be seen, heard and felt with no explanations, asking the reader to take it on trust that the place is like that, and the other is to explain in precise, scientific detail why something is as it is, thus creating an air of authenticity and drawing attention away from all the details that aren't explained. This book seems to attempt both, and achieves neither.

The story opens with the testing of a computer called Obie who can interfere with the structure of reality. Two scientists built it; one is an Evil Scientist and the other is a Misguided Dupe (with adolescent daughter). This computer can apparently turn anything into anything else. Great, you say, let's turn Ronald Reagan into ice cream, let's turn the Moon into green cheese, let's have some fun. So they turn a girl into a centaur and back again, the Evil Scientist programs the Misguided Dupe's adolescent daughter to fancy him ("code it 'love-slave mode' for future reference and store in aux one"), and eventually they put horses' tails on a lot of diplomats. At this point the Markovians intervene.

The Markovians are a vanished master race who knew the Secret of the Universe, i.e., how to fiddle with the reality principle. They built a giant master computer to run the universe by storing its complete current reality on equation form. This computer lives in its own space-time continuum and is in fact the mysterious Well World. The Well World computer decides that Obie has been a bad boy and fiddled too much with reality, so the planetoid New Pompeii (you remember the planetoid? but how could you forget it), bearing the Entire Cast, is extracted from reality-as-we-know-it and placed into orbit around the Well World.

Now you remember that these computers can change anything into anything else? Good. Because the surface of the Well World is made up of hexagons (the Markovians liked hexagons), each containing a life-form made by the Well World computer. As the cover blurb says, "countless bizarre ecologies, locked in a desperate struggle for control of the universe". I don't think I can bear to say much more about the plot than this, except that (predictably) most of the more important personnel get put through the computer and turned into pixies, electric goats, minotaurs, etc., etc..

I don't think I can bear to say any more about this. Come back, Star

Trek, all is forgiven.

Larry Hiven & Jerry Pournelle -- OATH OF FEALTY (Orbit, 328pp, \$1.95)

Reviewed by David Penn

In this novel, business-minded men and women frustrated by the bureaucratic trappings of normal society lock themselves up in a huge one-building city on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The city is administratively independent of the United States and its inhabitants pay no taxes to the federal government, but they have to pay a large amount of money to move in. In return for this, they receive all the benefits of the arcology's high-tech luxuries and the protection of its surveillance cameras, and are also free to exercise all the money-making talents at their disposal without hindrance. All the money they make, they make by themselves for themselves.

Living in squalor outside the arcology are the Los Angeles poor -- those living on welfare -- who are used as causes by ambitious politicians and self-righteous social campaigners, and other than that gaze up in wonderment at the arcology's dazzling heights.

What the authors mean to show by this very pointed contrast is that if we wish Western capitalist society to continue its development along its present course then it must give the talented the means to exercise their talents to the full, with all the incentive they require, while society's "failures" will be able to live better for the wealth and new technology that the successes create, though they cannot expect to reap the full benefit of their betters' industry. Such a system is "evolution in action" -- the authors' own much-repeated slogan -- since the intellectually superior rise to the top and are there free to enrich and advance the whole of society. Their development is society's evolution, since their advances are available for everyone to use if they can first attain the success necessary to gain access to them.

In other words, the authors wish to point out the logic and necessity of the economic system of laissez-faire as they believe it would operate if put whole-heartedly into effect. Their romantic illusions about their utopia -- for example, that so natural a step into the future is it that we of the ordinary world have no more right to judge it than would a Roman legionnaire -- are simply elaborations on their basic ideology. Grotesque ornaments on a tasteless cake. The same can be said of their image of the city as a sort of baronial castle, dominating but at the same time benefitting the serfs (the unemployed and the lower-paid) who live outside it. The desirability of laissez-faire economics also seems to be closely linked in the authors' minds with the idea that it would produce and utilise wonderful technological hardware, but that is hardly a surprise.

What is wrong with this point of view is essentially its narrow-mindedness. The authors consider that the simple fact of an increased standard of living is good for people, irrespective of the circumstances in which they gain that increase. If, for example, people see before their very eyes others living in a style far beyond theirs and as a result come to feel inadequate about their achievements in society, and at the same time are presented with an image of themselves as inferior by the whole ethos of those possessing such wealth, then that is not to be considered important because the relatively poor have increased their real wealth. If the importance of the top social stratum is such that the luxuriousness of their lives is taken as the measure of the "progress" of the whole society, including those members of it who receive no credit for the advance and gain nothing from it, then so be it, because the unimportant can count themselves lucky that they are part of the society that has produced such general wealth and the privileged beings who display most of it.

The authors seem to have no conception of class structure. People are seen as atoms in a homogeneous society, so that everyone has an equal chance of rising to the top. Apparently they do not believe that success is class-linked, that it is achieved by those who are best able to fulfill the middle class role of the numerically and verbally intelligent, well-educated, management-oriented individual (when the middle class not only set the standards but also has the best means of ensuring that its children reach them). The whole image of the book rests on the middle class's dream of the super-

iority and universal merit of its own culture of machines, clean offices and business acumen, and its conception of itself not as a class but as a group of people who have climbed a natural ladder to success because they have the ability to do so.

Oath Of Fealty is a romance by two writers completely enveloped in this dream. They are so insensitive to its contradictions that they write about the people who do not belong to their luxurious new world as though they were cattle. No argument that points out the social injustices inherent in the system appears in the book even for dramatic effect, and none of the welfare takers complain because they don't seem to register the huge gulf between themselves and the rich in the arcology next to their slum. Whether the authors' main fault is political naiveté or political cynicism, their product is equally appalling. They wish us to share a vision of the future which encompasses only the class of people who can afford it, which denies the humanity of those who are not successful within the terms of the most narrow of Western middle class ideals. It is a fantasy of the self-righteously rich: unintelligent, reactionary, and arrogant.

Lisa Goldstein -- THE RED MAGICIAN (Timescape, 156pp, \$2.25)

Reviewed by Ann Collier

Is there a Jewish Fantasy genre? Did I miss the article on it in Foundat-ion? Or is it just that Lisa Goldstein saw in this story of two magicians battling for supremacy in a small East European village an inviting plot into which to weave her warnings about the folly of ignoring events in the real world and seeking refuge in cultural myths?

Not the least of her achievements in The Red Magician is her convincing description of the traditional, ritual-laden atmosphere of the village where all accept without a qualm that magic works. In the eighth line of the book, she casually mentions "the rabbi who could work miracles", and it is to this that he owes his power over the villagers. He is a traditionalist and a man who jealously guards his area of influence. Into this well-controlled village walks Vörös, a young, red-haired magician whose knowledge belies his years and who makes an enemy of the rabbi by using his magical skills to lift a curse imposed by the latter. In a sense, the remainder of the book is the build-up to their final, to-the-death shoot-out. Since all the paraphernalia of magical effects is done with confidence and imagination, Goldstein lures us into a false sense of security by leading us to believe that this is what the book is principally about. It is not.

We see the events of the story through the eyes of Kicsi, a small girl enchanted by Vörös's tales of faraway places. Her enforced growth to adulthood is Goldstein's metaphor for the belated acceptance by these villagers of the evil reality of mankind's inhumanity to man, because what intrudes savagely and with disorienting brusqueness into Kicsi's world is Hitler's Holocaust, and we are thrust from the familiarity of a fantasy about two magicians into the nightmare of the cattle trucks taking the Jews to the concentration camps and the grim business of staying alive there. Initially, I felt Goldstein was simply using the Holocaust as a plot device and that this was extremely sick, but later realised that what happened to the Jews in those days is her central concern and that she is absolutely earnest about it. Kicsi's parents and most of her family die; she herself is near to death when the Allies, and in their wake Vörös, arrive. He has come to save her but she prefers the oblivion of death, and he has to produce all kinds of magical delights to persuade her to hang on to the thread of life so that she can be present when he and the rabbi finally confront each other.

Vörös is a mysterious figure, at least to one unacquainted with Jewish culture. He is eventually named as Gorshon, the Stranger, the exile, the man with no home. He warns Kicsi's family and friends of the impending catastrophe and tells them to leave the village, but they look at everything they have built there and put off the decision until it is too late. The rabbi also has intimations of the future, but chooses not to look. The villagers reassure themselves with the familiar refrain of "After all, what can they do to us?" Kicsi grows to adulthood by learning the answer to that question and the villagers similarly learn that the rabbi's and Vörös's magic are less powerful than the cruel determination of men.

Magic and the Holocaust are not natural bedfellows, however, and there is sometimes an uneasiness about their juxtaposition within this book. But it is clear that Goldstein speaks as emotionally and as sincerely about the historically real events as she enjoys describing the magical effects. She is so much in sympathy with her characters that despite the horror she ends on a note of conciliation and hope, a rather facile and unworthy brave-smile-through-the-tears ending. But the book gets through a lot in its 156 pages, its pace rattling along without ever seeming rushed, and although it is not a particularly memorable work it does make one look forward to her future ones.

Ernest Callenbach -- ECOTOPIA EMERGING (Bantam, 337pp, \$3.50)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

I'm going to recommend a book I found extremely weak.

Read it -- or do something with it, for in many respects Ecotopia Emerging is a lousy book. It's a prequel to Ecotopia, which was, I felt, a genuinely interesting novel in the Utopian tradition, concerning the reactions of an American journalist to the life-enhancing, ecologically-based society on the West Coast of the USA, which had broken away from the federation and aimed to build a society unfettered by the materialism and waste of present-day America. However, whereas Ecotopia had a strong if obvious hook -- the narrator starts off opposed to what he sees as starry-eyed idealism and crankiness but comes to see Ecotopia as a positive alternative -- Ecotopia Emerging, which sets out to explain how and why the country seceded and dramatise events leading up to the breakaway, is weak and flabby, tending to take refuge in Red Indian mysticism and Californian optimism when some incisive thought is called for.

It lacks tension -- even the main plot, involving the discovery of a new way to tap solar energy by a brilliant teenager, Lou Swift (who is of course incredibly beautiful and sexually liberated), has little going for it; much is made of the fact that the big corporations are against it and will stop at nothing, etc., but in truth very little happens and very little trouble is put in Lou's way. The polarities are just too easy -- even Andy, Lou's uncle, a former liberal who sells out to a big corporation, is a stock character who nobly fulfills his function by repenting right at the end. And I really cannot believe in a novel which is supposed to dramatise a revolution in the near future yet says nothing of note about international politics until the story is nearly over and totally avoids any mention of socialism at all.

Yet the irony is that it's a very worthy book. The issues it deals with are vital, in this country no less than the USA, yet Callenbach comes across as a left-wing Heinlein. If you're wise you'll search out some of his ideas in their undiluted, undramatised form (visit your nearest radical bookshop) and read them as well as Ecotopia Emerging. But don't take the fact that I'm trashing this book as a work of fiction to mean that I'm trashing what Callenbach is discussing; just that I'm making the obvious point that a work of fiction has to operate as a work of fiction, however pious and worthwhile the opinions that the author is trying to put over. It's a pity that no one made that point forcefully enough to Callenbach.

James Elish -- THE STAR DWELLERS and MISSION TO THE HEART STARS (Avon, 109pp and 111pp, \$1.95 each)

Reviewed by Kevin K. Rattan

I have admired Elish's work ever since I read Black Easter, and I have read with enjoyment the few books of his that I have been able to get hold of since then. Sadly, despite this, and bearing in mind that I generally believe that any book that's been around for 20 years must have something, I don't think highly of these juveniles. They were first published in, respectively, 1961 and 1965, and other than the reputation attached to Elish's name I can see little reason for their being reprinted.

Elish introduces The Star Dwellers, about a 3-person expedition to make a treaty with an ancient and powerful race of "angels", with a piece discussing the nature of life, concluding that it is negative entropy. His intention seems to be to suggest that life can be very, very alien, and that is



doubtless what he intends his angels to be; but despite his constant assurances as to their alienness, they do not reveal themselves as such through their actions. Perhaps because they never really convince as anything other than the humans in strange shapes, Blish is forced to constantly repeat that humans could never understand what they were doing at such-and-such a time.

The characters are common to both novels, and are disappointingly stereotyped. There is "hero" Jack Loftus, his "rash" friend Sandbag, "romantic interest" Sylvia McCrary and the "competent" Dr Howard Langer. The rationale for Blish's inclusion of characters young enough for his readership to identify with in a mission of such importance lies in his "cadet" system, where children are force-fed with information and are thus capable of being apprenticed to people in high positions and given a great deal of responsibility at an early age.

In both books, Blish uses journeys as an excuse for didacticism. We are told by Dr Langer, a wise-old-man of Heinlein-esque proportions, that pop music "was vile because it was aimed at corrupting youngsters, and then after that job had been done, the corrupted tastes were allowed to govern public taste in music as a whole". Just what you always suspected, eh?

The interaction with the angels in The Star Dwellers is given extra importance by the revelation that humanity's actions could affect its chances of entering the Heart Stars Federation, which has existed at the centre of the galaxy for a million years and which mankind will be allowed to enter only if it passes a 100,000 year test period. Thus are laid the seeds for Mission To The Heart Stars, dealing with mankind's attempt to use the bargaining power given them by their experiences with the angels to join the federation now. Its cover proclaims that: "Their journey to the center of the galaxy could mean incredible advancement for the earth -- or catastrophe!" and for that reason, and because these two books have some of the most sci-fi-ish covers I've seen for a long time, you should get yourself a plain brown wrapper to cover it should you want to read it. But Mission To The Heart Stars does at least have the merit of dealing more concretely with Blish's suggestion of life as negative entropy. Here it is applied to societies: when a society goes into stasis rather than equilibrium it is on its way out. He also makes connections between this and the conflict between high technology and freedom.

Both books have largely cliched elements, whether it is stereotyped characters, the suggestion that man is superior because of his curiosity and zest (something which for some unstated reason the other races lack), or the idea of a galactic federation watching and judging man. I suppose that Blish was banking on his audience being unfamiliar with these concepts. The same holds for his technique: he is painfully obvious when he wishes to make a didactic point and is obviously counting on his readers' inexperience to let him get away with it. This is the major problem with the pair: he is writing down to his audience. If the reader is of the correct age, however, then he or she will find a fair degree of tension and even excitement; but the books cannot be read with much enjoyment by adults, and do not rank high in the range of Blish's works.

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And thus does another issue draw to a close. There's just room to mention here that Chris Morgan's and Dave Langford's Facts And Fallacies has recently been published in paperback by Corgi at the supremely modest price of £1.50, so there's no excuse at all for your not rushing out and buying it (for more details, see my review of the hardback edition in Vector 103). On hand for next time are more reviews by Jim England, Sue Thomason, Chris Bailey, Judith Hanna, Brian Smith and Kevin Rattan, plus material by Martyn Taylor, Paul Kincaid, Dave Langford, Mary Gentle and Nigel Richardson, with more expected from all and sundry....which reminds me to tell you that the inventory no longer looks as embarrassingly overcrowded as it has for most of this year, so you people who still owe me stuff better get your acts together or else I'll have to publish some more of my own reviews (that's an Undisguised Threat, you know....). And I disclaim any and all responsibility for such advertising matter as may be inserted in this magazine, since it's done entirely without my knowledge and without any consultation beforehand, etc. etc. etc., grump grump grump.