

PAPERBACK

PARLOUR

Volume 3, Number 2 - edited by Joseph Nicholas, 2 Wilmot Way, Camberley, Surrey GU15 1JA. This address will change within the next few weeks, so publishers should watch for COA postcards falling softly through their mailboxes. Reviews this time are by Alan Dorey, Dave Langford, Ian Maule, me, and (if they come through in time) Paul Kincaid, Keith Plunkett and Kev Smith. (The waiting isn't killing me, but it has forced me to abandon the cherished alphabetical-by-author order of the reviews, for this issue at least.) Plus the first "Sleeve Notes", a column about paperback cover art by Welsh fanwriter and fanartist Rob Hansen.

There isn't an editorial this time ("E Is For Excuse", eh wot?); although I was originally intending to devote the remainder of this first page to a vigorous polemic against the utter crap that won the Hugo Awards at Seacon a couple of months ago, the piece turned itself into a long attack on the concept of the Awards itself and was siphoned off as my "From The Underworld" column for Dave Langford's and Kev Smith's Drilkjis 5, available from them at 22 Northumberland Avenue, Reading, Berkshire RG2 7PW even as you read these words. So stint not your 40p (I mean, only 40p!), but remember to tell them I sent you....

Piers Anthony - THE SOURCE OF MAGIC (Futura/Del Rey, 326pp, 85p)

This, an obvious sequel to Anthony's earlier A Spell For Chameleon, is also the second book in a trilogy about Xanth, a land where everyone and everything has some sort of magical attribute - a potentially interesting concept that Anthony ruins by a welter of unnecessary (and often quite juvenile) invention and the breathless haste of his plotting. Not that the characters are particularly engaging, either; they all seem to think and act like little children, sulking when they can't have their own way or else shouting at each other until they do (and even, once or twice, offering to duff each other up - in the approved schoolboy fashion - and thus "prove" which one of them is "the best". I kid you not). They're also unbelievably stupid, apparently unable to remember anything from one page to the next - which actually suits Anthony's purposes admirably, enabling him to iterate and reiterate the facts of his story in a manner that suggests he holds a remarkably low opinion of his readers' own intelligence. (And he could be right; this certainly isn't a book for people who like to think.) The plot, if you care (and after about 50 pages I found it difficult to care for anything in this novel), concerns a quest to discover the source of Xanth's magic: it turns out to be a demon imprisoned in a cave whom Bink (in what I assume is intended to be a crisis of confidence, but which actually comes across as mere sentimental agonising, on the level of deciding whether or not to steal a sweetie while mummy's back is turned) sets free. The demon, of course, takes Xanth's magic with him - and Anthony, realising that this will render impossible completion of the trilogy, promptly brings him back via a plot device that, even in so shoddily-written a book as this, sticks out a mile. Perhaps he just doesn't care - and, remembering the promise he displayed in Chthon, that

strange, compelling novel about alienation and alienness he wrote back in those heady days of 1967, I can only wonder how he could ever have sunk to producing such rubbish as The Source Of Magic. It's a book to be avoided.

Richard Kirk - RAVEN 5: A TIME OF DYING (Corgi, 190pp, 95p)

Another exciting Chris Achilleos cover, full of perfectly-formed breasts and glistening thighs...oh, the story? Something to do with an Alien-like monster slurping around and knocking off everyone it can get its talons on, written while "Richard Kirk"'s brains were out to lunch (or hungover from it). Formulaic sword-and-sordidry, in other words, but I'd better not say any more because I know one of the authors, and he's bigger than I....

Ron Goulart - THE PANCHRONICON PLOT (LSP/Daw, 156pp, 85p), HELLO, LEMURIA HELLO (LSP/Daw, 156pp, 95p)

Two novels about Jake Conger, an invisible secret agent who works for the Wild Talent Division of the US Remedial Functions Agency - which organisational labels alone probably demonstrate Goulart's satirical bent. His main flaw, of course, is his inability to conceive of any other future than an exaggerated version of present-day California (nut-cults, food fads, and paranoia in abundance), and for that reason these two are best not read one after the other since they can become repetitive. Of the two, The Panchronicon Plot is the better, not least because it does actually have a plot; Hello, Lemuria Hello has instead a number of unrelated threads which never quite come together - and to attempt a satire of something as nonsensical as the Shaver Mystery strikes me as pretty futile in any case. But they're both undemanding fun, and just right for otherwise tedious train journeys.

Brian M. Stableford - WILDEBLOOD'S EMPIRE (Hamlyn, 169pp, 80p)

The third in the Daedalus recontact series (derived, Mike Dickinson tells me, from Eric Frank Russell's The Great Explosion), and surprisingly better than the previous two, probably because it doesn't contain quite so many biology lectures. (Hey, Brain, why not a series about a starship pilot who flies around the galaxy lecturing everyone on the sociology of literature?) And it's got a swordfight! (For the definitive argument on swordfights in Brian Stableford novels, see the interview with him printed in Graham James's and Simon Ounsley's Ocelot 2.) The cover is by Tim White, and by God that orange sky doesn't half clash with the dark green vegetation in the foreground.

Brian W. Aldiss - BROTHERS OF THE HEAD (Panther, 156pp, 85p), LAST ORDERS (Panther, 222pp, 95p)

The original edition of Brothers Of The Head was a large format illustrated one published by Piatret; in this ordinary one it's supplemented by "Where The Lines Converge", a novelette superficially concerned with dinosaur-descended reptilemen hiding out amongst the normal run of humanity but which, underneath, is actually about loneliness, obsession, paranoia, self-analysis, generation gaps and God knows what else besides. "Brothers Of The Head" is about a three-headed Siamese twin punk band called the Bang-Bang, written from the viewpoints of the main people in their lives - a technique that naturally tells us more about the characters writing the different accounts than about the twins, but that's probably just as it should be, since how many of us really know what goes on inside the heads of such people? Perverse and disturbing stuff, anyway.

Last Orders, on the other hand, is a more light-hearted collection, its stories laden with a variety of prankish and outre philosophies - although several of them hardly exist as stories at all, being instead patently transparent vehicles for the voicing of said philosophies, and read in succession they can become a bit wearying. I'd have preferred to see such discourses embedded in a few longer stories rather than lots of short ones; but that's a matter of purely personal taste. It's a pretty good collection, anyway, if nowhere the standard of his earlier The Moment Of Eclipse.

William F. Nolan - WONDERWORLDS (Corgi, 190pp, 95p)

Reviewed by Alan Dorey

Nolan is perhaps better known for his co-authorship of Logan's Run, the novel that demonstrated the true depths of the American TV mire. The 21 short stories collected here are all reprints dating from 1954 to 1976. None are outstandingly good but the majority are competent, light and well-constructed along traditional formulaic lines. In a way, they all have their hearts set firmly in that immediate post-war period when SF was young and innocent and all short stories had to have solid, off-beat SF endings; and whilst our latter-day "sense of wonder" may have become jaded, this collection does occasionally create a fair facsimile of it. "Fasterfaster", a James Bond parody, is quite fun; "He Kilt It With A Stick" tries to chill the spine but really only sets the odd vertebra tingling; and "The Elena Movement" reads like a satire on the whole 1950s' SF scene. Not what I would settle down to read when all else fails, but coming from a guy who finds cheer from studying cricket statistics that could be taken as a seal of mild approval.

Fritz Leiber - THE SWORDS OF LANKHMAR (Mayflower, 222pp, 85p), SWORDS AND ICE MAGIC (Mayflower, 189pp, 85p)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

When judging books against literature as a whole rather than merely against SF (PP's policy, stated last time), there are important distinctions to be made. Leiber isn't writing the Swords (Fafhrd & Gray Mouser) series with the lofty aims of Tolstoy, and comparison with him would be absurd; the books are good picaresque adventure and like Leslie Charteris's Saint books they succeed on this level by bringing wit, style and inventiveness to unpromising material. Also like the Saint stories, Swords is not a seamless whole: the early work contains more shaky writing, the most recent shows a decline.

The novel The Swords Of Lankhmar is the high point of the series: funny, cruel, outrageous, perverse and (as they say) action-packed, neither too serious and logical nor too arbitrary. The setting is Leiber's fabulously sleazy city of Lankhmar, where almost any treasure or crime can be found - London with more glamour and fewer parking meters. Recommended.

Swords And Ice Magic opens with a few of the virtually plotless set-pieces Leiber has been writing lately, wherein he flaunts inventiveness and clever writing at the expense of his heroes, who lose their charm when pushed about like chessmen. The remaining two-thirds has a different flavour again: a sinister story of malevolent gods, with the humour sadly muted. Leiber is making his old heroes perform new tricks, and they don't seem wholly happy with the change of policy.

Frederik Pohl - ALTERNATING CURRENTS (Penguin, 190pp, 75p), THE MAN WHO ATE THE WORLD (Panther, 190pp, 85p), SURVIVAL KIT (Panther, 192pp, 85p)

Three reissued collections, the stories in them stemming (for the most part) from the mid to late fifties, when satire was the predominant name of Pohl's game. Alternating Currents is perhaps the weakest of the three, dragged down by "Let The Ants Try" and "The Mapmakers", two stories so astoundingly bad that they can only have been written while the rent-collector was hammering at the door; but they are partially redeemed by "The Tunnel Under The World", "What To Do Until The Analyst Comes" and the excellent "The Children Of Night" - a story which, in these dark post-Watergate times, now takes on added significance. The Man Who Ate The World is the strongest of the three, containing (among others) the title story, "The Day The Icicle Works Closed", "The Wizards Of Pung's Corners" and its sequel, "The Waging Of The Peace", all of which actually succeed because of their preposterous exaggerations (exaggerations which perhaps only Pohl has the skill to carry off; I certainly can't imagine any other writer making much sense of them). Survival Kit is a merely average collection, falling midway between the other two, and is mainly distinguished by "The Day Of The Boomer Dukes" and the sour-tasting "I Plinglot, Who You?" (These latter two collections, incidentally, last saw paperback in the UK as the one-volume Frederik Pohl Omnibus, and it's good to see them restored to their original form.)

should there be any such contact between the two worlds anyway? I'll admit that science or pseudo-science isn't important to this novel, but most readers (myself included) would expect some sort of doubletalk explanation.

But who are those readers? Judging by the book's back cover category label, which bills it as "Fiction/Literature", they're not SF fans, since they will be instinctively repelled by its prose style (to call it overwritten to the point of almost total impenetrability is an understatement); while those instinctively attracted to said prose's lushness and decadence will find its overtly SF background difficult to swallow.

It's a strange book: one I wanted to like but couldn't, and one that, even on its own terms, is something of a failure.

Garry Kilworth - IN SOLITARY (Avon, 126pp, \$1.25; & Penguin, 139pp, 75p)
Reviewed by Alan Dorey

This was Garry Kilworth's first novel, and followed hard on the heels of his two Sunday Times/Gollancz SF competition prize-winning stories. It is by no means a block-busting epic brimming over with platinum-plated ideas or mind-blowing concepts, but it is well-written and well-balanced: there is no unnecessary rushing of plot in the last few pages and the characterisation is well-established right from the start. The story concerns an enslaved Earth where the alien overseers strictly control the population level and ensure that humanity exists only in a series of isolated pockets. But in Oceania resistance to the artificial demographic control is slowly building up and, as they say, things were never to be the same again. Tangias, the principal protagonist, is a very real and believable character, and serves to demonstrate Kilworth's depth of writing which can only get better as time goes by. Once he learns to become a little less restrained in his plot treatment we shall have a fine writer in our midst.

Robert Silverberg, Martin Harry Greenberg & Joseph D. Olander (eds) - CAR SINISTER
(Avon, 253pp, \$2.25)

Reviewed by Janice Maule

This is a collection of 20 stories by 18 authors (including such as Zelazny, Ellison, Harry Harrison, Avram Davidson, Lafferty, Leiber, Herbert, Gene Wolfe and Malzberg), all featuring cars or their byproducts. Insofar as the collection can be said to have a common theme, it is about the increasing importance of the car in modern society: as a means of transport, as a social symbol and as a cultural manifestation. Anthropomorphism of the vehicle goes hand-in-hand with dehumanisation of the driver. Because the stories take this approach to the car the fact that they were all written in the period 1963-74 does not make them obsolete in the light of the recent/current fuel crisis. The car is used mainly as a symbolic device and not as an end in itself. An entertaining and worthwhile collection despite the familiarity of some of the stories it includes.

Gerald W. Page - THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES: SERIES VI & SERIES VII (LSP/Daw,
239pp and 221pp respectively, \$1.25 each)

I must admit that I'm not particularly fond of horror per se: all those ghosts and haunted houses and things bumping in the night strike me as so cliched (and so ludicrous) that I'm more inclined to yawn (or laugh) than anything else. These two anthologies, however....well, the majority of their contents aren't "horrer" in the sense of the above "definition" but "fantasy" - and sometimes not even that, merely ordinary mainstream stories with a slight touch of the unusual about them. (And I claim not to play the literary categories game, too! Oh, what a hypocrite I am. Better start practising what I preach, eh?) Cases in point are the two stories by Michael Bishop: "Within The Walls Of Tyre" in VI, about a middle-aged boutique manager who was once delivered of a lithopedion, a petrified foetus, which she keeps, and who later has an affair with its live half-brother (of whose existence she was previously unaware); and "Collaborating" in VII, about a two-headed person struggling to preserve its essential humanity in the face of its obvious (and crowd-pulling) classification as a freak - a situation akin to that of Brian Aldiss's "Brothers Of The Head", and a rather better story to boot. (But then I'm a confirmed fan of Bishop's work, and convinced

Sandra Marshak & Myrna Culbreath - THE FATE OF THE PHOENIX (Corgi/Bantam, 262pp, 85p) Reviewed by Janice Maule (whose name I cretinously omitted from the colophon)

Once upon a time two Star Trek fans wrote a novel called The Price Of The Phoenix, but unfortunately couldn't think of an ending in time for its publication. When they did resolve the dangling plot-line they wrote this sequel, which not only removes the major problem of two Jim Kirks flying around the galaxy but also conveniently disposes of the seemingly omnipotent villain, Omne. This feat is accomplished more by luck than judgement, as the book is more a series of incidents which happen to follow each other than a coherent exposition of a carefully calculated plot: the characters get into a fix, the authors write them out of it by the nearest convenient method and they all stumble off into the next crisis.

One might forgive this if only there was more life in the characters. After all, several of the main ones were created 12 years ago, and what with the TV series and the novels and short stories inspired by it sufficient background information is available on the original characters to give any author a great deal of scope for extrapolation of old ideas and interpolation of a few new ones. Other writers of Star Trek novels have not been afraid to do this, but Marshak and Culbreath have apparently decided that Kirk, Spock and McCoy were to remain untouched by auctorial invention, and as result all the scenes in which these "personalities" are present are totally flat, completely lacking in the vital touch of leavening that would have been provided by some attempt at new insights into their natures. The scenes involving the Romulan Commander and the Doyen seem more successful but here the authors have the advantage of allowing themselves the liberty of invention on a grand scale, huge chunks of cultural and political detail about the Romulan Empire being created out of whole cloth. If only some of this imagination could have been applied to the characterisation....but as it is the heroes are totally good and the villains totally evil and the walk-on parts generally ill-formed and confused.

This could have been the archetypal Star Trek wish-fulfillment novel: a female Romulan Commander who has to protect Kirk and has a romantic interest in both Kirk and Spock and takes a very active part in fighting the villain and outwits the rest of the Romulan Empire in her bid to the Right Thin by the Universe and has to overcome the suspicions of a jealous queen - no female Star Trek could fail to identify with such a protagonist! If only this book had been tackled by someone with a little less reverence for Star Trek it could have been an amusing read for anyone who'd ever seen the TV show, but even the most dedicated Star Trek fan will find it very hard to enjoy.

Michael Moorcock - LEGENDS FROM THE END OF TIME (Star, 182pp, 95p)

These three novelettes - "Pale Roses", "White Stars" and "Ancient Shadows", originally published in numbers 8 to 10 of the New Worlds paperback anthologies - act as a sideline to the excellent "Dancers At The End Of Time" trilogy, casting further light on the milieu by the simple expedient of raising Lord Jagged of Canaria, the Duke of Queens, the Iron Orchid and other wonderfully engaging loons from the minor roles they previously occupied to the subjects of stories in their own right. I say "loons" advisedly, since it seems to me that the intent of this book is more determinedly comic than that of the trilogy - which may well make it a more attractive proposition to those readers repelled by Moorcock's more formulaic sword-and-sorcery novels, and it can be read without reference to the aforementioned trilogy in any case. So stint not your 95p; it's great stuff.

Joe Haldeman (ed.) - STUDY WAR NO MORE (Futura, 323pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

This collection's theme is "alternatives to war"....though Harlan Ellison's "Basilisk" merely expounds VERY VERY LOUDLY on the abyss between suffering soldiers and armchair patriots back home. The rest find their alternative in one gimmick or another - all ultimately pessimistic, for even when the gimmick works it suggests that we can't escape the rut without such magic tricks. Ben Bova offers bloodless conflict through mental struggles in "The Duelling Machine": if that works we'd be doing it playing chess. Poul Anderson ("A Man To My Wounding")

suggests assassination rather than open war, and admits it doesn't work. Harry Harrison ("Commando Raid") diverts bloodlust into savage well-digging and disease fighting on behalf of unwilling tribes; unfortunately and atypically not played for laughs. In "Curtains" George Alec Effinger has soldiers playacting and dying for good reviews: this is called satire. Mack Reynolds ("Mercenary") has limited skirmishes using only pre-1900 technology: memorable for his horrid term "the Frigid Fracas" and the notion that decades of such wars could elapse before anyone realised that spy-gliders were eligible. Damon Knight ("Rule Golden") and William Nabors ("The State Of Ultimate Peace") plump for making people nicer with drugs and bugs respectively. Isaac Asimov's essay "By The Numbers" offers computerised utopia, but the price is total lack of privacy and the argument shaky. Joe Haldeman himself, in "To Howard Hughes: A Modest Proposal" suggests that a coup could give one man control over all the nuclear arsenals....a nice man, of course, who would merely set up a world government.

An average anthology, scarcely earth-shattering; since my modest SF library already includes four of the items (Ellison, Bova, Knight, Asimov - coming to 174 pages) in the authors' own collections, I would hardly have troubled to buy it.

Marion Zimmer Bradley - HUNTERS OF THE RED MOON (Arrow, 176pp, 95p)
 Reviewed by Ian Maule

When I first picked up this book and read the back cover blurb I had the distinct impression that it was sword-and-sorcery, in much the same vein as Bradley's well known Darkover series. Fortunately, after a fewpages it became apparent that it was more of a sword-and-science novel.

Dane Marsh is on a lone round-the-world cruise when he is kidnapped by aliens to be sold into slavery. By devious means he and his non-earthly compatriots are singled out and sold the the Hunters World, whose inhabitants hold hunts on their red moon. Any prey who survives until the setting of the red moon is allowed freedom and wealth.

On the face of it a fairly routine adventure novel, one of many being published these days, but Hunters Of The Red Moon has the redeeming factor of being well-written and not inane. The interaction of the main characters is well done and the plot carries on at fair pace. The one complaint I have is that from about 20 pages into it the secret becomes obvious to the reader but to the characters, supplied with the same basic information, everything remains murky until at least page 100. Apart from that, Hunters Of The Red Moon should keep you occupied for a few hours on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

Martin Green - THE EARTH AGAIN REDEEMED (Sphere, 359pp, £1.50)

You might recall that in last issue's rideout paragraph I referred to this as "a parallel world story in which Europe never conquered Africa", which is more or less correct. In our world, the Portugese won the Battle of Mbwila in 1665; in this one they lost, mainly due to their opponents' leadership by one Donna Beatriz, an early black convert to Catholicism (who existed in our world too, but was eventually martyred for it), who then wrote to the Pope calling on him to instruct Europe to abandon its technology and sink back into a Dark Ages "state of grace". Which he did, and they did....and which I can't believe for a moment since, given the humiliations of the then-recently-ended Thirty Years War, what 17th-century Pope would further humble himself by (a) taking orders from Africa and (b) allowing the Kongo to take control of the Catholic church away from the Vatican? And what makes Green think that the Protestant countries would even listen to the Pope in the first place, and not go rushing in to fill the vacuum left by the Portugese?

So what's the story about? I'm damned if I know, actually, since most of the crucial action takes place offstage while we witness (in the main) the efforts of an English diplomat to persuade the African Pope of 1984 to rescind the church's ban on technology so that Europe can rearm itself to repel a Turkish force massing at the gates of Vienna. Thrown in for the apparent hell of it are glimpses of our post-holocaust world of 1984, in which a lone cyborg lives out what's left of his life, experiencing occasional mental contact with the other world's African Pope - all of which contributes little to the main story. But why should

that he'll be one of the major SF writers of the 80s.) And there's also Robert Aickman's "Marriage", in VII, more ordinary than either of the Bishops, just hinting obscurely at its more unusual aspects (and with its more pornographic bits cut down to the merely erotic from its original appearance in F & SF).

Other good stories are Lisa Tuttle's "The Horse Lord", Stephen King's "The Children Of The Corn" (which had me really gripped at one point, but then copped-out by producing the half-expected monster rather than the twist for which I was hoping), and Charles L. Grant's "If Damon Comes", all in VI; and, from VII, Charles L. Grant's "Hear Me Now, My Sweet Abbey Rose" (both this and the other, incidentally, being in the same Oxrun Station series) and Jack Vance's "The Secret" - which, as those of you who've read The Best Of Jack Vance will recall, was also the title used on two stories he once wrote for Damon Knight, neither of which ever saw print due to their unaccountable disappearance from the face of the Earth; but as to whether or not this is one of those lost manuscripts Page doesn't say, and I'd be genuinely interested to learn more about it.

Two good anthologies, anyway, worth particular attention from those of you who (like me) usually dismiss horror as nothing more than "ghosts and haunted houses and things bumping in the night" and who (again like me) could well have your opinions altered as a result.

Cordwainer Smith - THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF MANKIND (Futura/Del Rey, 238pp, 85p)

I won't attempt to deny it: Cordwainer Smith - "surrealist, poet, man of amazing inventiveness" (Brian Aldiss, Billi n Year Spree) - is one of my favourite SF authors, and this collection became a "must get" the moment I first heard of it. Its cover blurb claims that it "completes the publication of the Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith", which is untrue: the unpublished "Himself In Anachron" and the first of the projected "Lords Of The Afternoon" series, "Down To A Sunless Sea" (complete by his widow Genevieve) are omitted. It does, however, contain all the other Instrumentality stories that weren't collected in The Best Of Cordwainer Smith, viz: "No, No, Not Rogov!", "War No. 81-Q" (his first published story, written under the "Anthony Bearden" pseudonym and believed lost for high on fifty years), "Mark Elf", "The Queen Of The Afternoon" (another story completed by his widow), "When The People Fell" (which the cover, a terrible concoction of sickly pale green and brownish-purple, is supposed to illustrate), "Think Blue, Count Two", "The Colonel Came Back From Nothing At All", "From Gustible's Planet" (the weakest and silliest story in the book, concerning a race of duck-like aliens who taste delicious when properly seasoned....I'm not making this up, honest), and "Drunkboat" (indisputably the best story in the entire collection) - plus all five of his non-Instrumentality stories, which seem to me little more than warm-up exercises, written while his full attention was focussed elsewhere. Never mind: Smith completists like myself will welcome them with open arms, although I must admit that those unfamiliar with his work would probably do better to try The Best Of first (if they can find it, since it was published back in late 1975 and may well be out of print by now), mainly because of the insight into it given by J. J. Pierce's introduction. Frederik Pohl's introduction to this collection, by contrast, concentrates more on the man, but is no less interesting for all that....ah, what else might Smith have produced had he lived!

Ian Watson - ALIEN EMBASSY (Panther, 204pp, 85p) Reviewed by Alan Dorey

Ian Watson burst onto the scene with a quite impressive first novel, The Embedding, which was full of ideas and well-written - what did it matter that the characters were as flat as melted ice-cream? It was a first novel; given time, the rough edges would be smoothed off and he'd become a first-class writer. What did it matter that his second novel, The Jonah Kit, was not a total confirmation of his abilities? Well, it does matter, because Watson will keep on developing vast ideas and then removing their keystone by enveloping them in a morass of insipid prose. The ability is there: Alien Embassy has its moments as a young African girl selected by Bardo (the Space Communications Administration) as a Starflight candidate discovers the true nature of an invading alien force, the Starbeast; but it's like a musical theme or melody where, while the whole is fine, only a few of the correct notes are struck during its playing. As the Sunday

Telegraph proclaims on the back cover, "the ideas are rich and complex"; one only wishes the text complemented this praise.

Fredric Brown - NIGHTMARES AND GEEZENSTACKS (Corgi/Bantam, 182pp, 85p)
Reviewed by Ian Maule

When Fredric Brown died in 1972 SF lost the master of the short-short story. This collection prints 47 of them, ranging from the purest SF to horror. Included are three "lost discovery" stories concerning Invisibility, Invulnerability and Immortality, each of them SF but also the blackest of black humour. Each concerns an individual developing his invention and eventually discovering its disadvantages, and "disadvantages" is the right word. The six "nightmare" stories all open with the words "He awoke" but from common starting point branch out into all bands of the spectrum, ending with the main character losing out in one way or another.

Despite the shortness of each story (the longest cover only five pages), I found that I couldn't read the book from cover to cover in one sitting. After perhaps the first 6 or 7 stories my attention began to wander due I think to the sheer pace and variety of the collection. There's no hanging about creating well-rounded characters - in the majority of cases the main protagonist is never even named - each story packs in the information required to keep the plot moving and nothing else; and it works despite or because of this.

Taken in isolation many of the stories would seem interesting but nothing else; only in the context of a collection do you begin to appreciate that Fredric Brown had an amazing ability to create plots, any one of which any other writer would have used as the basis of a novel.

Vonda McIntyre - DREAMSNAKE (Pan, 288pp, 95p)

"Winner of the 1978 Nebula Award" says the front cover flash which, given the handful of SFWA members who still bother to vote in the poll, is a totally meaningless accolade. (SFWA President Jack Williamson has set up a committee to investigate ways of reviving the Awards, but the widespread feeling amongst most members is that the task is hopeless and the best solution would be to abandon the things altogether.) The fact that it won the Hugo at Seacon a couple of months ago doesn't mean anything either, except that it was popular, and popularity is no guarantee of quality (and if you think it is then you'd better start justifying the absence of Arthur Hailey and Harold Robbins novels from your bookshelves). And Dreamsnake is not a very good novel.

In point of fact, it isn't really a novel at all, but a series of cobbled-together Analog novelettes and one short story - the 1973 Nebula-winning "Of Mist, And Grass, And Sand" - and hence little better than a collection of subplots on desperate search of an overall frame. And a frame of sorts they do get: remember how "Of Mist, And Grass, And Sand" ended with the death of Grass, one of the snakes used by the healer Snake to effect her cures? The story here masquerades as the 23-page first chapter, with almost all of the rest of the book concerned with her quest for a replacement for Grass....yes, the plot is really as slender as that, and in some parts quite nonexistent.

The silliest aspect of this "novel", however, is its post-holocaust society (set in the same world as her earlier The Exile Waiting, unless I completely miss my guess), McIntyre's concern to portray the most scrupulously equitable sexual balance possible having crippled plausibility beyond all resuscitation almost before the book is properly under way. Yes, male-female equality is a thoroughly laudable goal (and one which, just in case you get the wrong idea, I do support); but Dreamsnake, rather than discuss how we may achieve it, concentrates on showing us how simply wonderful everything will be when we have. Adolescent wish-fulfillment at its worst, in other words, written up with a naivete so mawkish as to be acutely embarrassing.

Past experience has shown a tendency for many Hugo-winners to abandon artistic progress in favour of further (and more financially secure) bouts of essentially similar crowd-pleasing - a lure which I sincerely hope McIntyre has the strength to resist, since she is undoubtedly capable of better than this turgid nonsense.

Arkady & Boris Strugatsky - ROADSIDE PICNIC (Penguin, 160pp, 80p)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

For all the praise lavished upon the Strugatskys in recent years, I was expecting some kind of masterpiece, but Roadside Picnic is nothing of the sort. What it is though, is a brief, tightly-structured and tautly-written novel that outdoes many Americans at their own game of writing action-packed SF potboilers. The praise, I suspect, is more than a little relief that the brothers lack the usual Russian prolixity, and that this work at least lacks any hint of the slavish adherence to the party line that one expects of "approved" Russian literature.

It is a slight entertainment with a nice light touch (all praise to the translator) that takes up the contemporary hard-SF interest in the incomprehensibility of alien artifacts (pace Pohl and Clarke), brings it down to Earth, treats it with a healthy realism, and uses it as a device through which to consider human foibles - greed, obsession, the things a man will do under the pressure of poverty. There are no new insights, no startling conclusions, in fact nothing that is particularly new at all; but it does clothe SF in a human and humane dress, and that is no mean achievement.

Philip Jose Farmer - THE LAVALITE WORLD (Sphere, 253pp, £1.10)

Series have a tendency to start well and then go slowly but inexorably downhill - particularly series that were never actually intended as such but sprung from one-off novels under the pressure of reader-demand to know "what happens next". Thus was Farmer's "World Of Tiers" saga born, and while the first two novels (Maker Of Universes and The Gates Of Creation) were fairly competent action-adventure extravaganzas, the third (A Private Cosmos) was pretty dull, and the fourth (Behind The Walls Of Terra) is best described as "poor". And now we have the fifth, so incredibly bad a novel that Farmer can only have written it in his sleep. In the fashion of Zelazny's "Amber" series, it picks up where the previous one left off, huge chunks of explanatory flashback and largely irrelevant background exposition following a few chapters later - chunks thrown into the text with a complete disregard for narrative pace (Chapter 8, for example, consists of half a page of action and dialogue followed by ten and a half of exposition). Internal consistency has also been ignored: page 88 has Urthona run past Kickaha on the beach but page 153, describing an incident that occurred earlier, has Anana sink her axe into Urthona's chest; and on page 167 we're told that Urthona did not run past Kickaha.

At which point I gave up. Damned if I'll waste time on an author so careless.

K. W. Jeter - MORLOCK NIGHT (LSP/DAW, 156pp, £1.10)

Stemming from H. G. Wells's The Time Machine, this novel starts from the premise that, on the inventor's return to the future at the end of that novel, the Morlocks stole the device from him and used it to mount their invasion of nineteenth century London - a premise that promises a quick and nejoyable romp, if nothing else. Unfortunately, Jeter doesn't know when to stop piling on the rompery, and almost before you know it there's a revived King Arthur (from the fifth century, to boot, whereas in 1892 everyone - including the first person narrator - would still subscribe to the old Geoffrey of Monmouth/Thomas Malory version), eternal Merlin and even Excalibur cluttering up the action. And then lost Atlantis. And then some magic to help the plot along....

It's entertaining, yes, and it kept me reading, but if its author had exercised a little more restraint it would have made a considerably better novel. As it stands, however, it seems rather a wasted opportunity.

Gerard Klein - STARMASTER'S GAMBIT (LSP/Daw, 172pp, £1.10)

Reviewed by Ian Maule

"The most densely populated planets had less than a hundred thousand inhabitants, although there were a few cities in the Galaxy with a population of over fifty million. It was a time of paradoxes...."

That's a quote from the book, and if you think it's incomprehensible then you

should try reading the whole book; I couldn't make any sense of it at all. I really wonder if anyone read this after it had been translated from the French and before it was typeset. Certainly the major paradox is that Gerard Klein ever came to be called "France's answer to Ray Bradbury". Avoid it.

Damon Knight - RULE GOLDEN (Avon, 394pp, \$2.25)

Reviewed by Alan Dorey

Lots of pages and a dreadful cover, redeemed by five above average Knight yarns. In his introduction, Knight attempts to justify his reasons for writing them, but drifts off into pseudo-intellectuality and over-seriousness: if he really puts that much thought into each piece then it's a wonder that he manages to write anything at all. As to the stories, however....in "Natural State" he claims that genetic engineering can be used to decentralise society; in "Rule Golden" he takes an unsubtle swipe at Big Government; in "Double Meaning", the earliest story, he delights in showing that bastards don't always win and that aliens needn't always look like humans, spiders, soggy loafers or anything else familiar; and in "The Earth Quarter" he reacts against John W. Campbell's apparent refusal to publish any SF stories showing alien races who were in any way better than mankind. The latter is the longest piece - at 100 pages almost novel length - and nearly succeeds in achieving its aims. By no means a vital collection, but pretty good anyway.

Howard N. Portnoy - HOT RAIN (Sphere, 285pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

If you're a card-carrying paranoid then this book will confirm everything you've ever suspected about the weather. The lightning is out to get you - and it's lightning with a sense of theatre, which never merely electrocutes them but flays them, sets them on fire, throws them through windows, blasts full-colour images of them onto walls, and anything else the author's limited imagination can conceive. A demented vicar preaches hellfire and damnation and spreads religious mania through the lightning-afflicted town. Scientists (as you always knew) are useless and won't do anything to help without vast sums of research money. The government is inaccessibly distant, even if these are the 70s. The army is implacably evil, staffed with megalomaniacs and perverts, and is causing the lightning anyway through its secret underground tests supervised by just one unqualified scientist whose advice they invariably ignore. Only newspaper reporters, and not many of them, have the guts and decency to Expose All....

It's the usual disaster rubbish, spiced with an awe-inspiring lack of scientific accuracy. One bomb uses that little-known element gargantium-247, Portnoy little suspecting that two elements with that mass already exist (curium and berkelium). The lightning is attracted, unbelievably, by extra positive charge in the ground, the cause of this being alpha-particles emitted by the tests, which travel 50 miles along geological faults (which Portnoy plainly conceives of as tunnels) to the doomed town. Our author has not yet learnt of Rutherford's astonishing discovery that, even in air, alpha-particles have a range of mere centimetres; but then that was only in 1899 and these wicked scientists are so secretive.

Douglas Adams - THE HITCH-HIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY (Pan, 159pp, 80p)

The novelisation of the BBC radio series, and do I really need to say any more than that? The original plot-line has been slightly modified in transition, as you might expect, the background being fleshed out with some welcome incidental detail and the book actually ending with all four of our heroes (Arthur, Ford, Zaphod and Trillian) on their way from Magrathea to eat at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe, thus promising a sequel. Even so, the humour translates surprisingly well (although I must admit that the extracts from the Book do seem to lack something without Peter Jones to read them), and the whole is very enjoyable - and rather disfigured by its cover. I'd have much preferred that shown in the Pan advert on page 20 of the Season programme book, irrelevant though it was, to the eye-searing turquoise and brown stripey horror with which it's been burdened instead, and which will doubtless knock thousands off its sales.

SLEEVE NOTES - a column on paperback cover art by Rob Hansen

The first thing to bear in mind when attempting any examination of SF cover art, possibly the most vital thing, is that what you're seeing is packaging, strictly functional art designed for the single purpose of selling the publisher's product. It is because of this "drawing to order" that commercial art (and not just SF cover art) is generally regarded as inferior to fine art, the vision of the "mercenary" who "prostitutes" his talents being somehow less pure than that of the fine artist who is his own master. Commercial artists are seen as the art world's equivalent of hack writers, which of course they are, but even so their work is not without value. Of necessity commercial art is far more communicative than fine art, far more accessible, and it should come as no surprise that reproductions of film posters, book covers, etc., sell better than those of all but the most famous of fine art pieces. It's lowest common denominator stuff to be sure, but it succeeds on its own terms - which makes it very difficult to judge it on any others. But then why let a little thing like that stop us...?

SF is the most imaginative of all literary forms and as such should command the most imaginative covers. Should, but usually doesn't. Far too often cover art on British SF books bears little or no relationship to the text. The piece of artwork may be well executed, and usually is, but the chances are that it will be a spaceship, and the chances are that if the novel is modern SF then there will be no spaceships in it. Publishers can argue that spaceships on a cover instantly identify it as SF and that as such they are therefore a useful brand-mark, but since most major bookstores in this day and age have their paperbacks racked under thematic headings identification can hardly be a major problem. These spaceship covers also give every appearance of having been ordered by the dozen and allocated at random since even in cases where the novels do contain spaceships those on the cover bear no resemblance to those described within. It doesn't seem too much to ask that covers should depict scenes from the text or at least show some evidence that the artist does in fact know what the book is about. Although when the cover blurb is so often inaccurate perhaps it is too much to ask....

I was careful to point out that I was talking about British covers above because the majority of American SF covers are drawn from the text. They are often poor but they are accurate. Take, for instance, the Well Of Souls series by Jack Chalker (Del Rey 1977/78). The first book in the series, Midnight At The Well Of Souls, has a cover by an artist called Von Dongen which accurately depicts a scene from the book but is quite abysmal; in contrast, however, the third book in the series, Quest For The Well Of Souls, has a cover by Darrell K. Sweet which is both accurate and well drawn. It's not high art to be sure, but Sweet's competent, workmanlike style (in some ways reminiscent of Chris Achilleos's) is one for which I have a lot of time. A point arising from all this is the question of covers on trilogies or series novels; I've always felt that one artist only should work on such covers since the uniformity of the finished product is aesthetically far more pleasing than the mismatched pieces on the Well Of Souls series.

And there you have it - the first in a series of columns about SF cover art. As in all such columns opinion is more the rule than objectivity but where your opinions clash with mine I'm sure you'll be letting me know. Ciac.

-----Rob Hansen

John Wyndham - THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS (Penguin, 272pp, 95p), THE CHRYSALIDS (Penguin, 200pp, 80p), THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS (Penguin, 220pp, 75p) THE TROUBLE WITH LICHEN (Penguin, 204pp, 85p)

Do I really need to say anything about these? Probably not, considering their by now classic stature; but on a purely personal note, I find The Trouble With Lichen one of Wyndham's least successful novels, and The Chrysalids his best. If I had more room I'd say why, but the Arts Council grant hasn't come through yet. Poet.

The covers, incidentally, are by Peter Lord, and very good they are too - so good that I'm nominating him as "best cover artist" in that section of this year's BSFA Award. (See page 26 of Vector 95 for full details.) Further examples of my nominations may be found overleaf....

....but first you'll have to wade through this fascinating list of all the other books I didn't have room to review:

Brian W. Aldiss (ed.) - Evil Earths (Avon, 318pp, \$2.50); Jo Clayton - Maeve (LSP/Daw, 220pp, £1.10); Philip K. Dick - Eye In The Sky (Arrow, 256pp, 95p) & Now Wait For Last Year (Panther, 224pp, 85p); Rob Holdstock & Chris Priest (eds.) - Stars Of Albion (Pan, 238pp, £1.20); Fred & Geoffrey Hoyle - The Incandescent Ones (Penguin, 156pp, 75p); Nigel Kneale - The Quatermass Experiment (Arrow, 192pp, 95p), Quatermass II (Arrow, 174pp, 95p) & Quatermass And The Pit (Arrow, 188pp, 95p); Ursula LeGuin - The Earthsea Trilogy (Penguin, 478pp, £1.75); Barry N. Malzberg - Guernica Night (NEL, 127pp, 75p) & The Sodom And Gomorrah Business (Arrow, 126pp, 85p); George R. R. Martin - Dying Of The Light (Panther, 316pp, £1.25); Ann Maxwell - A Dead God Dancing (Avon, 281pp, \$2.25); Emil Petaja - Saga Of Lost Earths (LSP/Daw, 222pp, £1.25); Frederik Pohl & Cyril M. Kornbluth - The Space Merchants (Penguin, 170pp, 75p), Search The Sky (Penguin, 170pp, 80p) & Wolfbane (Penguin, 160pp, 75p); Clifford D. Simak - All The Traps Of Earth (Avon, 278pp, \$2.25); Hugh Walker - Magira III: Messengers Of Darkness (LSP/Daw, 156pp, 95p).

A mention here does not preclude a fuller review in the next issue; for definite review then will be Tanith Lee's Drinking Sapphire Wine, Daniel F. Galcuye's Project Barrier, Marvin Kaye's & Parke Godwin's The Masters Of Solitude, T. H. White's The Book Of Merlyn, Donald Moffitt's The Jupiter Theft, Brian Stableford's The Walking Shadow, Richard Monacc's Parsival, Or A Knight's Tale, James Gunn's & Jack Williamson's Star Bridge, and Gerald W. Page's & Hank Reinhardt's Heroic Fantasy.

GERNSBACK DELUSION

Fred Hoyle's and Chandra Wickramasinghe's Lifecloud (Sphere, 191pp, £1.25) is a hugely detailed (graphs, appendices, tables of elements, etc.) but immensely readable account of the possible origins of life: not on planetary surfaces at all, but in interstellar clouds of gas and dust, the "spores" being then borne to earth by meteorites. It's fascinating stuff, but I for one remain unconvinced because I can't help but think of Hoyle as the man who continued to defend his Steady State theory of the universe even when the evidence for the opposing Big Bang theory had become almost overwhelming, which makes me necessarily sceptical of any other theory he propounds. Well worth your attention, anyway.

"Future history" strikes again with General Sir John Hackett's The Third World War (Sphere, 494pp, £1.75), a quasi-factual account of just that, supposedly written shortly after the cessation of the August 1985 hostilities; and, like all future histories, it's already out of date (in re. its assumption that Iran will fight on the side of the West). It also has a tendency to succumb to wish-fulfillment at certain crucial moments; the Soviet-inspired attack on the Middle East oilfields, for example, is repulsed with ridiculous ease. And the West wins by default: a Soviet ICBM clobbers Birmingham, a NATO missile flattens Minsk in retaliation, the Ukraine decides it's had enough of being pushed around by Moscow, and the USSR falls apart. Ho hum; not convinced, boss. Even so, the descriptions of the ground fighting in Europe have an awful ring of authenticity....

Since I don't have the room to discuss them at length, I'll just have to mention what are, in my opinion, the best short stories of the previous ten months - stories which, by a quite unamazing coincidence, also happen to be my nominations for the "best short fiction" section of this year's BSFA Award. In no particular order, they're as follows: Christopher Priest's "Palely Loitering" (Fantasy & Science Fiction, January), Jane Yolen's "The Pot Child" (F & SF, February), Jack Dann's "Camps" (F & SF, May), Bill Pronzini's & Barry N. Malzberg's "Prose Bowl" (F & SF, July) and Michael Bishop's "Collaborating" (Year's Best Horror Stories: Series VII, reviewed on pages 6-7 of this issue). The only two stories of any note published in Analogue were Michael Bishop's "A Few Last Words For The Late Immortals" (July) which, for Bishop, was quite atypically pedestrian and unimaginative; and Ian Stewart's "The Malcdorous Plutocrats" (September), which was fun but superficial.