

PAPERBACK INFERNO



ISSN 0260-0595

Price 15p

Vol 6 No 4 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas (at the usual address: 22 Denbigh Street, Pimlico, London SW1V 2ER, United Kingdom) and featuring, in this issue, a substantial "Blood On The Racks" column by Chris Bailey, buttressed by as many other reviews as I can cram in. The entire contents are copyright 1982 by The BSFA Ltd on behalf of the individual contributors, who retain all rights.

THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN' -- Joseph Nicholas

I daresay that many of you were rather bemused by the references in the previous issue to my "resignation message" in Vector 113 -- what on Earth was I talking about and, if there was such a statement, what happened to it? Well, there definitely was one, written at Geoff's specific request; but he dropped it at the last moment (without telling me) and the further references to the "impending changes" in Inferno were thus rendered even more cryptic than they might have been.

But what, you're no doubt wondering, are these proposed changes, and what are the reasons for them anyway?

In reverse order, then... When I took over Paperback Parlour (as it then was -- but not for much longer) I saw it as essentially a companion to Vector, reviewing the books it couldn't or wouldn't and thus providing a more extensive coverage of the SF field; but at the same time I wanted this magazine to adopt a more critical approach to such books -- not in the sense of hammering them flat but in the sense of persuading the readers to pay closer attention to and ask more questions about them: to read less for escapism and more for intellectual stimulation. However (and as I pointed out in Vol 6 No 4), with Vector creaming off most of the good books and leaving Inferno to deal with the stuff covered by Sturgeon's Law, the bulk of this magazine's reviews have tended to condemn rather than praise: often vitriolically, often with justification, but with a cumulatively depressing effect -- and after four years I can't be the only one to have noticed the effect it's had on the magazine. An almost palpable air of disappointment and frustration hangs over it, one compounded by the fact that, although a companion to Vector and thus theoretically equal to it, it has remained in a somewhat subordinate position, perpetually overshadowed and denied any opportunity to establish an identity and a direction of its own. It's fallen into a rut, in other words, and badly needs to change before it decays altogether.

At least one of the forthcoming changes is a consequence of a change in Vector's reviews policy, which (as I understand it) means it will now concentrate

mainly on hardbacks, covering only the barest minimum of paperbacks and even then on a very irregular basis. Inferno will thus be free to review all paperbacks, the good as well as the bad and the indifferent, and it will review them at a length commensurate with their worth -- which means, in respect of the good books, that the reviews could be longer than the long ones published in the past and will (where appropriate) be more discursive, focussing on not just the books themselves but also examining their wider contexts (because if art is an attempt to interpret the world then the criticism written about it must attempt to show how that art relates to the world).

This doesn't mean, however, that long reviews will squeeze out short ones and Inferno will therefore cover significantly fewer books than hitherto, since a change in its format (to electrostencilled double column A3 reduced to A4, to be thoroughly technical) will lead to an increased volume of wordage per issue; but it does mean that the amount of space devoted to simply stomping up and down on the grottier titles will be slightly reduced (what is that strange cheering I think I hear?) while the grottiest will be shuffled off into an "Also Received" column with but a few lines of description to their name. None of this, I hope, will reduce the comprehensiveness of the magazine's coverage, and those of you who regard it as a guide to recently-published books will still be able to use it as such; it is more a change in the nature, in the emphasis, of that coverage, and one which I hope will lead to certain changes in the magazine's tone -- remaining rather cutting and in some respects slightly irreverent, but (dare I say this?) becoming somewhat more positive in its overall outlook.

Ho-hum, you say, and probably rightly; only time can tell whether that particular change will come to pass. Other changes, however, are more certain: an increased coverage of non-fiction (as referred to in the letter column of Vol 6 No 5), featuring more than merely popularisations of science of the kind that used to be reviewed under the collective title of "Gernsback Delusion" in the early days of my editorship; reasonably frequent letter columns (I'd hope for one in each issue, but this depends on you); and occasional editorials by yours truly on aspects of science fiction and science fiction criticism that strike me as worth airing.

Sound intriguing? Well, I hope so. Forward, then, into the new dawn of the New Improved Inferno!

BLOOD ON THE RACKS -- Chris Bailey

This column will discuss the last seven issues of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (November 1982 to May 1983) and issue 4 of Interzone. My verdict on F & SF tends to echo Joseph's familiar refrain, that nowadays it is rather a flat and grey little publication, and can no longer be considered to occupy the premier position it held during the 1950s, invidious though comparisons across the years can be. That isn't to say that I don't have a certain amount of sympathy for it. The bulk of the US market for digest-sized SF magazines is carved up between Analog and Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine, with their lowest common denominator appeal, leaving F & SF as very much the poor relation, both in terms of circulation and its lingering concern for quality. It also differs in one other important respect, which is that it attempts to be all things to all men. Analog is the bible of the "hard" end of the market; Asimov's caters to the pulp-adventure audience; but these seven issues of F & SF contain hard SF, social speculation, horror, what might be termed "bastardised folklore", humour, and more besides. On the last occasion that the magazine was reviewed in these pages, Joseph took style as his song, concentrating on a very few stories; this time I propose to discuss genre and sub-genre in order to give some idea of the sheer range, of both subject matter and quality, encompassed in its pages. This will oblige me to comment more briefly on a larger number of stories, so should any of my judgements seem gratuitous then you'll have to take my word for it that they could be substantiated.

F & SF does not have a happy knack in its hard SF selections. Take the lead story for May, "Rogueworld", by Charles Sheffield, which I tried to approach in a charitable frame of mind. Alas, the warning signs began flashing early on:

"'And he's the brightest of the lot of us,' said McAndrew. Coming from him this was a real compliment."

When all the characters repeatedly tell each other how brainy they are then you

know you're in for a feat of smartass speculation, the biggest smartass of the lot being by definition the author, since he has to keep rein on his dazzling protégés. The very plot of "Rogueworld" is the result of weeks of severe cerebration. Two young geniuses contrive to maroon themselves on a dead rogue planet, which of course is not so dead after all. Two older geniuses hijack a spaceship (which short-sighted, penny-pinching, etc., government bureaucrats have forbidden them to take on man's first interstellar expedition) in order to rescue the junior Einsteins, and cleverly they blunder into the same trap. Sorry, I forgot to tell you about the story's epigraph: "'The laws of probability not only permit coincidences; they absolutely insist on them'". This saw is attributed to the great McAndrew and is trotted out whenever the plot strains credulity. Engines shrieking, the ritual escape is effected, but even as unimaginable forces buffet them hither and thither and the bile rises towards eye-level in the spacesuit helmets, the four of them are frenziedly theorising on the rascally behaviour of the rogue-world. A few moments' calmer thought and they realise they're in for a carpeting back on Earth so, there and then, they decide to set out on man's first expedition to Alpha Centauri. They're already pointing in the right direction, you see. Bloody hell.

Hilbert Schenck provides the lead story for April, "Hurricane Claude". Schenck writes stories of seafaring and maritime disasters averted by the power of technology. This is peripheral SF at best considering that the technology is scarcely mind-boggling and that most of it lies within the parameters of present-day achievements. The only other criterion by which Schenck's stories can be considered SF is in the scale of the incidents described; in other words, he makes a direct appeal to the adventure'n'sense-of-wonder fans. With "Hurricane Claude", I had been hoping to cut loose with a few devastating one-liners such as "the storm shows evidence of more characterisation than the characters", but no:

"...A typical spiral cloud-pattern, imposed on the older, more passive cloud structures overhanging a vast middle Atlantic low-pressure region..."

Ah, the sound and fury of Mother Nature at her most wrathful. But maybe the meteorology does have more going for it than the characters, who resemble one of those typical cross-sections of the populace thrown together in disaster movies. One character is bad-tempered, another bigoted, another an ugly genius with a heart of gold, another a middle-aged businessman with a dicky ticker that goes haywire right on cue. The really unpleasant characters are, you guessed it, government bureaucrats trying to red-tape the storm-busting activities of our heroes. The characterisation is impressed from above, as with a rubber stamp, because the real drama in this sort of story is purely on an impersonal level, man versus storm, with the reader's sympathies lying to windward. After "Hurricane Claude", I can scarcely bring myself to write about February's lead story, "Gilpin's Space", by R. Bretnor, who the gnurrs and the voodvork a long way behind are. Can you take another totalitarian government trying to stomp on an enterprising brains trust with a miracle spacedrive?

"Everything's become too complex for the individual genits who just can't or won't fit into a think-tank slot."

Too complex for geniuses? Oh. Part of the premise of these stories is true, and is a valid worry; state intervention in people's affairs is on the increase. But "Gilpin's Space", like "Rogueworld", scarcely faces up to the problem, ending once more with the geniuses blasting off to a romantically misty future in the stars rather than enriching Earth with their IQs. Thanks for the tip.

Proxmire pole-axing plasma-drives is of course the sine qua non of Analog and in making these three pieces the lead stories for their respective months F & SF is clearly hoping to appeal to the same enviably large slice of the market. It's a moot point as to whether stories as bad as these attract or repel the high-tech custom. Good God, here's another; "To Leave A Mark" by Kim Stanley Robinson, the lead story for November. Earth is enfeebled by overpopulation and wars and her vigorous offspring, the colony on Mars, is gradually being throttled by totalitarian government. Mars is home base for a society of asteroid miners, free spirits all and with a sprinkling of geniuses amongst them, including the heroine, Emma ("I quickly proved that I was the best amongst the systems people there"). The free spirits mutiny, kidnap Emma and take her to a secret starship they've hidden amongst the asteroids. This reader wept openly as Emma overcame her initial suspicion of the star expedition, began to utilise her genius to help the pioneers

with their life-support problems and came up with a brilliant wheeze to evade the government police ships. But then it turned interesting; Emma has second thoughts. Romance, freedom, adventure, friends and a selection of ex-lovers beckon her starwards; homewards there is -- well, home and not much else. She is incapable of making such a decision. Her torpor of spirit is well described as she numbly allows herself to be ferried back to Mars, where a revolution is in the throes of failure. Emma crouches with the rebels in the rubble of their homes as they vainly try to repel the hordes of militia descending on starship trooper backpacks: "Little pops like obscene firecrackers burst everywhere above me". This is good; Robinson shows that he is not content to take the easy way out. It would have been a doddle to show Emma vacillating, being won over, finally riding out to Barnard's Star amidst a romantic haze of photons. "To Leave A Mark" is far from being a first-rate story, but it reveals an awareness of human pragmatism and uncertainty that is sadly lacking in the general run of hard SF.

F & SF does rather better with stories of social speculation, or what-life-will-be-like-in-the-future, and there are three interesting examples from the period under consideration. Frederik Pohl's "The New Neighbours" in the May issue offers a future in which humanity has fled to orbiting colonies to escape its own pollution, leaving Earth's cities to the robots. Not a terribly original notion, but presented in an individual style. Our hero, the robot Ralph, has the endearing character of a quirky bachelor, with his finicky pride in his apartment and his ridiculous devotion to his dog. The new neighbours are renegade humans, trendy, liberal, with-it arty types. They don't fit in with the prim tone of the neighbourhood and, with a merry irony, the robot condominium unites to pollute them out. I hesitate to afflict you with phrases like "old master at work", but I enjoyed the relaxed and easy style and the wry humour of the story. Somewhat sterner is Joanna Russ's "Elf Hill" (November), which suggests a method for housing old people in an increasingly poor and overcrowded world. A sleight of hand with space-time allows twenty million souls to "co-exist" in the same apartment. This story isn't Russ at her authoritative best, owing mainly to her assumption of a breathless and scatty persona as narrator, which becomes quite infuriating, but the story still parades qualities that indicate a class writer at work. She does not burden the reader with explicatory paragraphs, lovingly detailing the mess the world has got into; this is very properly made into background information, as it would be in the life of the narrator, and it is gleaned by the reader from hint, detail and allusion, building up into a remarkably complete picture. And then there's the moral spine which can always be found stiffening even the least of Russ's works. Here, she offers no crass answers; the old folk have accepted a horrifying death-in-life existence, but they're happy, while on the outside their life would be grinding misery at best. A contrast again is Felix Gotschalk's "Conspicuous Consumption" (March), in which people's lives are regulated by the quotas of consumer products they must use to keep the economy moving. There's a savage little twist at the end which I won't give away. The story is spiky, funny and irreverent towards every aspect of US life:

"...It was our beloved Potente, Teddy Kennedy, reading us the daily economic growth figures. His full, jowly face and ennobling vocal nuances never failed to inspire me to continuing loyalty to the US. I believe he could have elocuted the most flagrant nonsense and yet have maintained his marvellously charismatic presence."

And so to the horror. Maybe I just don't like horror or maybe F & SF just doesn't print much good stuff, but none of the horror in these seven issues caused me to blanch, quail, or generally wake up palpitating in the small hours. Maybe I'm misinterpreting the purpose of horror fiction, but pretty typical, to my jaundiced eye, is Michael Reaves's "The Tearing Of Greymare House" (March), a grinding and turgid haunted house story of the most obvious kind. However, this is an SF and fantasy magazine, so the horror also comes in a variety of more appealing guises. There's Bruce Sterling's "Spook" (April), about a future agent-assassin whose trade is in mindless cruelty, but whose mindlessness makes it difficult for the reader to develop interest; or Walter Satterthwait's "Territorial Imperative" (in the same issue), concerning a city gangland feud between vampires; both taut and racy stories, but essentially slight. (I could have started a separate sub-section for vampire stories, as there's one in most issues.) More rewarding are the psychological stories, in which the horror is all in the mind. Lisa Tuttle is an-

other who relishes a haunted house, but what sets "The West" (April) above Michael Reaves's story is the restraint. Two sisters buy a house in remotest Gloucestershire and pretty soon there are scrabbling noises emanating from the attic, but the whole point is that Tuttle is never so crude as to go into details of burning red eyes, dripping fangs, etc.. The true horror is in a tension, barely stated but felt at gut-level, in the relationship between the two sisters:

"All cosy and snug now, aren't we, Sylvia?' Isaid, forcing the cheer.

"She looked from the clutter of cups and saucers down to her hands in her lap and began to twist her ring."

It's the subtleties, not the author telling you, that lead you to realise that in all likelihood the attic-thing does not in fact exist, that it is a cypher for subconscious dreads -- perhaps sexual tensions -- between the two sisters that eventually drive the narrator to madness. Unfortunately, a sense of rushing towards the end in this final slide to unreason hampers a very thoughtful story. Bogies in the attic are traditional and therefore easily accepted, but it's also refreshing to see something original in the way of horror settings once in a while. Richard Mueller's "Welcome To Coventry" (March) has the ghost of a medicine man haunting an aircraft. If this seems daft, I find it no dafter than the usual run of window-rattlings and dorr-creakings, and here Mueller crafts a powerful and individual story, as effective as the Tuttle in its sense of the mind's instability. It's also a strong anti-war fable, and I commend it to you.

Under "folklore" I classify a multitude of sins; the real thing revamped, elements of the real thing transposed to various chronologies, or fantasy with a folksy flavour about it, a dash of the Irish being especially popular with F & SF. Wholly typical is Gil Fitzgerald's "The Vengeance Of Nora O'Donnell" (April), wherein it seems that traditional elements excuse a declamatory, over-emotional and highly conjunctional style:

"Send your devils back to hell, woman.'

"But she only smiled and her hands moved over her harp strings, and her voice pealed like a bell over the noise of death and slaughter."

Also excused are absurdities not found in real folklore, where apparent absurdities in fact have an internal logicity:

"The English learned quickly that while their guns might not harm the ghosts, Irish weapons could draw blood, though they were wielded by phantoms."

Across the water to Wales, where Edward F. Hughes ("The Master Stroke", May) assumes, as many of these writers do, the resumption of quaint old ways after the holocaust. The hero, Dafydd, has the ability to "charm" objects from this air; harmless enough nonsense, except for the implication that this is a mutation induced by fall-out. Ethnic credibility comes from the sprinkling of the narrative with random Celticisms ("Since there were no more than a couple of dozen siopai in Pwllheli..."). There's plenty of this sort of dreadful stuff in F & SF and I despaired of ever reading a good folksy piece until I tripped over "The Shannon Merrow" by Cooper McLaughlin (November). The mere mention of Ireland unleashes a mawkish flood of romanticism from the majority of F & SF's contributors, but this story contrives to be as Irish as Paddy's pig while also remaining modern and clean-edged. It's totally successful in its blending of elements of the old and the new, in its evocation of the beauty of the hard, grey country, in its apposite wit, and in its depiction of the central character, developing him without drawing a ponderous moral.

The humour. Oh dear, the humour. Here's Avram Davidson ("The Hills Behind Hollywood High, with Grania Davis, April), who only has to sit down at his typewriter for Ed Ferman's funnybone to start tingling in anticipation:

"I grant you, Professor Wumple,' said Superintendent Opdegroof..."

Don't those names just slay you? Joseph dutifully savaged Davidson's "Dr Bumbo Singh" (October 1982); this is even worse. Yet worse again are the Wizard Kedrigern stories of John Morressey -- three in these seven issues. Cute, sickly and unspeakably dull, it goes without saying that they're not funny; "Welcome To Wizcon" (May) fails to draw on even what feeble fount of humour there is to be derived from contrasting a convention of wizards to an SF convention. I'm not going to attempt to define what does make me laugh, but a few pieces did raise a smirk. Rudy Rucker's "Inertia" (January) is the palatable side of hard SF. It

features a genius with a ~~stupid~~, would you believe, but this genius is an agreeable slob:

"Harry squatted on the floor, picking up bits of broken glass. Seeing him, Nancy stepped back, as if from an open drain."

Rucker's style and humour might not be to everyone's taste -- not always to mine -- but his cavalier attitude to the hard sciences is cheering. An honourable mention to Harvey Jacobs also, for his "Where Did You Get My Number" (March), about an alien heavy-breather; but pride of place goes to Joseph Queenan for "The Power Of The Spoken Word" (February), which brought several chuckles, out loud too. It's a neat parable on the insidious power of cliches (featuring a virtuoso display of same), very amusing, and had it been written a little more tightly it could have been riotous.

One of the distinguishing marks of the true SF writer is the ability to yoke together disparate elements to create a new and surprising vision, so space ought to be found to mention Richard Cowper's intriguingly-titled "What Did The Deazies Do?" (December), a story which wrecks all my neat classifications. To isolate any one of the ingredients that go to make up the story is to make it seem faintly ridiculous; a feud between various agents of "the other side" conducted in a sleepy Norfolk village during the Second World War. One never knows quite what to expect with Cowper; his previous F & SF piece, "Incident At Huacaloc" (October 1981) had a Central American scenario, and I'm always impressed by the warmth and economy with which he conveys surroundings. In "What Did The Deazies Do?", the setting, local history, world history, folklore, mystery, "science" and character fuse in an entirely convincing manner, and while the story exhibits no great literary pretensions other than thorough craftsmanship, it is an absorbing piece of storytelling. Cowper never seems likely to set the world aflame by his fiery genius, but "individuality" is a key word when assessing his fiction.

So, 59 stories and "novelets", and I can't bring myself to hail any of them as vaulting triumphs of the imagination, but if it's entertainment of the classier kind you're after then I commend the piece by Pohl, Gotschalk, Tuttle, Mueller, McLaughlin, Queenan and Cowper. I'm inclined to advocate a new editor, but it's hard to see how F & SF could survive an upheaval that would not harm its tenuous market position, unless it were an upheaval that sent it further Analog-wards. You can play a diverting little game, mating SF magazines to publications in other fields, such as daily newspapers. F & SF then shares a stable with The Daily Telegraph; dull, conservative, but essentially worthy, while Interzone rides in harness with The Guardian, being stylish, liberal, frequently irritating and always worth opening, as the ad has it. It doesn't need a new editor, as the existing ones are legion. Issue 4 sees it settling down to a regular pattern, mixing new or newish and established writers in fair proportion. This is as originally promised, you may recall. Interzone has had a hard time living down its own advance publicity but now presents a workaday realism and accessibility. John Sladek's "Calling All Gumdrops" offers a future in which increasing unemployment and leisure time have resulted in a society of adults who are, literally, like bored and aimless children. They have lost interest in adulthood and are a source of constant worry to their earnest and studious offspring. It's a deceptively slight story, written with great glee; Sladek's gift is to set you thinking even as you laugh. In contrast, Barrington Bayley's "The Ur-Plant" is top-heavy with exegesis and speculation on the subject of "a single fabulous primordial plant". Mind you, you can never quite tell whether Bayley is taking the rise or not. David Redd's "On The Deck Of The Flying Bomb" is set on board an aerial behemoth cruising inexorably towards some obscure and unimaginably violent doom and peopled by a rigidly autocratic crew. With a shock one realises that the Bomb is a metaphor for our world, but after a page and a half the story suddenly stops and contents itself with a little parable on man's doom being in his submission to authority. This is a shame, because in that brief space Redd has established the Bomb and its inhabitants as a society with the teeming potential of a Gormenghast; one of the most effective and economical pieces of writing I've seen in a long while. And the new writers? Alex Stewart's "The Caulder Requiem" is a disappointment after the fine promise of his "Seasons Out Of Time" in issue 2. It's a brave attempt to inject human emotion into a near-future space-technology environment, but falls between two stools. I unashamedly confess to having totally failed to understand Andy Sutter's "The Quiet King Of The Green South West", but this is the sort of instance where Interzone is valuable, challenging and provoking its read-

ers. I enjoyed the vivid and evocative writing; others may greet it as a work of brilliance or of pretentiousness. One thing which is certain is that it would not have lingered long on Ed Ferman's desk. Fans will be interested in the short story debut of Malcolm Edwards, with "After-Images". "Ballardian" is the adjective that springs to mind, though I would prefer "British". It's very British. Armageddon has arrived and an unremarkable London suburb is "bracketed by three virtually simultaneous groundburst explosions" causing a local disruption in space-time (the cheerful observation being that this is "as good an explanation as any"). Not a brilliantly original concept, I think, except perhaps in one respect: the deadly matrix is slowly closing in on the beleaguered streets. It's a well-crafted and atmospheric story, and features a bravura description of the slow-motion incineration of one of the characters, though I wish that at the end the final holocaust had been left unmentioned; to have been left contemplating the remorseless advance of the creeping horror would have been more effective.

I haven't gushed unreservedly over any of these stories in Interzone 4 but, perversely, I find their faults and their variety to be stimulating and to be almost preferable to being spoon-fed five or six works of polished competence. Interzone makes you work, which F & SF manifestly does not. We're quite lucky, really.

Michael Moorcock -- BYZANTIUM ENDURES (Fontana, 404pp, £2.95)

Reviewed by Bill Carlin

George MacDonald Fraser struck literary gold in the mid-1960s when he began his excellent series of novels based upon the fictitious "Flashman Papers". With Byzantium Endures, Michael Moorcock has achieved a greater "editorial" triumph by exposing to public scrutiny an excerpt from the equally fictitious manuscripts of Colonel Maxim Pyatniski, shedding new light on Russian history during the years 1900-1920.

Like Harry Flashman, Pyatniski is a rogue, a chauvinist, a bigot and a lecher; but whereas Flashman is really an exceptionally honest cad, Pyatniski is prone to wild exaggeration and completely lacks the faculty of self-criticism. Beneath a bristling facade of mysticism, anti-Semitism, warped patriotism and curdled romanticism (a whole host of "isms", in fact, which seem calculated to give an impression of all that is quintessentially Russian), he is far more convincing if considerably less engaging character.

His autobiographical narrative begins in a reasonably light-hearted way with a sketchy recollection of his childhood years in Kiev, when his life was dominated by the presence of his mother (a woman much given to the Victorian fashion of chronic ill-health) and the absence of his father (who absconded shortly after Pyatniski's birth, leaving his "racial purity" in some doubt). The boy's thoughts are influenced by his reading of H. G. Wells's short stories, and he admits to becoming a confirmed technophile because of them. As his story progresses, his interest in the "Age of the Machine" becomes an important factor in his travels within Russia.

A vein of darker humour is introduced when he recalls his adolescence and the education afforded him by a short visit to relatives in the more cosmopolitan city of Odessa. Over a period of a few months, he becomes addicted to cocaine (with no regrets) and acquires a taste for earthier pleasures (his attitude to the female sex being portrayed as a strange mixture of contempt and adoration). Without warning, the general tone of the book seems, at this point, to change from the frivolity of a Gogol comedy to a satire poking affectionate fun at the drunken, dissolute anti-heroes of Dostoevsky.

In the final part of his narrative, the longest part, Pyatniski describes his years at the Technical Academy in St Petersburg and his involvement with the city's intellectuals and political activists. Curiously, and except to voice inwardly the most cliched right-wing cant, he himself remains totally apolitical, yet nevertheless finds himself buffeted remorselessly by the sudden winds of change as revolution and counter-revolution sweep the country. These events dominate the closing chapters of his memoir, and to a certain extent dictate his actions as he seeks first to return to his Ukrainian homeland and then to leave Russia altogether, but are presented in a confused, disordered manner -- hardly surprising considering his self-confessed cocaine addiction, his lack of sympathy

with the revolutionaries, and the confused nature of the events themselves. Moorcock, as "editor", has included an appendix (of six densely-typed pages) giving a brief account of the Russian civil war in which Pyatniski becomes peripherally involved.

Moorcock is no novice when it comes to the writing of epics (as witness his seemingly endless saga of the "Champion Eternal"), but Byzantium Endures gives an impression of real effort and enjoyment on his part. His historical research is painstaking and apparently faultless, and his only two references to the earlier body of his work are in the style of throwaway jokes (a "Mrs Cornelius" makes a series of cameo appearances, and at one point Pyatniski is roped into a lunatic project to design a "death ray" with which to repel a Bolshevik invasion). Only a reader reasonably familiar with his other, more mass-produced work will even recognise their presence, and he does not go out of his way to draw attention to them.

Those who expect Byzantium Endures to be similar to Moorcock's past work will be sorely disappointed, but to those who are entertained by a strong, well-researched story and neatly-drawn characters and whose hearts are warmed by the efforts of an author aiming for excellence -- and succeeding -- I cannot recommend this novel too highly.

Chris Evans -- THE INSIDER (Granada, 237pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

One of my preferences is for science fiction novels that are barely science fiction at all; novels laid on the fringes of the genre, like Gregory Benford's Timescape and Chris Priest's The Affirmation, which can and do pass for "ordinary" fiction. The Insider is very much of this class, and although I welcome it for that I can't praise it for itself alone -- I admire its ambition, but think it falls short of its aims.

It opens with the death of the aging hack writer George Blair, who as a boy was orphaned in the Blitz of 1940 and at the same time had his mind taken over by an alien whose spacecraft had crashed on his house. Thus trapped on Earth, the alien had shunned human company, becoming a writer because of the pursuit's reclusiveness; yet so unexpected was the body's death that it was forced to effect a transfer into the nearest available person: Stephen Marsh, a gregarious and socially outgoing management consultant with a Hindu wife, a daughter at university, numerous well-heeled middle-class friends, and a socio-political conscience he expresses at every conceivable opportunity. The alien's attempts to adapt itself to its new host's lifestyle and alter that lifestyle to accord more closely with its previous one constitute the bulk of the novel; attempts complicated by the changing political tenor of the UK, featuring -- in the wake of a withdrawal from Northern Ireland a few years before -- a resurgence of nationalist fervour orchestrated by a new ultra-right racist splinter party which, following a general election that takes place offstage midway through the book, becomes the junior partner in a coalition government. (The novel was published a year before 1982's Falklands nonsense; hence the invention of a withdrawal from Northern Ireland and a new right-wing political party, for Evans obviously could not have foreseen the "little England" mentality engendered by last year's events.) It turns out that Marsh's daughter is having a lesbian affair with a woman who proves to be the daughter of one of the new party's leaders (who is of course a sexual puritan), and this brings down the wrath of one of their racist hit-squads on his and his wife's heads.

A remarkable scenario -- but one not handled as well as it could have been. To begin with, the revelation of Marsh's daughter's affiliations is delayed for far too long (right to the end, in fact), which may be necessary for the sake of the plot -- Marsh is killed but the alien doesn't transfer -- but means that for most of the book the political background remains as background, unintegrated into the flow of the story and contributing little to its development. Marsh's silence on these political matters, where before his conscience would have prompted him to speak, does not help in this regard, for all that his silence can be attributed to the alien's continuing adjustments to his behaviour. We're thus left with the story of the alien's reactions to the endless grinding minutiae of Marsh's ordinary everyday life -- friends, dinner parties, management conferences, minor household repairs -- a life which in itself is really rather dull; and although Evans deserves full marks for his ability to make such details seem interesting, it un-

fortunately goes on for several chapters longer than it should; you begin to wish that the alien would do something dramatic, something that would take it away from such drudgery, and although hope rises when Marsh leaves his wife it is soon dashed again as the detailed descriptions continue almost unchanged. It's horrific, certainly -- how can life possibly be so boring? -- but is ultimately numbing in its effect on the reader; interest begins to ebb away and is not wholly revived by the introduction of the idea that Marsh might be suffering from a schizophrenic hallucination. This is an important idea, and one that should have been brought into play in the early stages of the novel; instead, its appearance is delayed until three-quarters of the way through, far too late to be properly developed -- except, perhaps, as an explanation of the alien's failure to transfer to a new host at the very end, but by then we've become convinced of the "fact" of the alien takeover and are not prepared to entertain any alternative hypothesis.

The Insider, then, is something of a disappointment, a novel which frustrates because it could have been better than it is; yet this failure derives solely from the structure of the plot, as itemised above, because in every other respect -- characterisation, dialogue, scenic description, and so forth -- it is extremely interesting and well-written. (Much the same could be said of Evans's first novel, Capella's Golden Eyes, whose plot also took several disappointing wrong turns.) This may not be enough to rescue the book, but if nothing else it marks Evans out as a writer to watch.

Stephen Couper -- DYING OF PARADISE and THE ICE BELT (Sphere, 183pp and 251pp respectively, £1.75 and £1.95 respectively)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Prologue: on the use of pseudonyms. Not exactly hidden away on the title page of Dying Of Paradise (but not exactly prominent either) is a sneaky little note which says: "Dying Of Paradise is an original publication containing some material from The Last Rose Of Summer (C) Stephen Gallagher 1978 published by Corgi Books". My suspicions were aroused. Is Stephen Couper really Stephen Gallagher? Why publish books on the same theme or story under different names? How much material in Dying Of Paradise comes from The Last Rose Of Summer? How original is "original"?

SF is a body of literature that has traditionally suffered from outbreaks of pseudonyms, like Job with boils. And, with some justification, many readers think that Pseudonyms mean Pulp, as pseudonyms are often devices for marketing the trash that dare not speak its (author's real) name. Pseudonyms mean never having to say you're sorry. All I can say is don't do it, writers: not if you want your reading public to take you seriously.

In a decaying city on the derelict planet of Persephone, life is hard. The Central Command computer breeds and programs its citizens to act as statistical units, without initiative or individuality. The citizens, bleak as their lives may be, are the privileged class of this society; for the non-citizens of the underbelly in their tenements across the river, life is really hard. Through a chain of unfortunate coincidences, a citizen named Rorvik becomes aware of Central's programming and sets out to destroy it. Randall of the Police Elite is assigned by Central to Get Him. The plot proceeds in best cops- and-robbers fashion, with a final showdown inside the bowels of the mighty computer itself.

The Ice Belt continues the saga after the takeover of the city by the corrupt underbelly council. Randall is exiled to the Ice Palace, where a group of criminals and dissidents live in a kind of plumbers' nightmare, forced to spend most of their time and energy on lagging an enormous system of hot water pipes connected to their power plant. Their purpose seems to be to disturb the Antarctic-type weather and create storms, crises and hardship for the men of the Ice Palace. However, Randall discovers it is all part of a Sinister Plot on the part of some aliens to Take Over The World (goodness knows why they want it, but that's alien psychology for you). He leads a bunch of Ice Palace old lags (sorry) out to hijack a spaceship and save the world, and I guess I'm not giving too much away by revealing that he succeeds.

The only distinguishing feature of this two-volume, not-terribly-amazing piece of storytelling, is the curious flatness of its style; rather like drinking nothing but boiled water for a while. The characters are minimally drawn, the landscapes are patently stage sets, there is no background detail at all. The style seemed somehow familiar, though, and the giveaway clue is the lack of minor characters: this is not a pair of books but a low-budget, single-set-and-only-one-

special-effect-per-episode, BBC live-action SF serial in embryo. Wonder what they'll be running on Channel 4 while it's on...

Robin McKinley -- THE DOOR IN THE HEDGE (Ace, 216pp, \$2.25)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

In her novel Beauty (see Paperback Inferno Vol 5 No 5, where I note that I mistakenly referred to McKinley as male, since Beauty contained no biographical details) Robin McKinley played her influences fairly close to her chest. In this collection, her second journey beyond the fields we know, rather more is revealed.

Beauty, of course, was a re-telling of a traditional story, and so indeed might these stories be; the review fragments inside the cover contain a few oblique hints that such is the case, but the fact that I escaped from childhood without encountering either the Brothers Grimm or Andrew Lang disqualifies me from comment. From a wide, and admirably literary, melange of fantasy traditions, the voices which come through most clearly are those of Lord Dunsany and the lesser-known works of Tolkien (Farmer Giles Of Ham, Smith Of Wootton Major, et al). I imply no slavish imitation -- Dunsay's stories were sometimes light on content and stood or fell by his style, while Tolkien's work depended largely on the rigid moral framework against which the actions of his characters had to be judged. McKinley may be walking in the footsteps of giants, but she is very much her own master.

A book of stories like these seems terribly out of place in such a cold, cynical place as Western civilisation. They are completely and unashamedly traditional fairy stories, a genre of ancient and noble lineage, which we today are conditioned to dismiss as childish and which children themselves are increasingly aware of only as half-hour animations on bank holiday TV. This collection contains two short stories and two novellas. Of the shorter tales, "The Princess And The Frog" tells of a princess whose only ally against the sinister foreign prince who has come to dominate her father's court is the talking frog she finds by a pool, while "The Hunting Of The Hind" tells of the beautiful Golden Hind that lured hunters into a magical mountain from which they return either mad or nevermore, and of the princess who followed the Hind into the mountain to find a cure for her dying brother, and of what she found there. Of the longer tales, "The Stolen Princess", the most overtly Dunsanian story in the book, set in the last earthly kingdom before Faerie begins, tells of the mixed blessings and curses of that land and of the children taken by the elvenkind beyond the border; "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" tells of a retired soldier, heartsick after a lifetime of war, who seeks to lift the curse which lies on the daughters of his king, and of what befell him.

The cornerstone of McKinley's work remains her wonderful, heartwarming characterisation. The story does not exist as a vehicle for the characters but, rather, they themselves are the story. Their easy plausibility, couple with the stories' consistent ring of inner conviction (McKinley rightly abhors travilisation), provides a reassuring familiarity against which the most fantastic (in the original sense of that muc-abused word) turn of events can begin to seem curiously normal; and conversely, when set against a background of talking frogs and enchanted forests, the perennial concerns of the human condition show up with fresh clarity. Robin McKinley sings of no Never-Never Land of jolly puppets and gingerbread cottages, but a land where people no different from ourselves strive and suffer, where good is never short of evil to oppose it and the darkness presses close no less there than here. She reminds us that "Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays...tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted". Her stories afford true glimpses of a better world, embodiments of Tolkien's concepts of Recovery and Escape (which, like the quote in the previous sentence, may be found in Tree And Leaf, a most instructive preliminary read). Robin McKinley continues to write with enormous compassion and humanity, proving that the true spirit of fantasy flourishes still, notwithstanding the efforts of a deluge of hack sword-&-sorcery novels to the contrary. She is one who truly can hear the horns of Elfland faintly blowing, and consequently a very rare talent indeed.

Samuel R. Delany -- DHALGREN (Bantam, 879pp, \$3.95)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

Some of my friends insist Dhalgren is the best book they've ever read; others call

it the worst. Back in 1973, when it first appeared, fierce arguments raged: was it ambitious bold, innovative, pushing back the boundaries of the SF genre ghetto, or was its length simply overblown, repetitive and self-indulgent, its ambitious innovation simply pretentious wanking?

Some readers expect a book to give tidy solutions to any questions it raises, others are more interested in how it tackles the questions it focusses on. This book certainly raises plenty of questions -- about normality and deviance, sanity and self, art and actuality -- but supplies no neat narrative-wrapped answers to them. Reviewing Delany, it's hard to avoid getting academic; as his own critical writings make clear, Delany's thoughts run along abstruse intellectual lines. So: Dhalgren is a study of deviance cast in the form of a novel, a novel which is not so much about a chain of actions as it is an exploration of a setting. The setting is the deserted city Bellona, cut off from the rest of America, receiving no radio or TV signals, lost under a sky of haze which doesn't seem to change from day to night. The protagonist through whom Delany explores Bellona is the Kid, who doesn't know his name, who knows that he has been crazy but doesn't know if he is now, and who becomes Bellona's poet. Although all the normal people have left Bellona, a few hundred, perhaps a thousand, weirdoes and drop-outs -- the fringe-dwellers of normal society -- still live there, scavenging from deserted stores and houses: negroes, a hippy commune in the park, the tough, sexually ambiguous gangs of "scorpions" parading in laser-light shields which project holograms of fantastic beasts around them; and in a mansion up on the heights lives Roger Calkins, who publishes the city's daily newspaper (assigning each day an arbitrary date), and his continuous party of Beautiful People. Of all the strange characters who inhabit Bellona, only the Richards family, still obstinately clinging to "normal" conventional ways, are shown as entirely crazy.

Bellona is a city that's all ghetto. The only order and meaning that remains there is the anarchy of interacting personalities; all events result from more or less random collisions of individuals, a sort of Brownian motion with Bellona a crucible containing a catalyst which reduces the activation barrier that the inertia of habit normally poses. This chemical metaphor is not one Delany uses -- his concentration on the steamy physicality of sex and excretion was, along with his abandonment of storyline, what provoked most antipathy towards this book.

Dhalgren is undeniably overlong, at times repetitive, naturally less shockingly innovative now than when it first appeared. For all that, it remains a stunning literary response to the creeping entropy that the New Wave writers diagnosed as the contemporary social disease.

Frederik Pohl & Lester Del Rey ("Edson McCann") -- PREFERRED RISK (Methuen, 187pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Preferred Risk, by "Edson McCann", enjoyed a chequered (if ephemeral) career in the Fabulous Fifties: "winner" of the \$6500 Galaxy/Simon & Schuster novel contest; serialised in Galaxy, June-September 1955; published by Simon & Schuster, also 1955. A Dell paperback edition was released/ejected (delete as appropriate) in 1962, after which the book was "retired".

Ballantine (or should that be Del Rey?) Books saw fit to reprint/resurrect this literary cadaver in 1980. The by then redundant/uncommercial "Edson McCann" pseudonym was discarded. Both authors contributed explanatory/apologetic Afterwords to that edition -- Pohl, "The Art And The Agony Of Collaboration"; Del Rey, "Risk, But Not Preferred". Now it has spread to Britain... These Afterwords are in fact the most interesting parts of the book, chock-full of nostalgic guff and/or esoteric "information" (for example, "Edson McCann" = EMCC = $e=mc^2$). They also serve as an Awful Warning of how not to write a novel.

The novel itself is a faded carbon copy of such Galaxy/Pohl-Kornbluth "classics" as The Space Merchants and Gladiator-At-Law. Insurance is the bugaboo; the Company runs a rigidly conditioned, "risk-free" world. But rebellion is in the air... Ho-hum; so much for the background and the plot.

Our hero is Tom Willis, a lowly but gung-ho Claims Adjuster who just loves the system, a la Mitchell Courtenay of The Space Merchants. He is, of course, an idiot. Here's a representative sample, chosen more or less at random:

"I know for a fact," Gogarty said bitterly, 'that Zorchi knew we found out he was going to dive in front of the express tonight...'

"Mr Gogarty," I interrupted, 'are you trying to tell me this man deliberate-

ly maims himself for the accident insurance?' Gogarty nodded sourly. 'Good heavens!' I cried. 'That's disloyal!'" (p.7)

The entire first half of the book is like that; evidence that this actuarial world is being manipulated by nogoodniks absolutely swamps Tom Willis, but he continues to plod along like the Compleat Zombie. He is supposed to be the archetypal "Man Who Learns Better", but his conversion to hero-hood is unbelievable. Impossible, rather -- it's "a tale told by an idiot...signifying nothing", with scant sound and precious little fury.

All is not quite lost, however, since one character does manage to break the surface of this cardboard quagmire -- Zorchi, the human jellyfish, whose ability to grow new limbs after "accidental" amputations enables him to defraud the Company, ad infinitum. Now, if he rather than Tom Willis had been the protagonist... but he is relegated to background-land after only a few chapters; mediocrity triumphs over everything in the end.

No, Preferred Risk is neither a neglected classic nor yet a rave from the grave -- it isn't even good enough to be decently bad.

James Blish -- FALLEN STAR (Avon, 191pp, \$2.50)

Reviewed by Nigel Richardson

Written in 1957, set in 1958, Fallen Star has all the hallmarks of the first-draft pot-boiler, the sort of thing usually written pseudonymously by an author to pay off this month's alimony or last month's medical bills, then forgotten about by everyone except the completist or the biographer. And yet...

Fallen Star isn't a bad novel. Dr Johnson once said of a play that it was worth seeing but not worth going to see, which is about how I feel in respect of this book. I read it straight through without foaming at the mouth or throwing the furniture around, but I'd be reluctant to recommend that you spent your hard-earned cash on it.

The plot is straightforward: an expedition is organised to travel to the North Pole, officially to collect bacteria from beneath the permafrost and observe the transit of the first American satellite but unofficially to search for a fragment asteroid that the somewhat obsessive team leader believes is buried there. Most of the story is taken up with factual accounts of how such an expedition would be funded and set up, although I'm sure that the number of pulchritudal ladies the narrator encounters as he makes his way from boardroom to observatory to airfield, all holding jobs like account executive or chief astronomer, is much more phantasmagorical than what eventually happens when the chunk of asteroid is found.

The book moves at a funny pace; at times I was with Blish, at others wondering how he was going to get this tale to fit exactly 200 manuscript pages. It begins slowly, padded with details of publishing rights and proprietary names of anti-air-sick pills, speeds up with introduction of sex, booze, madness, murder and Martians, then tapers off to fit the writer's commitments. The characters are cinematic ready-mades from an early fifties' B-movie; smart-mouth narrator, pneumatic blonde, reformed drunk with a secret, spunky young businesswoman ("with a most unbusinesslike rump"), and a bunch of scientists who only show individuality in their allotted manner of death. It is the writing alone that saves the book, breathing life into the hoariest situation and cliché and pointing the reader towards Blish's more considered works, like "Cities In Flight" and "After Such Knowledge". This reader, anyway...

M. John Harrison -- THE FLOATING GODS (Timescape, 159pp, \$2.50)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

I have to confess my attraction to what Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine labels "futility stories" -- the fiction of decadence and despair, of blasted landscapes, crumbling cities, dead machines, and fruitless journeys into nowhere undertaken by doomed protagonists. Such a statement is of course wholly subjective and hence useless as a critical rubric but, to me, such fiction does seem to express something right and proper about the world: that entropy will get us in the end, and resisting it is pointless.

This, despite its somewhat overwrought prose style, is why I like A Storm Of Wings so much, and never mind that the aimlessness of Viriconium's culture was compounded by the Reborn Men of The Pastel City, that novel's predecessor, having

usurped what was left of its purpose. The Floating Gods -- titled, more aptly, In Viriconium in its original British edition (Gollancz, 1982) -- takes this aimlessness to its ultimate conclusion. (In the "Author's Note" preceding the story, Harrison states that it is not necessarily a sequel and that its events could just as easily take place before those chronicled in the other two novels; ambiguous, but smacking too much of auctorial misdirection, and a throwaway reference to "giant beetles" in the body of the story itself tends to confirm my belief that, albeit at a distance, The Floating Gods does follow A Storm Of Wings.)

The plot is ridiculously simple. An unspecified "plague", which seems more psychological than physical in its effects, has engulfed a portion of the Low City and is spreading slowly towards the High City. In the High City itself, life meanders on its decadent, self-obsessed way, with no one paying the slightest attention to the plague -- no one, that is, bar the portrait painter Ashlyme, whose friend Audsley King, acclaimed as one of the greatest painters of her age, has recently become trapped within the plague zone. He's been trying to persuade her to leave for some time before this, to no avail; now he decides to smuggle her out, enlisting the aid of a friend, the astronomer Emmet Buffo, to do so; but Buffo's over-elaborate scheme goes awry and they are forced to retreat in disarray, leaving Audsley King to be returned to her rooms and allowed to sink back into her plague-fostered apathy.

Which has taken us halfway through the novel, and we know without having to be told that the remainder will be taken up with a second attempt to rescue her.

This plot is not only simple, it is also rather thin, a consequence of its having been stretched too far for its own good; it would support a novella, but is insufficient for a novel. To his credit, Harrison is aware of this, and seeks to round his book out with a number of not-quite-subplots, vignettes designed to shed light on various aspects of Viriconium's life. In this he succeeds admirably: I can't recall ever previously encountering so well-realised, so completely alive an imaginary city. Yet, despite the fact that these vignettes touch on the matter of art -- its function and its place in society, with which the protagonists are nominally concerned -- they never seem wholly integrated with the rest of the narrative: you're aware that what you're reading is peripheral to the main thrust of the story, not only contributing little to the advancement of its plot but in some cases actively retarding it. Admittedly, plot should not be paramount (and I have little regard for the sort of narrative that steams straight ahead to its conclusion without allowing any time for the development of character or setting), but there is a point at which the picaresque approach can lose its way altogether, arrogating everything to the joy of creativity for its own sake; and this is just what happens with The Floating Gods.

It is thus some time before the book's main theme becomes apparent, and even then it's robbed of its centrality by its realisation not through the activities of the protagonists but those of the minor characters -- specifically, the two Barley brothers, who roam Viriconium in a near-perpetual drunken stupor, falling into the canals and vomiting in the gutters, who are encountered several times in the course of the book and who reveal themselves (towards the very end) as the "floating gods" of the title, pointing out at the same time that the city's woes are the fault of its citizens, for not caring enough about it. The only message that can be extracted from this, it seems to me, is one to the effect that art, to live and to have meaning, but be fully integrated with and respected by the cultural life of the society that claims to support it -- something that certainly cannot be said of Viriconium, but it's a message that strikes me as so obvious as to hardly need a novel written to (supposedly) dramatise it.

For its images of Viriconium alone, this novel can be recommended; but images alone, I fear, are not enough.

LET A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOOM -- the letter column

Not nearly as many letters this time; either the novelty has worn off or the severity of my editing last time frightened people away. But here's Sue Thomason:

"Please shoot Kevin Rattan. I think The Grey Mane Of Morning is an excellent book of its kind. I know theological romances are not currently popular, but this one is good. It's a very carefully drawn, self-consistent world, with real people in it, who are imperfect, who love and suffer and learn about the way they have been shaped by their culture/environment/god, and the way they

can (partially) take their destiny into their own hands. The setting is 'realistic' in that there is no magic, as such. There is a theophany paralleling God's appearance to Moses, and a couple of things which might be classed as miracles. I would guess that Chant is probably a deeply religious person, as in this book she creates a deeply felt and consistent religious/ethical/moral system, and a lot of the book is 'about' the relationship between humans and their gods. It's also an exploration of a land Chant obviously loves and treasures; none of the people or places are startlingly original but all have a sound anthropological feel. The main thing is that she cares, she quite obviously cares about the people and the world..."

There was a lot more, demolishing Kevin Rattan's review point-by-point, but space considerations preclude me from printing it. (Roll on the new production method: advance planning will be so much easier.) Let's hear from Nigel Richardson:

"I agree with your comments on "Cheek To Cheek" from Interzone 3. To me, that story epitomised everything that has gone wrong with "speculative" writing since the heyday of New Worlds in the late sixties. "Gross", as you said, is the word. The fact that the guy who wrote it has an MA in Creative Writing says a lot. I'm sick of stories about people waking up to find that something is drastically wrong, that they're under the mast with Captain Ahab, linked at the loins to some lovely, or whatever. As M. John Harrison once said, the real horror story is waking up every day to find things exactly the same.

"Turning to your remarks on Granta 7, I completely disagree with you there. The Rushdie piece is dreadful! The idea was good, but it was just flung together, a real first-draft job. And I liked Adam Mars-Jones's story; it was my favourite piece apart from Martin Amis's "Money". I haven't read Chris Priest's story yet, although I've been meaning to since its original appearance in New Terrors."

Chris has since told me that it's a sort of prologue to The Affirmation, which rather deep-sixes his earlier cautions that the "Dream Archipelago" stories are not to be regarded as a formal series. Nik Morton also wrote about "Cheek To Cheek", wondering whether the linking cord was "allegorical, a view of loves based on sex and nothing else and therefore destined to wither and die -- if this view is credible, the story could be interpreted as moralistic!", which is very possible. One of Interzone's editors, Malcolm Edwards, also responded to last issue's "Blood On The Racks":

"Your leading article leads inevitably to two conclusions: (1) every story in the two issues of Firebird is better written than any story in the first three issues of Interzone; and (2) because Firebird is the best-paying and most prestigious market for short fiction, there is no justification for the existence of any others. Is this really your position?"

No, it is not my position, and nor do I consider the above conclusions as "inevitable". To deal first with your (more important) second point: my question ("one might be excused for wondering," etc.) whether, given the other markets, there's a need for, say, a magazine like Interzone was (obviously, I'd have thought) purely rhetorical, and has nothing to do with rates and prestige -- I neither know nor care what each publication pays its contributors, and such is in any case irrelevant to assessments of the stories' quality; and prestige was never mentioned anyway (although it's possible that Firebird could acquire it simply because it's published by Penguin, itself a pretty prestigious firm). And, in response to your first point: too-hasty copy-typing, I think, and for that I apologise. What I meant to say (scent of backpedaling?) was that the stories in the first three issues of Interzone struck me as not as well-written as they could have been, and hence not as memorable (whereas I can remember quite a bit more of what went into the two issues of Firebird, the dull as well as the good -- which, as I said, perhaps appeared dull largely due to its order of presentation and subject-matter). It's also my impression that a lot of what was published in those first three issues is not the best that its authors are capable of -- a wholly subjective opinion, perhaps, but then I have been very disappointed with Interzone to date, although the fourth issue is a definite improvement. Others obviously disagree with my opinion of the magazine, though, considering that it published four of the five stories nominated for this year's BSFA Award; but such is life.

I also heard from Geogre (sic) Bondar; I should have heard from Dave Swinden, but the post office have yet to deliver his letter. Next time, if it turns up...