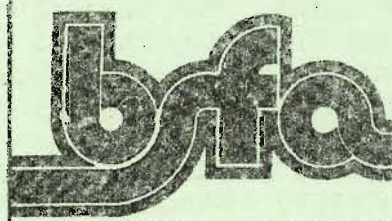


PAPERBACK INFERNO



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BLOOD ON THE RACKS -- Joseph Nicholas

The conventional wisdom of the science fiction "field" is that the market for short fiction has contracted to such an extent that the SF magazines and anthologies now represent the only market for short fiction of any kind. This "wisdom", laid down most noticeably by the magazine editors of the sixties in the introductions to their Best Of collections, is and always was arrant nonsense -- their vision hobbled by the category magazine publishing with which they'd grown up and knowing little or nothing of the wider market beyond the (then) recently-deceased Saturday Evening Post, such editors managed to blithely dismiss all the other magazines and anthologies that published and continue to publish short fiction of all kinds. Certainly, such publications may be less widely read, have a completely different audience, and not publish either as much or as often; but to ignore them is ridiculous. Particularly when they don't restrict themselves solely to so-called "mainstream" fiction (just what is that, anyway?), but publish stories that would not seem out of place in, say, Interzone....

I have three such examples to hand: Granta 7, a special issue of the Cambridge magazine paperbacked by Penguin to celebrate the Book Marketing Council's recent "Best Of Young British Novelists" promotion, featuring stories from each of the twenty writers involved; and, also from Penguin, Firebirds 1 and 2, the first two volumes of an annual anthology series of "Writing Today". Firebird 1 did of course appear in 1981 so, although I've only recently caught up with it, it's perhaps too late to say anything detailed about it; for the record, however, my personal favourites (for widely different reasons) from its total of twenty-one stories are Angela Carter's "Peter And The Wolf", Jack Debney's "At Vassiliou's", James Kelman's "Not Not While The Giro", Salman Rushdie's "The Free Radio", Victor Sage's "The Festival Edition", and Graham Swift's "The Watch". (Only the latter two can be counted as "speculative".) Otherwise, I found it, overall, a rather better collection than Firebird 2, which struck me as worthy rather than good, admirable rather than likeable, and possessed of an appallingly dull stretch

in its middle third relieved only by R. M. Lamming's "Portions". (It isn't remotely speculative, but I quite liked it: it concerns a poverty-stricken Japanese artist struggling to complete a portrait of a local dignitary's beautiful new bride while being continually distracted by the complaints of his wife and the lumpy unattractiveness of his servant-girl; the work finally completed, he is acclaimed as a master, enjoys a brief year of fame, and then slips back into poverty as he proves unable to repeat his triumph, leaving us to wonder whether, after all, an artist can only ever have that one brief moment of glory in which everything goes superbly right...). How much of this dullness is due to the presentation of the stories in alphabetical order by author (carried over from Firebird 1, but it worked better there) instead of mixing them up for greater effect and how much to the seeming preponderance of stories whose styles, themes, characters and settings are stuck firmly in the mid-fifties is a moot point. The best stories, I found, were those set somewhere other than the UK: Meira Chand's "Spectrum" (concerning the self-liberation of a sexually and socially oppressed Indian woman), Dai Vaughan's "The Key" (a bizarre tale of revolution and counter-revolution somewhere in Central Europe, with an oblique, disjointed narrative structure), Angus Wilson's "Sri Lankan Journal" (non-fiction, and in parts very jaundiced), and the Lamming story discussed above. (That's four out of seventeen, if anyone's counting.) The only marginally "speculative" story is M. J. Fitzgerald's "A Landscape With Walls", about a promiscuous woman who, every time she sleeps with a new man, dreams she's gathering up bricks to build a series of walls; a fairly obvious allegory, and one spun out too long to fully hold the reader's interest. But I think that the series as a whole is a worthwhile and important one; I wish, however, that Penguin would tell us a little more about the editor aside from his or her name (T. J. Binding) and persuade him or her to write some sort of foreword or introduction to the collections.

Granta 7 certainly needed as introduction; if it wasn't for the back cover blurb, we'd have little or no idea of the reason behind it. That reason -- to showcase the work of the twenty writers chosen for the BMC's promotion -- is a good one, however, although its execution is not. I have it on reliable authority that the book was put together in something less than a month, so no one had the opportunity to write a story especially for it; instead we have either extracts from forthcoming novels (some good and some dull, but you can't judge a complete novel by an extract) or reprints from previous anthologies (or perhaps even rejections from previous anthologies, so poor are some of them -- Adam Mars-Jones's "Trout Day By Pumpkin Light", for example, a desperately dreary tale of drunken encounters at a homosexual Halloween disco). Which isn't to say that I didn't enjoy some of them: William Boyd's "Extracts From The Journal Of Flying Officer J", for instance, gloriously sends up everyone who ever wrote about wartime flying; not a new theme, but brilliantly handled. I also liked Philip Norman's "Ol' Black Rock", a subtle but accurate attack on the stupidities and banalities of rock music journalists, and Salman Rushdie's "The Golden Bough", a witty modernistic retelling of Frazer's central myth. The story in which most of you will be interested, however, is Chris Priest's "The Miraculous Cairn", a fairly lengthy Dream Archipelago piece told with his usual grace and economy but which...um. Narrated in the first person, it concerns the journey of Lenden Cros to the island of Seevl from the city of Jethra, after a twenty-year absence from them both, in the company of a female sergeant in the Jethran police, to clear up the affairs of a recently-deceased uncle who'd lived on the island. Interposed into the present-day narrative are chunks of flashback relating the last of a series of visits to the island, made with Lenden's parents, to see the aunt, who was suffering from a long wasting disease. The narrative of the flashback moves forward in turn with that of the present, moving Lenden-then into conjunction with the niece, Seri, and Lenden-now into conjunction with the escorting sergeant, each illuminating the other, until, with a sudden unheralded twist (the exact nature of which I won't disclose), everything you've read up to that point is altered, seen from a wholly different perspective. But it's not the end of the story -- there are ten pages still to go, and from that knowledge alone one expects to discover within them yet more twists, revelation upon revelation,

but such is not the case: there is instead a slow tailing-off into a suggestion that Lenden-now is imagining what happened to Lenden-then, an idea quite Dickian in its scope but not powerful enough to match the revelation of ten pages previously. The result is to leave the reader grimacing in a fury of disappointment, and needlessly so; the question is whether many of them will have the patience to re-read the story and realise how needless.

If these anthologies prove anything, it is that it is possible to sell SF or SF-related stories to non-SF outlets. (Even to outlets which don't normally publish fiction at all; for example, the November 1982 issue of New Internationalist, a journal of Third World development, had as part of its special section on "the family" Bob Shaw's "Private Passions", a short and (it must be said) rather routine satire on the superconsumers of the future.) It always was possible to make such sales, of course, but I'd contend that there's a world of difference between a sale to, say, Playboy, and a sale to Firebird -- the degree of artistic freedom allowed, for one, the intellectual level, for a second, the type of critical reception, for a third...and so on. But, given that these markets do exist, one might be excused for wondering whether there is any real need for a magazine like Interzone -- particularly when it publishes so consistently late that it negates the main argument that might be made in its favour: its regularity and frequency. (Firebird is an annual series, after all.) Another argument that might be made on its behalf is the one that greets every new SF magazine: "to seek out and encourage new talent", but there can't be a lot of it around, considering that the three issues to date have managed to locate only two new writers. (Both volumes of Firebird have managed rather more.)

The new writer in Interzone's third issue is Nicholas Allan, with "Cheek To Cheek", all about a couple who fall asleep after making love and wake in the morning to find their genitals fused together; not only do they stay fused together over the next few days but grow into a twenty-one feet long cord of flesh joining them crotch to crotch. And while you say "Eh?", wondering what might be the point of the story, let me say that it doesn't have one; it is, simply, gross, tasteless, and dully written to boot. Nor did I much care for Angela Carter's "Overture For A Midsummer Night's Dream", which struck me as pretentious twee, or Josephine Saxton's "No Coward Soul", about an operation on someone's brain intended to alter their personality which has the side-effect of half-trapping them in a strange internal world; it's something that's been done several times before, and neither the sparkiness of the writing nor the fact that it's the protagonist who's operating on herself can save it from numbing familiarity. More to my taste, however, were David Garnett's "Saving The Universe", cleverly counterpointing (through being set at an SF convention) the wish-fulfillment fantasies of SF with the real world beyond it -- not a new point to make, of course, but it didn't take itself completely seriously and half the fun of it came from trying to guess the real identities of the authors featured -- and Garry Kilworth's "The Dissemblers". Almost...it concerns, at its core, a man obsessed with finding out what lies just beyond the point of death who, in furtherance of that, keeps almost hanging himself in the hope of obtaining a glimpse of the beyond. This he pursues in a remote cave in the Empty Quarter; searching for him there are his estranged wife, who wants him back, and the narrator, a British oil prospector converted to Islam because of the peace and security it offers (he doesn't need to search for an "answer", because the Koran has already told him what it is), whom she's hired for the job. A story with a lot of scope, at least at first sight, but it never quite fulfills its promise -- mainly because it isn't long enough. Such a theme as Kilworth's requires, I think, an understated, contemplative, possibly oblique approach, but instead he's given us a plot which races ahead so fast that (apart from often running out of breath and having to be revived with the narrator's internalised soliloquies) it gives him no time to properly flesh out either the characters or the setting -- a fault, I find, of many of his short stories.

It may be, however, that this is the sort of story that will eventually come to "justify" Interzone's existence -- a story that's most unlikely to find a home in the more commercial genre magazines and could find itself squeezed out of Firebird because the latter's more leisurely schedule forces it to be more selective. But then again, if the stories were any good they

wouldn't be squeezed out... (Although I said at the beginning that some of the stories from Firebird wouldn't seem out of place in Interzone, I don't think that any of the stories the latter has yet published would fit into the former -- not because of their subject-matter but because they're not as well-written.) The fact is, no matter how conservative the SF original anthologies may be (an announcement in the March 1983 Locus soliciting submissions for Terry Carr's Universe, for example, laid great stress on the need for wholesome, upbeat material -- never mind Damon Knight's famous remark to J. G. Ballard, when asking for a story for his now-defunct Orbit series, that he didn't want anything "too original"), the "mainstream" original anthologies are a lot less conservative -- less conservative in comparison with both the SF ones and SF readers' and writers' expectations of them. It's time to take advantage of that, and to forget for once and for all that witless argument about the SF magazines being the last bastion of short fiction.

LETTERS Yes indeed -- in my usual gloomy way I wasn't expecting much response to my plea in the previous issue for written feedback, but a surprising number of people found time to drop me a note or three. First, however, I have a few letters passed on to me by Geoff Rippington to deal with... Complaining about Jim England's review of E. C. Tubb's The Quillian Sector in Vol 6 No 3, ETHEL LINDSAY said:

"Of course Ted sets out to merely entertain his readers. The England reaction to this could only be equalled by the scorn poured out by the educated classes watching the general public fall avidly upon the Penny Dreadfuls the reading of which became possible when some education became general.

"~~The point~~ I would like to make is that unless a critic has some respect for the person who has nerve enough to put pen to paper he ought not to be a critic at all; and that it would be a good idea if they judged a book on what it sets out to do rather than what they thought it ought to do."

To take all this in order...as I seem to be forever stating, entertainment can be derived from many different facets of a book, and it can be of the intellectual as well as the non-intellectual variety; to continually equate it with "escapism" is a ridiculous misuse of the English language. But what is so mere (emphasis per original) about entertainment anyway? Entertainment is a high art, difficult to do well but easy to do badly; and a book must be in some way entertaining otherwise no one would ever read it in the first place. Assessing the worth or otherwise of the book's entertainment value requires that the critic judge it on what it ought to do rather than what it actually does do, discussing and analysing it in accordance with certain standards of excellence; the respect he or she may or may not feel for the author has nothing to do with it,

KEN LAKE also wrote to Geoff, suggesting that for the sake of balance we print at least two different reviews of every book -- unworkable, considering the endless pressure on our limited space -- and PAUL BRAZIER tried advancing a theory (which lost me somewhere along the way) to the effect that negative reviews contributed to the suppression of literary excellence. (Eh?) Moving on to my own letters, both LES FLOOD and ALAN FRASER wrote to point out that, contrary to Ray Owen's remarks about it in Vol 6 No 4, there have been various previous editions of Poul Anderson's Shield; quite so. PHILIP COLLINS remarked that my editorial in the previous issue seemed like "a hopeful shout into the yawning chasm of the BSFA readership", and thinking along the same lines DAVID LEWIS said:

"In answer to your question: yes and no. That is, in one sense you are shouting into a void and no one is taking much notice of you -- particularly authors and publishers. SF will continue to pour off the presses, as badly written as ever, and the punters will eagerly buy it up. Such is life."

Good Lord, but if I was that fatalistic about people's reactions I'd have

given this up long ago! Or, more accurately, I live in hope that one day, someone, somewhere, will...etc. etc.. Someone who, it would appear, already sees eye-to-eye with me is IAN MCKEER, who said he was writing articles bemoaning the state of SF before he joined the BSFA and found that we'd been there before him; he went on to pose the following question:

"Whilst you say you don't dictate what goes into the reviews, how would you cope with someone who was pro Asimov/Clarke/Heinlein, a sort of Sam Moskowitz type? Wouldn't it be fair to say that you have a school of reviewers working for you who, while not sycophants, do have a similar approach to yours, and this therefore determines the tone of Inferno because anyone with the biases of a Moskowitz steers clear of you?"

A fair point: as far as I know, no one of the Moskowitzian persuasion has yet asked to be considered as a reviewer, and perhaps for the reason you cite. But let's not confuse the incoherent prejudices and the blustering of a Moskowitz with the ability to actually construct an intelligently-argued case on behalf of Asimov, Clarke, et al, which may be eminently possible; it's just that I've yet to read one which didn't retreat into maunderings about the authors' reputations and took no account of the general literary standards by which we're operating.

Changing the subject, SUE THOMASON asked "Should Inferno continue to review non-fiction?" and, sounding a warning about the loss of the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, went on to say:

"We already have 'novelisations' of real events: The Soul Of A New Machine springs to mind as a possible example. We have 'faction'. We have 'documentary reconstructions' and 'popular science', we have the Bermuda Triangle and the Loch Ness Monster and Relativity For Beginners, and we give them all the same amount and type of belief, and all the same authority: by association with each other. We put the Club of Rome's report right in there with L. Ron Hubbard, who, bless us, we don't even know is currently alive or dead.

"It may be that all this worry and concern is misplaced: that discerning and keen-minded fans will at once be able to spot the difference between fiction and non-fiction reviewed in Inferno's august pages. Not only that, but they will instantly sift the cult rubbish from the books of real and thought-provoking worth."

I'd hope so too; but then, all things considered, we don't often cover "non-fiction" of the Von Daniken kind, partly because I personally have no time for it and partly because it isn't funny enough. But Inferno will continue to review non-fiction of the more serious kind, and increased coverage of such is one of the changes alluded to in my "resignation message" in Vector. And what do I mean by "serious non-fiction"? Well, Robert Harris's and Jeremy Paxman's A Higher Form Of Killing and the Brandt Commission's Common Crisis are just two of the books I have on hand...and if anyone were to claim that said books had nothing to do with science fiction I'd respond by saying that if the world has a future then it behoves us to make ourselves aware of the shape(s) that future could take.

Finishing off now: I also heard from DOUGLAS ATKINS, telling me (out of the blue) how much he liked Anne McCaffrey's The Crystal Singer; BENEDICT CULLUM, who wanted to know what happened to the books after they'd been reviewed (the reviewers keep them); and MICHAEL WHIPPELL, who liked my editorial.

Gosh. That was fun. Write again, eh?

Sandra Miesel -- DREAMRIDER (Ace, 279pp, \$2.75)

Reviewed by Ray Owen

A painting of a cross between a Macbeth hag and Boudicca, standing next to a seven-foot otter playing a Steinberg bass, would qualify as one of the worst book covers in some while were it not for the fact that two of the major characters really are as they are shown. The blurb (surprise surprise) offered little more hope for the book, and I still have my doubts as to the

wisdom of an introduction by Gordon Dickson saying, in effect, "Look, this is Sandra Miesel's first novel, but she's very clever, and this is a jolly good book in the following ways..." Indeed, my worst fears seemed about to be confirmed when, on page 5, I encountered the following lines:

"If Ria had reported her to PSI when the depression set in, she might still be alive. Only there were some things worse than death."

There are, it's true, irksome things in the book -- the explanation of probabilistic time theory ("the tree of time") takes ages to tell us anything, and the description of the main character's native dystopia is unoriginal. Yet, as the story got going, the pencil marks in my review copy got fewer, for I was simply carried along by the tale of Ria, adopted by shamans from an alternative future so that her natural talents can be exploited to make her one of them.

As the novel's main attraction is its plot, to go into it in too much detail would be self-defeating, but it fills the 279 pages with little discernible effort. Moreover, Miesel is capable of the occasional neat line ("There's more to civilisation than plastic furniture, Ria.") or idea (such as the ability to read works never written in our time stream, like Wilfred Owen's poems of his old age). The race of "macotlers" (relics of genetic engineering) were, however, a risky idea, especially when Miesel decides to relate their behaviour to our own ideas of otters (happy-go-lucky but wise), but she manages to give them a reasonably convincing racial psychology so that they thus hold our attention and our credence. (I do wish that they didn't talk like Yoda, though.)

This novel, I am sure, indicates the coming worth of Sandra Miesel's worth and, as pleasant a gesture at it was on Dickson's part, I don't think she'll be needing anyone to lend her respectability in the future. Whether or not she follows up the possibility of a sequel to Dreamrider, and if her next novel is a little more even, we may very shortly have a Big Name on our hands.

Piers Anthony -- GOD OF TAROT, VISION OF TAROT, FAITH OF TAROT (Granada, 256pp, 272pp, 271pp respectively, £1.50 each)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

Sorrow and anger are two reactions that may be experienced on reading this trilogy. Sorrow that Granada should feel obliged to print it; one fondly imagines publishers printing rubbish to subsidise the good stuff, and Granada do publish more than their fair share of the latter, but one finds oneself reluctant to conceive of anyone actually making money from something this execrable. Anger can be directed at the author for being so contemptuous of his audience that he expects them to endure these books and still regard him with any degree of respect.

Brother Paul of the Holy Order of Vision is sent to the planet Tarot to investigate the nature of the strange "Animations" which are terrifying the colonists there. Are these Animations -- wherein the participants are plunged into frighteningly realistic fantasies -- material or spiritual in nature? If spiritual, then it may be that they are manifestations of God's will, and so Brother Paul is effectively being instructed to seek out God. All well and good, except that Anthony is not content with so modest an ambition; he also blunders flat-footedly through every theological minefield ever laid, makes a frontal assault on the Tarot arcana, and finally impales himself on the barbed wire of Freudianism. It's all a matter of discipline. Anthony has never been a controlled writer at the best of times and all he has done here is give himself license to wander where he will. In the second volume, for example, Paul is meant to be surveying all the Earth's major religions -- simultaneously causing offence to almost everyone who is likely to read the book, because even if you're not offended by the notion of Buddha as a gormless little old man sitting under a tree or by Jesus as a half-witted hobo, then you'll be offended by Piers Anthony's belief that he is fearlessly outspoken, a tiresome outrageousness which in fact has all the daring of a teenager's naughty thoughts during a boring confirmation class. Anyway, during this highly selective rampage through the temples of man's spirit, Anthony suddenly veers off course even more than usual and for 65

pages regales us with a thinly disguised tribute to his own moral integrity in the face of the puritanical campus authorities of his college days. After Brother Paul has emerged from this Animation, another character rather lamely observes, "You have looked at other religions and other philosophies, including your idea of an educational institution, and found them wanting." You can draw your own conclusions about a writer who introduces chunks of autobiography into the narrative of a search for spiritual ideals.

Piers Anthony obviously identifies himself pretty closely with his protagonist and, just in case you should be in danger of missing this, at one point has Brother Paul briefly animated as Piers Plowman. (I do hope that Anthony is not trying to imply that his trilogy is in any way comparable to Langland's equally diverse but rather more integral attempt to justify the ways of God to man.) Although Paul reaches the indisputable conclusion that "My soul is a steaming turd", he also turns out to be a rather marvellous fellow. Even his family is marvellous, because he has an adorable little daughter over whom he gushes as fulsomely as Piers Anthony gushes over his daughter in his introduction to his story in Again, Dangerous Visions. Searching for God, indeed -- this author is probably the last person in the world one would choose as a spiritual mentor. The only tests of Paul's spiritual calibre he can devise are to threaten him with grisly torments or to entice him with fleshly delights, for which purpose a massively-bosomed and quivering-buttocked colonist is conveniently sucked into the Animation vortex with him. (There really are some remarkable distortions practised upon the female anatomy by male writers in pursuit of their wish-fulfillment fantasies.) There are attempts to raise the tone, but they take the form of an arrogant parading of a magpie's nest of knowledge; a mediaeval theological dispute (you're referred to Blish's Doctor Mirabilis to see this done properly), a history of the Mormons, a quick tour around Dante's Inferno, the story of the Waldensian heresy, a dramatised history of the Tarot. About the Tarot content I'm not too sure, knowing very little about it as I find it unconvincing to say the least. If you're into the Tarot, then it's conceivable that there may be something of interest here, although it's possible that it may have been treated in the same cocksure and cavalier manner that Anthony adopts towards religion. The reference to Dante is significant, though, as it goes to stress the hypocrisy of Anthony's enterprise -- purple passages are easy, but Dante rose above them in the second and third parts of his trilogy; Anthony conducts his quest for God entirely at the level of the gutter.

This is explicable, mind you, in the terms of the Mindblowing Conclusion that we eventually grind our way to -- Satan is God, everyone. But the abiding memory that this whole ghastly 240,000-word farrago leaves behind is that of being quite unforgiveably dull:

"...The applicable letter is Zain, the Sword. A sword cleaves apart, as Eve was brought from the rib of Adam, flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone. Zain, following the Vau of the Heirophant; the nail that joins together. Astrologically, Gemini naturally applies..."

Drone, drone, drone -- he can go on like this for pages, and does. These books are horrible.

Diana L. Paxson -- LADY OF LIGHT (Timescape, 261pp, \$2.75)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

I hate to admit it in these pages, but I did enjoy this post-apocalyptic, eco-conscious, neo-pagan fantasy pulsating with lush Barbara Cartland passion. It's a nice story about this girl (slim, fragile, cloud of dark hair) and this king (hard, compact, muscular body, sapphire eyes) and how their mating embodies the mystic union of the people with the spirit of the land. The obligatory map is of northern California, with "Elaya" down south, a range of mountains, "the Ramparts", to the east, and such place-names as "Las Costas" and "Montera". The mock-mediaeval life-style is tinged with free-wheeling screwing; the general ambience is of what a Californian SCA commune might grow into if all that nasty modern technological gadgetry (not to mention the rest of the populace) were cleared away -- wish-fulfillment

escapism rules okay and story-telling is an opiate, a psychoactive drug that can turn your mind to mush. Both fantasy and romance are prime mushers, and this book generously combines both.

John Brunner -- INTO THE SLAVE NEBULA (Corgi, 157pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

If I had to coin a term to describe this type of novel, I think that it would be "Silverberg's syndrome". The basic syndrome is hallmarked by the republication of a very old and unimpressive novel; occasionally (as here) a complication sets in, called a rewrite. The syndrome is often observed in publishing houses whose lists stop a considerable distance short of stunning. This particular example (rewritten in 1968, from the 1960 Slavers Of Space) is a joy for nostalgia addicts everywhere, being precisely the sort of thing that Heinlein and Asimov were doing thirty years ago. Derry Horn, frustrated young scion of a rich industrial family, has his comfortable existence shattered when he discovers a corpse in a hotel room. The body, it transpires, is that of one Lars Talibrand (evidently a refugee from the kind of Asimov novel wherein every third character seemed to be called Qwerty), whose identification shows him to be a "citizen of the galaxy", a distinction meaningless on Earth but a high honour in the rest of human space. After an attempt is made on his own life, Horn resolves to find out what such a paragon knew that was worth dying for, and heads off to the colonies for a spot of tilting at the galactic windmills.

As Horn moves from world to world, getting closer and closer to the answer, Brunner begins to drop hints about the terrible truth at journey's end, attached to each of which is a large, fluorescent arrow with "CLUE" written underneath. I wouldn't go so far as to say that anyone who doesn't see the answer coming a mile off is in urgent need of a brain transplant, but I would prescribe a very long holiday, somewhere with no loud noises. Undemanding and obvious, I'm afraid that this novel has been in print for rather longer than it deserved; like most syndrome novels, it should be allowed to retire to a footnote in a bibliography. But I suppose that it might while away a medium-length train journey (London to Manchester, say), and should it happen to get left behind on your seat -- well, what's the price of a couple of pints, anyway?

Lawrence Watt-Evans -- THE CYBORG AND THE SORCERERS (Futura/Del Rey, 248pp, £1.60)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Come daughters of inspiration, and draw for me a cup: let the ever-living waters of Rhetoric slake my parched imagination, for I must kindle the fires of literary passion in the hearts of my hearers; I must sway them to cries of "Triffic!" or "Yaarghch!" over this papperbok which I thought was, well, quite all right really, not the sort of thing I'd think of nominating for the BSFA Award (if it was eligible), but not sickening enough to be fit only for donation to the nearest public library....

Enter Slant, the Cyborg Warrior, his 300-year (and counting) mission: to boldly go etc., to discover strange new weapons technologies and return them to Earth, to meet harmless and potentially interesting people and kill them. His Robot Spacecraft has orders to make the bomb in his head go bang if he shows any sign of turning soft and actually worrying about killing people, but he does have a specially implanted warrior personality which takes over in combat situations, so he can wreak major havoc and destruction without disturbing his finer feelings too much. This Robot Spacecraft is itself suicidal, but unfortunately Earth's Empire, and the people who knew the mission release code which would grant the poor mechanical its deathwish, blew themselves up shortly after launching our intrepid pair. There is No Way Out (until page 238).

So far, it's straightforward Blood and Chunder. This, then, is the place to insert the standard paragraph which deplores and condemns the gratuitous, plotless violence which is (I'm told) all too common in the less refined types of fiction. However, as gratuitous, plotless violence goes, this is very mild curry, not even all that searing to me (who has been known

to watch Dr Who from behind the sofa).

The story, then: our corporate-identity hero discovers "gravitational anomalies" on a hitherto unvisited planet. Let's investigate, it must be a new weapons technology. No: just a bunch of stock sub-Tolkien wizards teleporting and levitating themselves about the place. So Slant tries to explain to his computer that this isn't no weapons technology, it's just a friendly community of little old magic-using sorcerers, peacefully governing their city-states. The computer doesn't believe him, and threatens to make him go bang and nuke all the friendly peaceful people in the friendly peaceful city (a view I have some sympathy with, in the circumstances). The plot proceeds more or less obviously to (tricky one, this) a Twist Ending which neither wild horses nor many pints of Adnams would drag from me.

My own feelings about attempts to mix SF and fantasy in the same book is that, like attempts at combining oil and water to make a third, wonderful and totally new substance, they are a little misguided. The result is usually a gloppy mess. The only person I can think of who can get the mix right sometimes is Andre Norton, Revered Master of my distant, uncritical childhood. Yet I could have sat back and uncritically enjoyed this, were it not for one thing that is as irritating as a wrinkled sock in a public place. That "gravitational anomalies" are flight magic, I can take, but why is telepathy also a "gravitational anomaly"? It does not compute (she says sadly).

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro -- CAUTIONARY TALES, TIME OF THE FOURTH HORSEMAN
(Granada, 285pp, 236pp respectively, £1.50 each)

Reviewed by Andy Hobbs

Cautionary Tales is a collection of short stories first published between 1971 and 1978; Time Of The Fourth Horseman comes in the middle of this period, a novel from 1976. Both of the books utilise settings and plots that are standard, although they have been treated in a more personal manner.

Yarbro develops her plots in this personal manner in more ways than one -- many of the thirteen short stories in Cautionary Tales stem from her own likes and ideals. There are, for instance, three stories with a firm base in opera ("Un Bel Di", "Into My Own" and "The Fellini Beggar"), and others are attempts by the author to convey either philosophical ideas or writing styles she possesses. Innovation seems to be what is aimed at, but there are limitations to both Yarbro's approach and feeling for the subjects which cause it to fail.

In the collection there is a constant feeling that SF is the format used because it is available, not out of any attempt to enrich the genre. The characters, and their predicaments, are put into a series of situations that could just as easily have been contemporary, for all that the plot is helped by their "fantastic" settings. Perhaps only "Allies", the best and longest story, gains from its SF setting, although the author's note following it rather gives the lie to this: her intention, it seems, was to write a story in which the characters cannot be identified by sex. Although she succeeds to some extent, "Allies" would have been better without this device.

The stories also have the feel of being drawn from a far greater picture -- Yarbro's scenes are too narrow, the lack of all but immediate detail sometimes confusing because it is difficult to imagine the broader canvas, and in some cases this does not allow a full appreciation of either the central characters or their predicament. There is also a certain implausibility about the characters which manifests itself through the realisation that in all cases the story outweighs the necessity for believable individuals to people it. The hero or heroine is merely used as a central hub for the plot, little or no detail of their background or personality being given to the reader.

Despite all this, the stock characters in stock settings, there is a nagging sense that what Yarbro is writing about transcends the need for plausibility. The prose is easy to read, but not easily forgotten, and I am sure that she will produce far better, more rounded and satisfying short stories in the future.

Time Of The Fourth Horseman did not live up to my expectations of it. Yarbro had seemed unsure of the short story form, overcompensating for its

limitations by concentrating too much on the immediate storyline. In the novel, I expected to find a well rounded and carefully thought-out plot, with characters capable of coping with it. If anything, the novel is more contrived and incredible than the short stories.

There is a standard disaster-type plot; a future setting of overpopulation and stretched resources forcing the government to instigate a (secret) plan for controlling the population through epidemic. The threat of all the major diseases having been quashed before the book opens, a Project is set up to nullify the effect of immunisation by reducing the potency of one in three vaccines to nil, thereby creating an epidemic of gargantuan proportions.

The central characters are all doctors in the beleaguered "test" city, who fight against the Project. This leads to their dismissal from practice, and their consequent effort to set up and run a private hospital. Throughout it all, though, there is disbelief in the actions of the doctors, and even in the society in which they live and work. There is no realistic basis given for the way in which that society was developed from today's, or the way that people act within that society. Apart from a very few sections, it is as if all the characters have been lifted from today and transported into an alien situation in which they are expected to survive. This maivete, coupled with a sentimentality which is at times overpowering (a fault also present in the short stories) makes Time Of The Fourth Horseman a poor book.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro will produce some very good fiction one day; her style is fluent and some of her ideas are nice developments of older ones. Until, however, there is a greater sense of identity about her characters and her settings then her fiction will be no more than mediocre. SF may be about the suspension of disbelief, but it cannot be suspended if there are constant reminders that the fiction is unbelievable.

Keith Laumer -- RETIEF AND THE WARLORDS (Timescape, 175pp, \$2.50)

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

This reprint need not detain us long. Laumer's galactic diplomat, Retief, is a well-known heroic figure, frequently resorting to unorthodoxy and even violence in the pursuit of harmonious diplomatic relations between Terrans and the various alien races of the galaxy. He has starred in several novels and many short stories, the best of the latter being subtle, inventive and cleverly humorous. At novel length, though, Laumer's invention seems to flag and, as here, he plumps for a chaotic series of farcical encounters between Retief and his enemies. The reader knows that Retief will escape from even the most dire predicament with barely a scratch, so the merit of each adventure rests largely on the author's ingenuity. Retief And The Warlords is notably low on ingenuity. Having menaced his hero with loaded handguns (amny times), torture, gladiatorial combat and the massed ranks of an alien spacefleet, Laumer resorts to "luck" and successively less credible deus ex machina to keep Retief alive. Even the humour wears thin. If you enjoy fast-moving, somewhat repetitive farce, this novel is probably aimed at you.

Robert Holdstock -- WHERE TIME WINDS BLOW (Pan, 286pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Kevin Rattan

This is a book which I find very difficult to review. I can't say that I particularly enjoyed it, not because of any fault with it but because of an inability to empathise with the main character. A quote on the back describes it as "fully realised", and indeed it is; and though I found the emphasis on the detailed relation of the feelings and actions of the hero tedious, the setting within which this takes place is pleasantly original.

Kamelios is a planet where strange winds seem to displace objects in time, both from present into past and future and from other times to the present. Man has been attracted by the fascination of the alien, seen in so many of the forms and structures snatched from other times, and by the search for profit from these. The nature of the planet has spawned new customs amongst the humans, and new tasks for those known as Rifters, who look

for artifacts in the great rift valley that is the centre of violent wind activity. It has even led to genetic engineering being used to create the Manchanged, who can breathe the planet's corrosive air.

The people who have come to live on Kamelios have been changed by the ordinary life of the planet and by storms called "fierzigs", which disrupt their personalities. The problems of each character are caused either by the effect of these storms on their relationships with others, by the fact of living with such wonders, or by the hang-ups which made them come to the planet in the first place. Commander Ensvilion is desperate for another glimpse of alien intelligence, something never clearly revealed by the winds, for he believes he has seen time-travellers; Chris Dojaan is looking for his missing brother, who called to him telepathically as he was sucked in by the winds; and through the central character, Leo Falcon, we become aware of the effect of the continual barrage of novelty on the Rifiers, dulling them to all save profit.

The book touches on many things, from the influence of the moons on the wildlife of the planet to the existence of a phantom who seems to have solved the problem of travelling through time, and is filled with interesting details. Kamelios is not just Earth with knobs on but a convincingly alien world, some of whose aspects are understood by the humans but with much that is unclear and still being researched. The book is worth reading for this wrapping, for the surroundings in which the characters move; although it has a strong central idea, the plot is uninvolved and promised revelations that it did not provide.

Jack Haldeman -- WORLDS (Futura, 262pp, £1.75; Timescape, 239pp, \$2.50)

Reviewed by Roelof Goudriaan

Man is accustomed to a sky above him, to free space. But in 2080 there are also the Worlds, forty-one manned satellites orbiting the Earth. Someone born in space cannot really appreciate the sentiments of someone born on Earth, and vice versa.

But space travel is still a luxury which only the very wealthy can afford. Marianne O'Hara, a political sciences student from New New York, is one of the few Worlds citizens who get an opportunity to visit Earth. She is a woman I can believe in, a sometimes very scared person touring a world she doesn't really understand.

Haldeman has given serious thought to the concept of space colonies. He doesn't just advocate cheap solar energy, beamed down to Earth, but gives us a glimpse of a great diversity of autonomous cultures and the mentality which man could develop in an atmosphere free of historical traditions. He makes light of the problems a space colony would face, very much so, but his vision remains likeable -- his Worlds are an exotic but functioning assembly of steel, equal rights and sexual cults.

As fresh as the Worlds are, however, as predicatable is the near-future Earth Haldeman portrays. It is the slightly extremist extrapolation which brands so much average science fiction, and though it may suffice to make the points Haldeman wants to it couldn't keep up my interest.

The plot is mainly a travelogue. O'Hara tours the different parts of Earth and gradually gets involved in the outer layers of a complex plot to overthrow the US government. This will eventually lead to the outbreak of global war, which prepares us for the logical climax: a plea from Haldeman to build such manned satellites to preserve civilisation should Earth be destroyed by nuclear or biological war. A well-trodden path.

Its strong female character, however, saves Worlds from mediocrity. By a narrow margin.

Anne McCaffrey -- THE CRYSTAL SINGER (Corgi, 302pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Eve Harvey

Whatever one's opinion of Anne McCaffrey as a writer, it must be admitted that she is a good businesswoman. She has researched her market, devised a formula to fit it and, as with all good businesses, once it has proved successful she's sticking with it. But, like all businesses, she must watch her market and prevent it from becoming saturated. In addition, markets to-

day change swiftly, and any business must be willing and able to adapt its product accordingly. The Crystal Singer may well be the signpost to her decline, since it shows only too clearly either her inability or her unwillingness to change her formula.

The McCaffrey Formula is to provide the reader with as many variations on the central theme of Cinderella as her limited imagination will allow. In The Crystal Singer we have a young girl, Killashandra Ree (Cinderella), who has dedicated her life to opera singing, only to fail her final examinations and be advised to concentrate on the chorus (she can't go to the ball). She is devastated, and in a haze heads for the spaceport, where she meets Carrik (her Fairy Godmother) of the Heptite (or Singers) Guild, who interests her in becoming a crystal singer (she can go to the ball after all). Crystal singers are a rare group of people who have perfect pitch and can therefore carve valuable crystal from the mountainsides of the planet Ballybran by causing it to resonate at the correct pitch. The importance of the crystal in such areas as spaceship drive units and long-distance communications makes the singers very influential; and this, together with the unexplained dangers to be encountered on the planet (which are such that no one is allowed to land without special permission), allows the Guild to maintain a cloak of secrecy over all its operations. Killashandra's determination to join them is only strengthened by the consternation this causes her colleagues (the Ugly Sisters) and their unsuccessful attempts to prevent her leaving. Arriving on Ballybran, she applies for membership of the Guild (she attends the ball). Passing the various tests with flying colours, she "familiarises" herself so well with the planet that she comes to the notice of the head of the Guild, Guildmaster Lanzecki (she is the belle of the ball, he is Prince Charming). She eventually wins his heart and satisfies her overwhelming desire to be the best by becoming one of the most talented crystal singers in the Guild's history (they all lived happily ever after).

Not only is The Crystal Singer a steal from Cinderella, but comparison with the dragon stories shows too much similarity for comfort. The "magical" experience of imprinting the egg is paralleled by Killashandra's empathy with black crystal and her ability to sense its presence; the rapport between Lessa and Ramoth is paralleled by the rapport between Killashandra and the crystal; finally, Ramoth was a rare golden dragon and black crystal is the rarest and most difficult to find. This lack of originality would be more palatable if McCaffrey's writing was strong enough to maintain the tension, but it is not. The hints at the Guild's "dark, hidden secrets" are too thinly veiled; it is obvious that the singers are the good guys. It is clear from the outset that Killashandra will become a crystal singer, and a special one into the bargain, and fall in love with the "unattainable" Guildmaster. Thus all the suspense is missing and the end is met with a yawn.

Since reading this novel I have suffered from a recurring nightmare. The scene is a convention at which Anne McCaffrey is giving a reading from this novel. The lights are dimmed; her voice, full of emotion, floats over the hushed audience. She is describing Killashandra's agony on having to leave the black crystal: "...Sound like a shock wave, herself the sound and the sounding board, vision over vision, a fire in her bones, thunder in her veins, a heart-contracting experience of pain and pleasure so intense and so total that every nerve in her body and every convolution of her brain echoed ..." McCaffrey's voice breaks as tears stream down her cheeks; she reaches for her handkerchief and I reach for the nearest waxed-paper bag.

Terry Brooks -- THE ELFSTONES OF SHANNARA (Futura, 636pp, £2.95)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

This is not such a bad book. It is very clearly written in good school composition English, so that it does not set a bad example. It is about a tree that keeps the demons and other baddies shut away from the world. Then the tree starts to die, and the demons get out and start killing people. An Elf girl called Amberle and a Dalesman boy called Wil have to take a seed from the tree to a spooky place and hold it in the Bloodfire. Then the tree, which is called Ellcrys, can be reborn, and that will shut the demons away

again. A druid called Allanon helps them do this. There are some battles.

You get the idea. After a while my lips started to move as I read. When I was nine, I might have loved this book, but even then I might have found it just a little tedious, just a little too carefully pitched down to a childish level. And that, of course, is something the best children's books never do.

There's no doubt that Brooks has read Tolkien, and his influence is no less blatant in this "long-awaited sequel" (as both front and back cover proclaim it) than it was in The Sword Of Shannara -- the battle scenes in particular echoed The Lord Of The Rings. Since writing the first book, it's evident that Brooks has read Donaldson as well, but though he makes use of his ideas Brooks weakens the similarity by sweetening bitter clenched pessimism to blandness -- the "tide of evil" has not overwhelmed the Land, and the one tree (which is both female and sentient) doesn't need to be sought since it sits right by the Elves' city.

Your average nine-to-twelve year old who can manage Blyton's "Famous Five" and the "Biggles" books should find Brooks acceptable. But this is hardly adult fare.

Marion Zimmer Bradley -- TWO TO CONQUER (Arrow, 335pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Ray Owen

"Like all the Darkover novels, this is an independent story and not an incomplete part of a series." I was glad to read that in the author's introduction, for I didn't relish going through the entire sequence to understand the one novel. No, this one will be easily accessible.

For Darkover fans, who might be familiar with the planet's history, the story is set near the end of The Ages Of Chaos during The Time Of The Hundred Kingdoms. It deals with Varzil the Good(y) and The Wolf Of The Kilghard Hills, and that most overused and contrived plot mechanism, the exact double (who, in this case, comes from Earth).

Despite Bradley's promises to the contrary, I found the book impenetrable, not because it required prior knowledge of the sequence but because I can no longer muster any enthusiasm for books full of barbarian kings wearing leather boots and jerkins, warring and feasting and raping all over the place, and holding endless conversations full of invented words. Unless the writer has something particularly interesting or original to say within the sub-genre, as Gene Wolfe has in "The Book Of The New Sun", then I'd rather not get involved with it, and instead consign books like this to the dustier end of my shelves, to rest with the other novels I'm slightly ashamed of owning (The Tides Of Lust, for instance, or The Many Coloured Land).

Perhaps Two To Conquer has qualities only detectable by Darkover fans; but the popularity of the sequence will ensure it reasonable success regardless.

Jack Vance -- GALACTIC EFFECTUATOR (Coronet, 219pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

An effectuator is someone who causes things to happen; a galactic effectuator, therefore, is one who effects on a galactic scale; all of which is a curiously inaccurate description of Miro Hetzel. Vance's investigator-cum-adventurer confines himself to matters of industrial espionage (in "The Dogtown Tourist Agency", the longer and better of the two stories here masquerading as a novel) and missing persons ("Freitzke's Turn") in the Gaean Reach. The atmosphere is low-key Chandler -- certainly, the female characters could only be at home in 40s' movies -- but Hetzel is a manipulator rather than a Bogart tough guy.

What gives it the Vance trademark is a kind of deadpan presentation of the highly improbable. Names, for example, have a gently mocking formality -- Sir Estevan Tristo, Dr Faurence Woxonoy, Casimir Wuldfache. From time to time there are footnotes (footnotes!) explaining, say, the derivation of a form of address: "Vv., an abbreviation for Visfer, originally Viasvar, an Ordinary of the ancient Legion of Truth; now a low-grade honorific used to address a person lacking aristocratic distinction."

If that appeals to your sense of humour, then Galactic Effectuator is

worth reading. As regards the solutions to the mysteries it is, as the saying goes, better to travel hopefully than to arrive; but the interest in a Vance narrative rarely lies in its supposed end, and more in the scenery and the journey. Nor can one complain that, in something so essentially lightweight, the aliens and alien societies are little more than cardboard cut-outs: Vance isn't aiming at Michael Bishop-style anthropology. But Galactic Effectuator will give you a fair amount of invention and wit for your \$1.50.

Charles Beaumont -- BEST OF BEAUMONT (Bantam, 238pp, \$2.95)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

Ray Bradbury's embarrassingly soppy introduction to this collection achieves its one useful moment at the point where he lets slip the fact that during the early fifties he advised his young acolyte Beaumont to discipline himself to write one story a week. Beaumont duly did so, and it shows. The range is wide, and SF stories are in the minority in strict genre terms; there are also mystery stories, horror stories, and a considerable number of juvenily titillatory pieces written for magazines like Playboy and Rogue. But all the different pieces have much the same feel because they are written in much the same spirit. They are all "suppose" stories: suppose a robot had a soul, a man feel in love with his car, a vampire didn't like the taste of blood, a woman was unarousable. The situation is set up swiftly and the story drills through to its conclusion with the minimum of malingering. Of the 22 stories in this volume, only one, "The Jungle", is over 20 pages long, and it also happens to be among the best. The colour and detail made available by the more expansive treatment stick in the memory after the story is finished, whereas most of the others in this book are forgotten within moments. Beaumont provides an object lesson in the dangers of writing to a punchline, and again shows improvement when he avoids temptation, as in "Last Rites" and "The Customers", two evasive stories about death. Add to three stories mentioned "The New People" (unoriginal but effectively creepy horror) and "Blood Brother" (a genuinely funny vampire story) and you have a collection which might just be worth flicking through. You'll also encounter three or four stories which are amongst the worst short fiction I have ever read, but you can always think of them as being educational, in that they show how not to do it.

Joy Chant -- THE GREY MANE OF MORNING (Bantam, 334pp, \$3.50)

Reviewed by Kevin Rattan

On a planet that will come to be known as Vanderei, the Khentorei live a nomadic life dictated largely by the moons and the gods through one of their davlani -- horned horses of impressive physique and stature. Their life is free from such external pressures as wars, their only duty being the paying of tribute to the "Golden Ones", which has been their custom for centuries. Unfortunately, the golden ones make the mistake of taking Nai as part of the tribute. Nai is the sister of Mor'anh and both of them are special to their tribe, Priestess and Priest, chosen ones of the gods. Mor'anh is named after lightning, the "Spear of the Sky", and the gods have given him the impulse to fight against custom.

That's enough. I did not like this book at all. The cover, with "The Heroic Tale Of Ancient Times In Vanderei" across the top, annoyed me, the list of characters at the beginning annoyed me (I don't mind an appendix such as Tolkien used, which contained much only hinted at in his book, but the idea of including the name and description of even the protagonist in these three or four useless pages suggests to me just how low an opinion the writer has of her audience), the introduction by Betty Ballantine annoyed me, and I just did not like the invented names at all.

It occurs to me that many of you, having read of my resignation as Reviews Editor of Vector in the pages of the said magazine, may have been flipping back and forth through this one in search of a formal announcement of the forthcoming changes in its content and format. I should have said, of course, that such will appear in the next issue, not this one. Stay tuned!