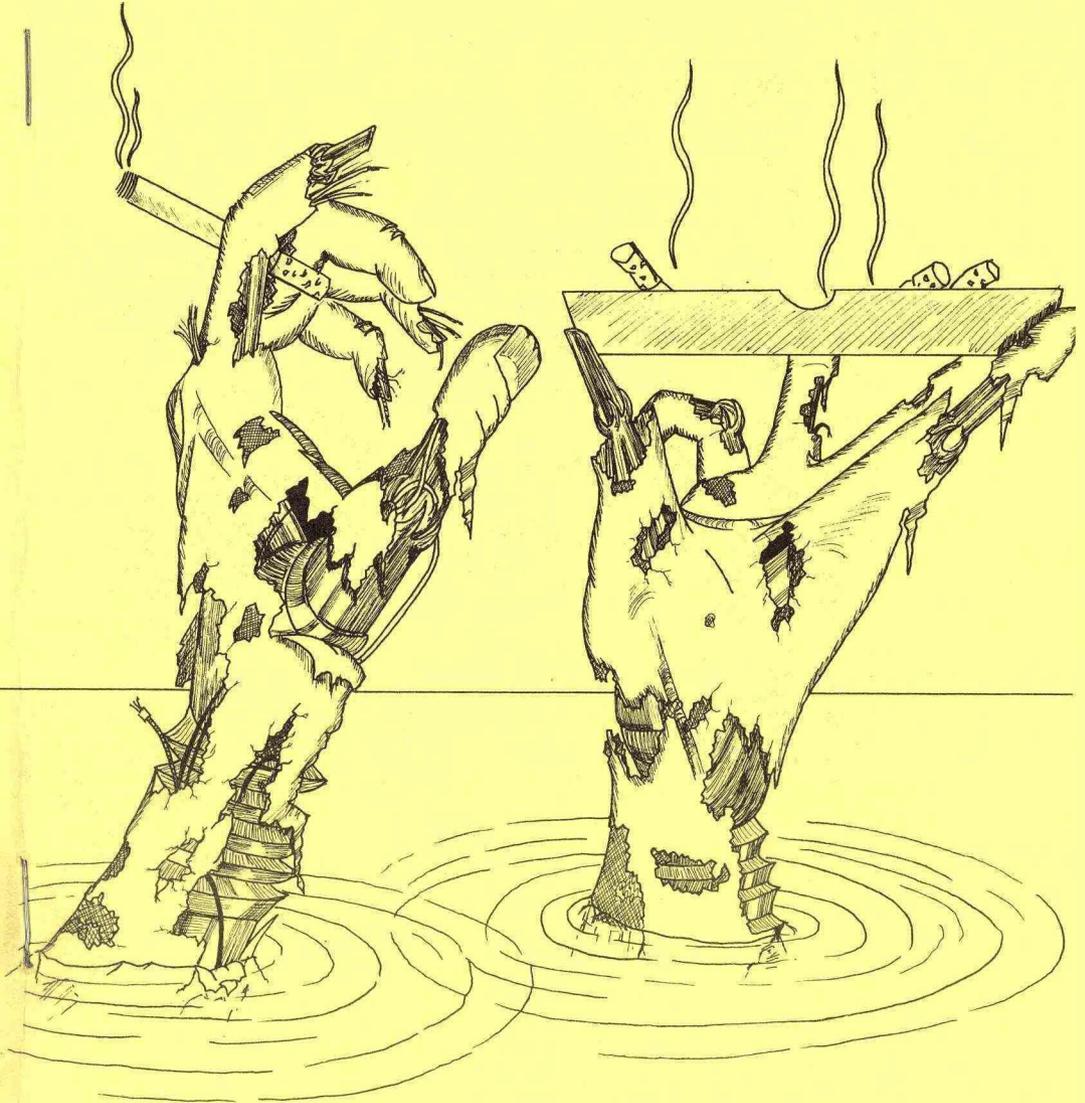


# VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

75p



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G. COURTENAY

# VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

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The British Science Fiction Association

# VECTOR

ISSUE 106

FEBRUARY 1982

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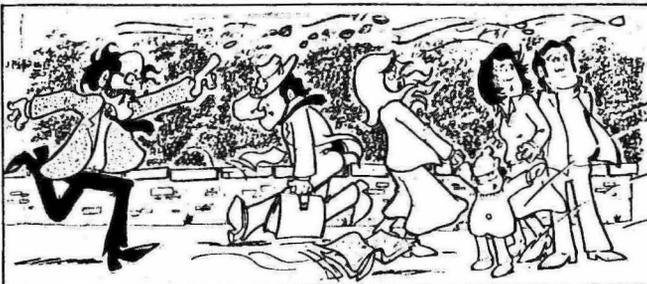
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Editorial and advertising correspondence should be sent for the time being to Alan Dorey, BSFA Chairman, at his new address, opposite. This includes letters, unless you particularly wish the out-going editor to see them first, in which case he will forward them if necessary. Correspondence about features and book reviews will continue to be dealt with by Paul Kincaid and Joseph Nicholas, respectively.



# EDITORIAL

## BIRD ON THE WIRE

This is it, then: my eighth and last issue of Vector. Despite its long history, I have tended to regard it as mine, to do with as I liked. Not entirely as I liked, of course. That same long history, coupled with the expectations of the BSFA membership, does give a certain inertia to the publication. So, for example, Vector must be about science fiction. Oh, and fantasy, of course. And the grey areas around them -- speculative literature of all kinds. Not forgetting films, TV, radio, art... Satisfying expectations is not that limiting.

I had two main aims when I took over Vector. I wanted it to be a respected literary magazine concerned with the science fiction field, and I wanted it to be, and to be seen to be, accessible to the members of the BSFA. These two aims, as you might imagine, do not always aim in the same direction. In fact they are most of the time contradictory.

The easiest way to literary respectability is to fill the magazine with famous names, by begging articles and interviews from established authors. Unfortunately, this is precisely the course that will isolate the magazine from its readers. Is Joe Fan going to think he stands a chance of having his say -- an article or even a letter -- when Vector is packed out with the likes of Brian Aldiss, Christopher Priest, John Brunner, Ian Watson, Bob Shaw... and who knows but that Isaac Asimov's and Robert Heinlein's contributions are regularly rejected by the all-powerful author? Only if Joe Fan is Joe Nicholas in disguise. So that 'easiest way' was no way for me.

On the other hand... accessibility: put in articles by the members. Fortunately, I am of the opinion that the members, though not professional writers, though not famous names, are quite capable of writing good articles about science fiction and fantasy -- be they closely argued thematic pieces or descriptions of the works of a favourite author, or whatever. So I decided that my best course was to encourage the members to write, in the confident expectation that they would produce 'good stuff' -- and then hope that the professionals would want to write to and for Vector because of the quality they saw there already. Optimistic, wasn't it?

But I went ahead on that basis. Without too much effort on my part, I received enough material to publish one or two feature articles and a clutch of short articles each issue, and to reject a few articles too. When this supply began to dry up, and Vector's publishing frequency increased to six times a year, I asked Paul Kincaid to do the job I didn't particularly want to do: organise the feature articles. This meant receiving them, asking for re-writes when necessary, asking people (not necessarily just famous names) to write articles, and rejecting them.

My main fault as editor was precisely my failure ever to get organised in anything. I didn't actually miss a mailing deadline (this hasn't happened for ages; you newcomers are spoilt -- in the old days a BSFA mailing came as a surprise!) but I did miss just about every printing deadline, which caused bi-monthly strains in my friendship with John and Eve Harvey, printing bosses. It's thanks to their efforts that Vector appeared on time, coupled with their

ability to start printing complete pages whilst other pages were still being pasted up, and my own developing ability to decide on the structure of an issue and type the page numbers on the pages before I'd even typed some of the pages -- and sometimes before I'd written my own contributions. (I amazed myself at just how accurately I could write in scribbled longhand with lots of crossings out an editorial that would come to precisely two pages of neat typescript -- try it some time.) Vector was always put together fast and late. This meant I never could organise a 'theme' issue, or relevant artwork for an article. I don't actually regret the lack of deliberate 'theme' issues; a theme would occasionally arise spontaneously, which seems preferable to me, since a spontaneous theme is likely to be much more interesting and unusual than one imposed by an editor. I do regret not getting at least title artwork for the articles.

What did I achieve?

- Clean, reasonably attractive, but not very inspiring layout and design
- Consistency in the cover logos and general appearance
- Re-establishment of reader participation through the letter column and the Standpoint feature
- Well-known professional SF authors writing in spontaneously
- A change in the tone of the magazine

The first two are relatively minor points, although I do believe that a reasonably attractive looking magazine will find more favour with its readers than a scruffy one containing the same articles. I made small changes with every issue, in a search for the ideal. I haven't found it, of course; spot this issue's alterations.

The second two were my original aims, so it might appear that I was successful. However, in neither case was the level of response as high as I had hoped for, which is not the fault of the readers or the authors. Obviously they didn't find enough to stimulate them.

Of course, this begs the question of whether my aims were reasonable in the first place.

Let's take respectability. By this I mean that the magazine should have an intelligent approach to science fictional matters, not that it should become bogged down in the current literary orthodoxy, whatever it might be. Thus Vector should contain well written and informed articles, rather than 'gosh-wow' uncritical acclamations of all science fiction. This seems to me to be eminently reasonable.

Participation is harder to justify in terms of presenting good articles for the consumption of the masses. If the best articles will be written by the professionals, shouldn't Vector use articles by the professionals? It is likely that the best articles will be written by the professionals, since they are used to writing and are intimately involved in science fiction. But, as I said earlier, some of the 'ordinary' members of the BSFA are quite capable of writing good articles too, and Vector is one of the very few places where the members can see themselves in print on the subject of science fiction. I think that people should be given every opportunity to write, and that it would be wrong to cut off one of their outlets in favour of people who have other outlets. It's not as if the amateurs would be taking the livelihood from the professionals, after all; Vector is not a paying market. Vector is for the BSFA membership. I believe that it should be by the BSFA membership so far as is possible.

The fifth point -- the change in tone -- is rather interesting. Under David Wingrove, Vector had been a literate and heavily literary magazine -- some would say too literary. Words like 'ideative' tended to crop up, or 'meta-fiction' -- the language of the academic. However, as with many things, the image exceeded the reality, and Vector was not actually as densely academic as it is remembered as being. Nonetheless, the tone was heavyweight. Mike Dickinson didn't really have a long enough run to fully establish his presence, but his Vectors tended to reflect his SF interests -- Ballard, Dick, the Moorcock New Worlds -- which left the adventure lovers out in the cold. I came in with impeccably neutral credentials in SF: I hardly ever read the stuff.

Shock! Horror!

No, it's true. My regular SF reading stopped somewhere around 1976. I knew almost nothing of SF writers who came to later prominence, such as John Varley, Spider Robinson, Jack Chalker, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Barry Bonyear -- and for the most part still don't. (A short digression. A few days ago I read the novel extract by Barry Bonyear in Omni, another of his space circus stories. This bit described how the circus's space ship, full of horses and elephants and things got into trouble near the planet Momus. About ten 'lifeboat' ships get away and crash on the planet's surface, during which several people horses and elephants are killed. The lifeboats are scattered across the surface of the planet, not all together, which is not unreasonable. But what the people do about it is not. You'd think, wouldn't you, that they'd get together as soon as possible and pool resources, set up a community, try to radio for help... Not these wily circus folk. They start to build a road. On an empty planet? From where to where? From where one lifeboat crashed to where another crashed to where a third... and so on. Good grief! Good grief! But I bet that Elephant Song is up there for the Hugo nevertheless... Sorry about that, but I had to get it out of my system.) I was, however, interested in novels, and had been catching up on the classics and the more contemporary English novels that years of SF reading had prevented me from reading before. I could, therefore, bring the generalist's wider perspective to the job of editor -- though still as a complete amateur: my Eng.Lit. studying ended with O-levels.

I was beginning to sort out in my own mind what I was looking for in a novel -- a process no doubt not unlike reinventing the wheel -- and there seemed to be no reason why I should look for anything completely different in an SF novel. A good SF novel should have the attributes of a good novel first and foremost; anything SF-ish is incidental. A novel can be good without any SF in it (oh yes it can!), but an SF idea on its own is a fish out of water. It needs the support and comfort of a novel. On the other hand, this was no reason to condemn each and every novel with a lot of SF-ish content -- which Vector, in its search for literary qualities, seemed to be getting dangerously close to doing as a matter of policy.

At one time in early 1980 it seemed that almost any book reviewed in Vector was going to get a panning. The reviewers seemed to think it was expected of them, and Joe Nicholas did have a tendency to give books for review to people he knew -- or suspected -- wouldn't like them. The reviewer of Greg Benford's Time-scape (Vector 100) thought the book was good, but gave prominence to its faults rather than its virtues -- and this book, may I remind you, won the Nebula and the BosFA awards amidst general acclamation. I think now that the majority of the reviews are favourable, and people are more prepared to see the good points of a novel. There are some novels worth reading, and people should be told about them.

The 'wider perspective' also enabled me to demolish the fallacious arguments of those who only read SF, and see all developments solely in terms of the SF

field, particularly with regard to style. There are still lots of people about who think that SF began with Gernsback, and that everything to do with SF should be taken from there. Thus, so the argument goes, although the style of E.E. Smith looks childish today, it was appropriate and good for its time. (I received a letter saying this only a month or so ago.) Anyone reading that argument could be forgiven for getting the distinct impression that writing itself had only been invented a couple of years before! Let me list a few contemporaries of E.E. Smith, not all of the first rate, I will grant you: James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Wolfe, E.M. Forster, Evelyn Waugh, Somerset Maugham, H.E. Bates, H.G. Wells.... Even the American (detective) genre fiction writers Dashiell Hammett and (a little later) Raymond Chandler knock spots off E.E. Smith when it comes to writing ability. (That isn't meant to sound that patronising about Hammett and Chandler; I recommend them both.) He didn't have to write like an idiot just because SF was new, you know. (It wasn't even new; H.G. Wells is in my list...)

(Strangely enough, one or two people have written to me saying that they'd thought about volunteering to be editor, but they didn't think they knew enough or had read enough SF. As you can see, it's not necessary. And the other day I was trying to pressurize Joe Nicholas into becoming editor, and one of his reasons for declining was that he only read SF and thus wasn't widely read enough. These people ought to get together. Sounds suspiciously like a load of old excuses to me.)

Not having many SF preferences meant that I wasn't biased when it came to the subject matter of material sent to me. Anything and everything connected with SF, however remotely, could find a place if it was well written enough. So we had G.K. Chesterton, space elevators, feminism, nuclear disarmament, cartoons, TV, radio, the SF 'ghetto', critical standards, the attitudes of publishers... all sorts of things which I found interesting, and hope you did too.

I've enjoyed doing Vector, and I can only hope that you've enjoyed the result -- full of editorial caprice as it was, such as just stopping

\*\*\*\*\* Kevin Smith  
THIS ISSUE THIS ISSUE THIS ISSUE THIS

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In 'Godmakers and Worldshapers', Mary Gentle examines the philosophical viewpoints of SF and fantasy authors as revealed in their works, looking particularly at Shardik, the Thomas Covenant chronicles, and Lud-in-the-Mist. Josephine Saxton expounds upon the attitudes of publishers, adding to the position established by Paul Kincaid last issue, and this is something that John Brunner takes up also in the letter column. There are no Reassessments this time -- there didn't seem to be any reviews I could steal, and the idea is to get articles especially written for the column -- but there is a Standpoint entitled 'A Reassessment of Reassessments' by David V Barrett which questions the idea of the column. We got book reviews and letters, too.

Following several complaints, the little end-of-page fillers have been reinstated. My thanks to Dave Langford for his assistance in providing them. Actually, I should say 'it'; there is only one extract in this issue -- but it goes on for a long time, and continues from end-of-page to end-of-page. Ladies and Gentlemen, preeesenting March of the Robots by Leo Brett!!!!!!!

*Once it had landed the silence was gone -- like an illusion that is destroyed when the curtains of a stage are pulled aside. The silence was broken by metallic noises. Harsh clanking, jarring, metallic noises. Things were*

# GODMAKERS & WORLDSHAPERS

FANTASY AND METAPHYSICS

Mary Gentle

God, perhaps, is an Author; certainly an author is god.

All writers inevitably imitate deities, but fantasy writers alone must literally play god. They are world-shapers and god-makers by profession.

To a large degree the content of any book will dictate its form. So as no character in a novel can be atheistic regarding his or her author, writing a book automatically produces a theistic secondary world -- a self-contained universe with its own omnipotent god. Even the ostensibly non-religious fantasy novels have this much of metaphysics about them. But since writers are far from omnipotent in the real universe, their secondary worlds must reflect the primary world. A secondary world will show either how the author supposes this world to be, or how she or he would prefer it to be. That holds true for their metaphysical concerns.

Playing god has pitfalls for the author: it isn't always wise to become deeply involved in opposing beliefs. But for reader as well as writer, the best books are processes of discovery that shake preconceived ideas.

Which is not to say that all authors have concern for that aspect of their work. In many fantasy worlds a religion is just part of the background propa. Existent pantheons are raided for their more colourful gods and legends and translated into modern terms. Some writers, however, have chosen to penetrate deeper layers of meaning, investigating the connexions between writer and novel, and the relationship between fantasy and what for want of a better term we have to call the real world.

To take some examples, books that regard the author as supreme visible power in the secondary world often have multiple third person viewpoints -- Eddison's Zimianvian trilogy, and the works of James Branch Cabell -- perhaps indicating that they contain multitudes. There are few fantasy novels written in the first person (in fact, I can't think of any), perhaps because it would strain the reader's credulity too far: to say 'I saw a unicorn' is less believable than to say 'she saw a unicorn -- once -- long ago and far away'. Richard Adams's Shardik and Hope Mirrlees's Lud-in-the-Mist are both written in the third person and from a number of viewpoints; both seem concerned with the reality of the material world and its people's worldly salvation. Stephen Donaldson's Thomas Covenant trilogy (like its ancestor, David Lindsay's A Voyage to Arcturus) is in the third person singular, rarely straying from the main character. Both the latter books concern themselves with the subjective view: the reality of the spiritual universe, where salvation is individual and to do with the soul.

The methods of telling the stories also differ. Shardik and Lud-in-the-Mist both have a strong auctorial presence. In Shardik it is the tale-teller, a historian perhaps, who is reconstructing the legends of Shardik's bear cult and making a realistic novel from them. In Mirrlees's book it is the writer herself, quite willing to leave her protagonists while she makes brief and witty excursions into the history of Dorimare and the customs of its people. This is the oldest form of narrative: once upon a time... It belongs to hero stories and fairy tales. Almost fifty years lie between the publication of the two books, but they don't differ in this.

The narrative of Covenant has a more modern form. The reader doesn't hear the story of the Land but instead becomes Thomas Covenant, looking out of his eyes, fitting into his personality. The author is as invisible as an author ever can be -- not a canvas on which a picture is painted, but a glass screen through which we witness events: events that, being more immediate, should have greater effect. Additionally, the language of Covenant is present-day American: we are less distanced from the book.

A fantasy secondary world is almost always pre-Industrial Revolution in setting, hence archaic in tone; therefore it's not surprising that many authors turn to an archaic use of language and style. Sometimes this is integral. Eddison's Zimianvian books could not be written in modern English without totally changing their meaning, they need the Jacobean language Eddison re-invented. Tolkien's quietly formal English has inner rhythms that an influx of TV-speak would destroy. Language is thought: in the case of fantasy, language is the bedrock of a secondary world. As some inept writers have discovered, there is more to archaic language than a few 'thees' and 'thous' and technical terms for armour. To produce a convincing secondary world the writer must either use the language with which the reader is familiar (as, in another context, Robert Graves did with the Claudius books) or else face the task of re-inventing language from the ground up. This is rarely done as well as it should be, considering how easily a jarring anachronism upsets the suspension of disbelief.

A secondary world must have more than invented language, however. Mainstream literature has the consensus view of the 'real' world which it can draw on, a framework which can be established by a few hints as to a character's dress, manner and financial status; the author can then go straight on to individual personalities. In fantasy the emphasis is as much on landscape and architecture and culture as on the protagonists.

Shardik's location is pre-Babylonian, some alternate-universe Sumer or Akkad perhaps; ruled from the imperial city of Bekla. As with Rome, a weakened empire falls to barbarian invaders; though here the imperial system is strong enough to re-establish itself in a slightly different form. The climate and country are both European in aspect. Ortelga, Bekla, Zakalon: these are tribes and cities and empires that can be found in history under many names. Here they do assemble into a consistent whole.

It would be interesting to know just what system of authority is used in the river settlements mentioned at the end of the book. While under Bekla's nominal government, their society appears more egalitarian than Shardik's general survival of the politically fittest.

Lud-in-the-Mist lies very close to 18th Century England, with commercial towns, agricultural hinterland; and the ruling monarchy recently deprived of its power. In Mirrlees's terms, commerce and law represent rationality, arbitrary political power represents all untameable influences: thus her society is not what it appears on the surface.

## Godmakers and Worldshapers

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Covenant settles for pre-Industrial Tolkien-country. The agriculture-based society is ruled by an elite of the knowledgeable Lords at Revelstone. There is nothing, however, to prevent a Stonedowner becoming a Lord, except innate ability. It is a meritocracy: education is open to all.

In all these cases the secondary world follows very closely the template of the primary world. There are no communist societies. There are no entirely new alternatives. There are no new tyrannies. Even the landscapes tend to be northern hemisphere: no deserts, tropical rain forests, arctic wastes. Maybe the suspension of disbelief requires familiarity. Fantasy readers, familiar (and by now, over-familiar) with the genre, could stand a little more originality.

Apart from language, landscape and culture, these books do also consider metaphysical problems. How original are they in this? Maybe it isn't fair to ask the question that way -- true originality in this would produce a philosopher as well as a novelist. Also, the highest aspiration of the secondary world will be the story, and that's liable to be uncomfortable for the protagonists: no one ever made a gripping novel out of 'and they lived happily ever after'. Allowing for that, then, how do these books interpret their authors' conclusions about the world?

Donaldson's is a universe of pitfalls. Evil is in control of the world, good being either absent or impotent. Everything material has the potential for corruption, ethical and physical. To be ignorant is no excuse here; less excuse, in fact, than cupidity. It's an unfashionable attitude: that we owe it to the world we live in not to be ignorant, to know what our lives are for. In this universe you may be damned physically for spiritual evil. There are no amoral tragedies -- even earthquakes and volcanoes are the result of moral action. This harks back to the old idea of regarding sickness, poverty and tragedy as God's punishment. All illnesses -- blindness, multiple sclerosis, heart disease -- are names for sin. There is no escape from a jealous Old Testament God. Humans, created imperfect, strive for a perfection that they can never reach -- and are punished for that failure.

Thomas Covenant, refusing to state belief in these tenets when he hears them preached at a revivalist meeting, finds the meeting to be only a commercial sham. The Unbeliever can't have blind faith. That would be to betray himself. Faith asks for the abdication of rational free will: to believe without knowing why. So does Lord Foul require Covenant's ambiguous white gold ring, preaching his own doctrine that 'Despite...is the only true fruit of experience and insight.' Foul believes only in himself and his ability to manipulate power. Faith and Corruption both ask that Covenant should give up the responsibility for his own life. Caught between the two, what can he do, Thomas Covenant who demands an 'absolute answer' -- and can't let go until he has it?

Covenant is not blameless. Yet 'only by defeating Lord Foul could he give meaning to the lives which had been spent in his name, and at the same time preserve himself.' Doubting Thomas, party to a covenant with a helpless Creator, is still unable to use the power of the white gold. He is saved only by a Giant's laughter, by the terrible capacity of life for survival in the face of absolutely anything. What does Donaldson say through his unbeliever, Thomas Covenant, wavering between the exercise of free will and suicidal desecration? That we must hold on to our integrity, that we have incalculable power not always at our command, that our worst enemy is our self, that we must reach a harmony with the natural world, that ethics take precedence over 'reality'. A harsh doctrine, where 'being fallible is the same thing as treachery'.

And Thomas Covenant, don't forget, is handicapped from the outset. The other great morally reprehensible illness is, of course, mental illness, still seen socially as a punishment for the individual's personal faults rather than a sickness. It's no coincidence that the leper Covenant thinks he's going insane, suffering delusions of existing in another world. Psychologists will tell him that the content of his delusion is his own choice, according to his subconscious desires. No use to protest he didn't want to betray the Land and its people -- if he hadn't wanted it, it wouldn't have happened. Psychology has become a modern doctrine of Original Sin.

To be sane and stay sane, he must be the Unbeliever. Yet despite his ambiguity, Donaldson postulates the reality of a Creator. There is a god, however ineffectual. In this universe he can't use his power for good, that action would destroy his creation. At the same time the inhabitants are free to choose whether they support or deny life. Donaldson's dichotomy is far more complex than the standard Good vs Evil. Thomas Covenant must combat a Despite which is more than external evil, which is in fact the internal wish for death and destruction. Whether the action is played out on the stage of his own mind, whether the mental universe impinges on the physical one, or whether the experience is wholly real -- we aren't told, and in the end it doesn't matter. What matters is the choice, the almost hopeless fight against corruption. Like most people -- though unlike most protagonists of secondary fantasy worlds -- Covenant finds himself engaged in a struggle he doesn't know the meaning of, on a ground he isn't sure of, among people who make demands on him that he is barely able to answer.

And in victory? He refuses the chance of being healed when it's offered to him. He is no longer a leper, only 'a victim of Hansen's disease', and what's a sickness of the body when the spirit is whole? In The Power That Preserves Donaldson says, "We are not the Creators of the Earth. Its final end is not on our heads. We are Creations, like the Land itself. We are accountable for nothing but the purity of our service." And if there is no god and no meaning to the universe? "Then who is there to reproach us? We provide the meaning of our own lives."

Richard Adams, like Stephen Donaldson, is given to quoting the Old Testament. 'Behold, I will send my messenger,' says Malachi, chpt III, pre-figuring Christ and Shardik. 'But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire.'

An epigraph for the book is from Jung: 'superstition and accident manifest the will of God'. A prophecy is fulfilled -- or is it? The occurrences in Shardik may be no more than nature magnified by eyes only too willing to use what they perceive as godhead for their own ends. Shardik's priests and priestesses are throughout the book intensely aware of him as an animal, a bear that may be sick, hungry, that can be drugged and captured. At the same time, this to them is unimportant: he is their messenger from god. The final scenes of Shardik's passing make it apparent that this story is as far in the past for the narrator as Gethsemane is for a Christian today. As the appearance of a bear in the Ortelgan forests grew into a power that toppled the Beklan empire, so the story of Shardik has become magnified into a widespread and deep-rooted religion. Chance or plan?

Ambiguous as it is, I think Shardik comes down on the side of a Divine Plan. The book is too neatly constructed for anything else. All is grist to god's mill here, and his refining fire -- Shardik -- shatters and remakes the society in which his prophet Kelderek lives. It considers the 'unthinkable': that god is as cruel and tyrannical as the Old Testament's Jehovah. Pity, compassion and kindness are human weaknesses, and humans are to be sacrificed

to god's purposes. Whatever dubious benefits accrue are not to the point: ends do not justify means. Things are not intrinsically moral, but good or evil as they fit in with the dictates of god. The usual explanation for this (other than the universe being naturally unjust and unfit for human habitation, which is just as likely) is that the universe is a testing ground, in which souls utilise their free will to become better through experience. If so, Shardik's world is a bitter arena. Yet why a testing ground at all?

It's not a theory that withstands close examination. An omnipotent god must, by nature, have created all the potentialities of a human being, must have created the universe, must therefore have created the cause and effect laws by which it operates. A created object cannot exceed its own programmed parameters. And if cause and effect operate infallibly then the form of the first hydrogen atom forever fixed what was to follow it -- suns, worlds, life, human history. In a mechanical universe such as this there is no free will. No use to call the world a testing ground, the results are inevitable, inflexibly written into the cosmos a billion years before the birth of the individual.

The god of Shardik that created the slave trader Genshed also invented his cruelties. But could Genshed not choose through free will to be evil? After all, he requires (as Foul did of Covenant) willing aid; requires that the boy Radu consent to help him murder the other enslaved children. If he didn't consent to be evil, it means nothing. (Whether a dead child would care why it was murdered is another question.) But no, it is all Fate: Genshed's evil is required for Shardik's success. Like Judas before him, he is an instrument of the deity -- and instruments aren't morally responsible. Without freedom of choice, there is no good or evil.

Listen to Shardik's universe. In the background there is the tick of clockwork.

Does Lud-in-the-Mist have any greater degree of freedom? The Dorimarites have banished all art, all creative impulses, from their land that lies between Fairyland and the sea. As a consequence, what they most fear is the influx of fairy fruit being smuggled over the Elfin Hills; fruit that brings strange visions, madness and a rejection of 'normal' life. This might be taken as straightforward allegory, like Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market, with the fruit representing hallucinogenic drugs, or the uncontrolled sexual impulse, or artistic inspiration. Without the creative impulse Lud-in-the-Mist is barren, it takes the return of irrationality to fertilise it. If Law is not the opposite of Despite, as Thomas Covenant would have it, then it is certainly the opposite of Art.

Yet Lud-in-the-Mist is deceptive. It has deeper layers of meaning. At first sight there is no freedom in that universe. 'It is useless to try and circumvent the Duke,' says Lud's Mayor, Master Nathaniel Chanticleer. But Duke Aubrey, though a supernatural power on both sides of the Debatable Hills, Mirrlees clearly intends to be human rather than deity (introducing him in that chapter entitled 'The Duke Who Laughed Himself Off A Throne and Other Traditions Of Dorimare'). There is no god in Lud. Even the priests of the sun and moon are referred to only as a cult. The Duke is the most powerful force in Mirrlees's world simply because he is the most knowledgeable. Chanticleer, initiated into his Ancient Mysteries, finds the basis of that knowledge is -- the Abyss.

The Duke's madwoman-messenger predicts that Chanticleer will soon be dead. In this world that means either the non-existence of a tomb in the Fields of Grammar, or else a thrall-like existence as one of the Silent People, enslaved to harvest gillyflowers in the fields of Fairyland, or to wander unknowing the Earth. There is no happy after-life. Under the book's two mirroring plots

(of the discovery of an old murder, and the uncovering of the smugglers) lies this third theme: the progress of Nathaniel Chanticleer who will eventually return from his wanderings as the Duke's deputy.

Freeing the Dorimarite children from slavery in the Elfin Hills, Chanticleer continues on to the very border of Fairyland. The Duke shows him a vision of the land over the border -- Dorimare, made perfect. This in turn vanishes and becomes an Abyss into which Chanticleer casts himself... dying, as the Duke prophesied. He will return, initiated into this most final mystery, to preside over the new Lud-in-the-Mist.

So all should be well: Lud has its renaissance, all the happenings that seemed chance have fallen into a pattern. Chanticleer has returned. What could be wrong? But a quirky unsettling note runs through the book, as melancholy as the old tune that haunts Nathaniel. "My adventures went on getting more and more like a dream," he says, "till the climax." This, remember, is the initiate who has passed beyond death -- further than Shardik or Covenant takes us. And what does he say? "Suppose...that what we know at first hand is only this -- that there is nothing to know?"

Mirrlees tells us that the mundane world is crippled if it doesn't admit the exotic, the artistic, the irrational, the religious. These things are necessary for us to live. But nevertheless they are delusion and falsehood, to enable people to live a comfortable life until the inevitable end. And after that? "I...would find an antidote to the bitter herb of life," observes Duke Aubrey, "but none grows this side of the hills -- or the other."

The advantage of this world, come about purely by chance, is that it holds infinite free will. What an individual does is circumscribed only by personal ability and given circumstances. Avoiding random accidents and human malice, there is a good chance that Lud's citizens will live pleasant and prosperous lives. Law can give what shape to the world it chooses, by the use of convenient legal fictions; so reason can give another shape to unbearable truths.

The universe has no purpose: that is its greatest freedom. Humanity is still fallible, and the devotion of human beings -- Chanticleer for his son, even Clementina Gibberly for Endymion Leer -- is all the more admirable because there is no heavenly reward for it. The passing of time is a frightening thing to the townsmen of Lud, but not to the old countrywoman who has grown used to the rhythm of birth and decay and death. The outlook is an atheistic one, certainly; a nihilistic one, perhaps. The last word lies with Hope Mirrlees, and it is not comforting. Books may lie, she says, and epitaphs, and Ancient Mysteries. In the end, all we can be certain of is that there is nothing of which we can be certain.

To go any further requires that we leave fantasy and literature and enter on theology. Do authors, other than the obviously didactic, expect their readers to regard their books as truth? Or as philosophical exercises? Or (because, being writers, demands of narrative may take precedence over philosophy) simply as good stories? But perhaps a good story is never simple.

If regarded as truth, or an aspect of truth, the books demand a different kind of criticism from the normal one. The first question a child learns not to ask of a story is 'Is it true?' To ask if the attitudes expressed in these secondary worlds are valid we must have something to measure them against.

A question. How do they measure up against -- Belsen? Hiroshima?

In Shardik's world such atrocities would be part of god's plan. In Dorimare

they would be an unwelcome reminder of the Abyss, to be put out of mind as soon as possible. In the Land, either the reflection of some overwhelming spiritual sin, or an opportunity for individuals to find their own salvation.

It is not, as you see, a question that has an answer.

In any case we don't argue from a firm foundation: how many spiritual and material mistakes are due solely to errors of perception? Do we see the world as it is? Mirrlees says not, Adams is ambiguous, Donaldson says we can't know but it doesn't matter anyway. Reality is a value judgement. We see only facets of the consensus world. As J G Ballard says in 'The Delta at Sunset', "the only real landscapes are the internal ones." Someday we may know what truth is --

By that time it will be too late for writing novels.

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## STANDPOINT

### A REASSESSMENT OF REASSESSMENTS

David V Barrett

On first sight, the Reassessments column appears an excellent idea, but on reflection I'm not so sure, particularly in the light of your editorial remarks: "...exactly what I'm looking for -- a view, preferably vitriolic, that runs counter to the accepted view...a scathing put-down of a so-called 'classic'." You may just be running the danger of falling into the same trap as Chairman Mao with his Cultural Revolution: condemning every-

thing that was once acclaimed. I'm not saying that all our SF 'classics' should be held sacred and inviolate, by no means; some of them were vastly over-rated when they first appeared, or have grown a reputation greater than they deserve. But this does not apply to all such works.

Why is a 'Reassessment' likely to take a different view of a novel from an earlier review? There are several reasons, some of which I'll go into here.

First, of course, a different critic will write a different review. Compare,

for example, the reviews of Valis by Paul Kincaid in Vector 102 and Brendon Gore in Paperback Inferno 5/3; apart from the obvious fact that Kincaid's review is more thoughtful, more serious and better written than is Gore's, their opinions of the book are quite different. This is as it should be; we all have different tastes. Didn't Vector, fairly recently, run two reviews, totally opposed in their judgements, of the same book? Perhaps this should be done more often.

But let's assume that someone is asked to reassess a book he himself reviewed ten years earlier. (Has anyone actually been in the BSFA that long?) ((Yes.)) He's lazy, so he digs through his back numbers of Vector until he finds his original review, and copies it out: same book, same critic -- therefore same review. But hold! He finds that he isn't quite in agreement with his earlier self -- surprise, surprise. Fifteen years ago I read everything by Simak I could lay my hands on, and then re-read it. Now I avert my eyes if I accidentally see one of his books in a rack. The quality of those books hasn't changed; I have. I'm older, more mature, my tastes have changed, I've read several thousand other books since those days. But if those books, for me, were once good and worthy to be read, they're not now automatically bad and not worth reading. They're as good, or as bad, as they ever were. And, in the case of Simak, someone still likes him (he's still selling, anyway); someone now shares my opinion of fifteen years ago. Does that make them immature, or poor judges of literary merit? No, it just means that they (and, once, I) like a certain type of fiction. The danger here is that 'we', who have outgrown 'that' type of book, condemn it; we tell someone who happens to like it that they're wrong to do so because it's poor SF, when really we mean that it's a type of SF we no longer appreciate.

These points have been covered before, in innumerable articles entitled something like 'Towards a Critical Standard' or 'Objectivity in SF Criticism', but I believe they need to be restated, because there is a tendency to forget them -- particularly when reassessing a work.

Why else, briefly, might reassessments turn out to be over-harsh judgements of books? I'd imagine that most regular contributors to Vector have been reading SF for a number of years. What happens? We become jaded. We lose our 'sense of wonder'; startling visions of future society are commonplaces; marvels of technological invention become hardware gimmicks. "And there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). We don't notice that the classic being reassessed was one of the first books to... To what? Whatever it is that is now an SF set-piece.

Style is another problem. Doc Smith and John Russell Fearn are too gosh-wow space opera; Wyndham is too 'bready'; William Morris is too sickeningly twee. But when they wrote, their style was right for what they were writing. It's now easy to be prejudiced against a book because its literary style has become dated.

And finally, to return to the Cultural Revolution, we can be negatively critical towards a book simply because it's become a classic. Because it's popular, which is one of the most pejorative terms in the SF vocabulary. If a book is popular it means that it's been bought by thousands of people who occasionally read sci-fi.

That's terrible!

It can't be any good, can it?

(Shame. I liked it before it became a classic.)

# THE WAY THINGS ARE

Josephine Saxton

When the features editor of Vector wrote to suggest that I might care to write about a serious defect in Science Fiction publishing in this country, I must have been caught off guard because I replied that I would. The (serious) defect in question was the fact that I had a number of novels published, most of which were not obtainable in this country, so I rashly supposed that I would be able to say something coherent on the subject, and even thought that I should. I customarily maintain silence on this and any subject related to writing because I find the entire business too painful and complex to discuss. I now find that this behaviour has had repercussions: I do not know what I think about it all and I do not care, but, after several drafts, much thought and a lot of despair and some horror at finding I could not write even one non-fiction page that made sense, I have produced the following. My published work by the way consists of three novels from Doubleday around ten years ago, one novel from Virgin last year, and 'a number' of stories, perhaps twenty or so, possibly as many as three dozen, I just don't know, in anthologies and magazines over a period of sixteen years: mostly American, a few British and some dotted about in other languages including Japanese. So.

Sixteen years ago when my first stories were being bought, I knew I had a great future. I knew nothing of how to become widely read, I did not even consider that aspect of writing. I was so naive that I believed I would become famous and financially rewarded if I made real efforts to write the best and most interesting stories I possibly could, putting into them deep and secret amazing ideas which would intrigue, communicate things I felt to be very important, and entertain. My method was also naive, I hadn't a clue how other writers went about writing stories; like Frank Sinatra I did it my way. It seemed obvious to me that the subconscious mind was the active part of creativity, and that dreams would naturally indicate what I must explore in my conscious work, but that sometimes it would be quite otherwise, and I would weave a story directly around some speculation based on a real idea or discovery existing in science. I saw no incompatibility. Later, other methods occurred. I had several heads, and eventually all of them produced stories. None of these heads has a clue how to make a fortune out of writing. What a pathetic figure I cut standing next to Clarke, Aldiss, Harrison, McCaffrey, Le Guin and so on - they know how 'tis done, and done quickly. Around the first time of publication I still believed that love and marriage were compatible too, even though I wrote The Wall. My subconscious mind knew a lot better than I did about these things, could predict my future for me if only I had cared to listen; I honestly did not know what that story was about or what it could possibly mean, I had a

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screen through which messages could pass but I cared not to interpret correctly. Had I been told I would not have wanted to know any more than did the Great Reading Public; although it has been reprinted and translated several times it will never make me rich or famous. Harsh iconoclasm unrelieved by hope is not what people buy by the yard. How was I to know - I thought people would love having their neck-hair made to creep by the truth. Not so - but then, when I have turned out funny stories the result has been the same. Like throwing a stone down a well.

For example my first novel to be published in Great Britain, The Travails of Jane Saint, has sunk leaving only a few stunningly good reviews to mark the place. It was given hardly any advertising, very bad distribution and the nastiest bit of cover art I have ever seen plus extremely silly blurb, all of which completely hid the book itself and have resulted in its rewording. I had thought that at last I had been given a Big Chance; it may have been my last chance. Virgin were used to making fortunes very quickly with records, and expected to do the same with books. They would not allow their editor a large enough ration of money or time; end of fiction list, end of book which makes strong women weep with laughter and which may even have cracked the dour mask of a few males, once they realized I was not after their balls with scissors.

At this point I must explain that I am not about to discuss quality. Those readers who think my work feeble or not worth publishing will have drawn their own conclusions as to the reasons for the state of my career, and will believe that the status quo is without fault. In the case of poor work this would be true but the core of the discussion lies elsewhere; for the purpose of this article I put it to you that there are a number of worthwhile writers who never gain much recognition or reward, and that I presume to class myself with them in at least some respects.

'Why are these writers and the unfortunate J Saxton among them not more widely available?' Before I try to answer I want to explain why it is painful to discuss the matter at all. It was not always so.

My lifelong desire to be a writer began to be fulfilled with my first work in print, so I proudly filled in forms under the heading of 'occupation' as 'writer' in preference to 'housewife'. An early passport grudgingly admits to both, but I have never earned a living from writing, nor have I ever been paid for being a housewife, for we do that for our keep, the motive being love and compulsion in both occupations, with the addition of social conditioning to help explain the idiocy of anyone who will offer a combination of several skills plus drudgery for what in Yorkshire is called nowt! Filling in or out of forms will present a problem now for I have just divorced my husband and do not live by writing, and have no job prospects. Now I keep quiet. People too often ask if I have ever written a best-seller; the business of explaining politely what a stupid question this is has become too much of a strain, and I cannot stand the looks on their faces - a visible lowering of respect, embarrassed contempt even, if I begin to explain that I write professionally but rarely get paid, and yet it is not a hobby. Another dreadful corner to be in is when people ask 'what kind of stuff do you write' and I am obliged to begin the SF or not SF thing, and "SF" makes people immediately mention '2001' or Star Wars and I want to run away screaming, especially if I get 'unusual, SF, for a woman' which means that there must be something wrong with me and that by definition I write Jung. I am in a ghetto within a ghetto, and thus have managed to sum up the purpose of this article: the problem is that I do not fit clearly into any category, and publishers do not want work which cannot be labelled. I must here point out that I cannot discuss any defects in Science Fiction publishing without broadening the question to include publishing generally. Most of my work could have appeared in a mainstream list and got away with it with more justifi-

cation than some of my work, the Vector for Seven cycle for example, appearing as SF. My science is more often than not human psychology which is, or should be a science of all novels, for novels are by definition about people, and not presumptuous gadgets. By any measurement I know of I am a misfit in all categories and this of course does apply to some other writers who have had little or no help from publishers. Why?

Remarks on my large collection of rejection slips are largely variations on the theme 'fascinating, interesting, personally I loved this, I enjoyed reading this but it isn't commercial and it doesn't suit our lists.' Well, I can do nothing about that except stumble off to lick my wounds, there really isn't much to be said or done although I used to indulge in the occasional daydream of personal confrontation, the challenge 'what exactly do you mean by this?' - the reasoned argument, recantation and so on. Commercial - what does this word mean? I used to think it meant that which sold, and as I observe that marketing exerts can sell anything, any work could be commercial. If some of the drivel on the bookstalls can put cash in a publisher's pocket (and maybe a per cent or so for the writer) why not the same process with something better? Sometimes it happens, mostly not. Picador for example publish some very unusual work and presumably sell it, but they too reject my stuff, twice as it happens. These publisher's lists are mysterious; it is beyond my comprehension how they can decide in advance of submissions what it is they will publish. Such a policy indicates an intention to bigotry and a desire not to discover or encourage originality. When I was at school originality was considered a virtue but now it would seem to be a defect. Anything ahead of its time must wait until its time has come and at that very moment the publisher will surely decide that it has already been done, is derivative, stale and hackneyed. An editor from Pan told me at Worldcon in Brighton that my turn would come, that 'they' would catch up and I could not help thinking of Jean Rhys, a good example of a writer who finally gained proper recognition (she had had a certain brief following in the 1930's) when she was quite old and who said of this with some bitterness: 'It came too late'.

Some new energy must somehow get into literature or it would be a static form, but it is not welcomed. Remember that old so-called New Wave furor; the Old Guard snarled and spat jealously, not realising that there was no such thing as a New Wave, but only a long tradition of exploration in literature which manifested in Science Fiction at a time when it needed new life. How silly all that seems now, but the prejudice against anything 'not entirely normal' will always be there; even people who appreciate avante garde painting and film will be irritated with a change in literary form. There is prejudice against SF and within SF there is prejudice; no wonder most of it is terribly boring.

Connected with this matter of new energy is something which I call 'the hostility reaction', which is what you get if you state a truth which will in any way damage the ideas, self-image or security of someone else, or a world-view in which they believe. Women of course get this to some tune with every wave of the ongoing and necessary changes in history, and not only from men either for obvious reasons. But this is a generally observed reaction; symptoms are not always in accord with verbal riposte, for I have seen smooth and reasonable words about literary questions betrayed by a sudden pallor of the face and a veiled expression in the eyes: this is the result of a desire not to commit murder. Sometimes of course, especially in drink, it all hangs out. I recall a famous and respected writer of some stature and skill but with a deeply ingrained hatred of females manifesting as a distanced patronising relegation of them to the roles of mother or whore (never at the same time of course) stating of a book by Joanna Russ nothing, but saying of her 'Oh she's just a bloody bitch.' Reduced to gibbering shit-hurling when he could have produced a reasoned argument? Fear of change, folks; mortal terror of a new order of things. Do

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intelligent and responsible people behave like this? Yes of course, if publisher's editors are intelligent and responsible. An excellent example from a few years ago which upset me considerably at the time, because I knew I was right from experience was the rejection remark from an editor who felt it necessary to first apologise for not having had my manuscript read by a 'feminine' (yes, I do quote) reader, before he explained that none of them who had read it were still living under the illusive myth of the vaginal orgasm, then explaining further that masculine predilections had not biased their view and concluding by saying that he just happened to find my book humourless. Well, he would know about female physical experience of course! I think I must have got him unwittingly on a sensitive and flabby nerve, never having benefitted from more than one kind of sexual response: so much for love of truth: and the lack of humour was not in the book I would dare to state. Anything genuinely anarchic will receive an unpleasant reception unless the author has been very clever and disguised it thickly, or the editor is very thick. Always there are exceptions but the editor receiving a manuscript of originality, with truth, revelation and revolution and no category will either feel ill and reject it immediately, or look the other way. Publishing is like a supermarket - geared to popular taste and pandering to a general desire for pabulum. No matter that this taste was formed by the vendors, and could be changed again. There are fake concessions to the exotic, foreign and unusual, but a good palate can tell supermarket continental sausage for the damp imitation that it is: end of metaphor, it is apt but too far-reaching, by Heaven, the whole fucking world is like a supermarket, not just publishing.

I am bound to mention a peculiar monster which is hurting everyone, which is called 'the recession'. I hear from writers much better established than I can ever hope to be that they too are suffering from this recession. But I recall being dished up the tale of a recession in publishing back in the sixties - publishers have always used this old chestnut. I now find it hard to swallow but back then, I had not put two and two together. I recall going into Doubleday's New York office in 1970 and being handed some cock-and-bull junk about my being lucky to be published, I was tax relief really - I listened to all that crap with open mouth then, shy and daft as a brush. I stared at the chartreuse carpet, goggled at the amazing ashtrays - why did I not think to point out that the chair I was sitting in obviously cost more than the wretched advance I had received for my novel? Come off it chaps, there is too much luxury and waste to speak of not affording to publish anything but sure-fire money-spinners. Millions are being made by publishing crapola; where is the publisher with the strength to put some 'hype' into something really good? In the Playboy Club, smugly corrupted I think.

Having broken my customary silence I find that there is plenty simmering - I could go on and on but I was asked for an article not a diatribe. I am attempting to express righteous anger without being peeved; point out injustice without sour grapes; find out why I have had such a rough deal without being bitter. I despise such negative emotions but admit to them, asking, who would not? I would rather not discuss this writing problem because such emotions arise; to feel hopeless, exasperated and depressed prevents me from writing at all.

If I am so hooked on writing, why do I not write what the public does want? Simple solution. Because I aspire to something else is why, although I did make attempts in that direction at the advice of literary agents who were unwise enough to take me on their books for a while. The results were useless. I studied a women's magazine market carefully but found myself incapable of getting the formula right except once and that must have been a fluke. I detested the payment however because the story was a wicked pack of lies and ended 'happily' with a proposal of marriage. How could I have been such a traitor as to write

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what I did? - I happen to believe that what people read influences them profoundly, therefore it is wrong to deal them false junk. But at least all the other 'commercial' stories were rejected because I somehow got into each one something offending somebody's sacred cow. I recently tried Woman with some of my 'real' stories, and not one of them would do, even though the staff apparently had much fun reading them. Readers of Woman will be overjoyed to know that their reading is censored, tailored down to them by editors who themselves prefer something rather different. Readers everywhere are similarly treated.

Writing 'commercial' stuff to float your 'real' work requires a special kind of schizophrenia which I do not have; mine is another, less lucrative variety and I much prefer to float by cooking, sewing (or possibly by drumming in a jazz-funk outfit, you didn't know I did that, did you?). Let those writers who can feed the monster which devours them, to me, it doesn't make sense.

I have tried to illuminate a situation which I find exasperatingly incomprehensible, and have succeeded only in spiralling down into the dark where lies a fat cliché coiled like a maggot: That's the way it is. And it will get worse and worse as Babylon falls, after which who will read anything for who will have eyes?

To change the point of view of publishing in this or probably all countries would require a total upheaval of the establishment in its entirety, for publishing reflects the degree of awareness of a society. Looking around W H Smith I would judge the anaesthetic to be good and strong, and for enough people to wake up and realise just how bad things are, just how low standards are, what junk most people are satisfied with will take something quite a bit more painful than a pin jabbed in a bum - that would be mere irritation and would cause a backlash ("get down bitches, you've gone too far this time!")

The short story problem illustrates the stupid attitude of publishers very well. Publishers say that the public does not want short stories so they do not publish them but everyone really does want short stories but can't get them because they are not published so they buy the novels, proving the publisher correct, which is not so. Everyone, but everyone I have ever spoken to wishes there were more short stories, and yet I have two collections going the rounds, one a collection of my Science Fiction which has been rejected for being too SF, for not being SF enough, for not having a connecting theme (which it does) and because short stories do not sell. The other collection is not SF and has so far been ignored. I should worry, I'm going to write another score of stories on a theme I have recently dreamed up, and the West Midlands Arts Council are to give me £800.00 to aid and abet this foolishness. Not exactly a living, but better than utter extinction. Chances are that they will never get into print.

There have always been loopholes through which genius slid triumphant into the limelight usually reserved for lesser souls, but they are getting smaller and less numerous. It was through such loopholes that Giles Goat Boy, V, The Rose, Red Shift, Voyage to Arcturus, Ghormenghast and many others appeared, never making their authors really wealthy or popular as far as I know (334 probably didn't have good sales figures and neither probably did various wonders by Chip Delany - and although I have never actually read more than a few pages of Tolkien because of the nausea, Virgin insisted on mentioning his name in connection with mine in preference to Peake because Peake doesn't sell! It's a weird world folks, it really is).

Perhaps it is only a short step to paranoia for me, to the point where I accuse the establishment of concocting a repressive plot against me, it happens all

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the time. Reich was persecuted which drove him mad and then his persecutors said 'I told you so, he was barmy therefore his ideas are barmy.' It is rather maddening to be ignored, but I take a view of paranoia which will turn it into a rich field of discovery instead of a disease. Dali knows well that paranoia is to be desired and cultivated and should not be used as a word of abuse, and nor should 'hysterical' or 'neurotic'. They are more interesting tastes than perpetual outer calm, stability and acceptable normality.

Personal taste in humour has accounted for quite a lot of my rejection slips. One of the funniest things I was lucky enough to turn out still has not sold even though every other writer at a Milford conference voted it hilarious; when it came to Pete Weston's turn to read it as editor of an anthology I'm afraid he found it utterly humourless. Well, I wasn't about to explain the joke, my attitude must be that it is his loss; if the editor doesn't get it, then nobody else gets a chance. Kafka used to literally roll on the floor laughing at some of the things he wrote, and yet they deeply depress most people who just do not get the humour.

Is there anything to be done about any of this? I think that as public taste is created by the vendors of whatever it is (for example nobody is actually born with a sweet tooth, people are trained to like Sugar Puffs) it might be possible for some highly intelligent editors to join heads with clever sales and distribution experts, and - but this is science fiction I am writing isn't it, or at least, a soppy fantasy. No, there isn't anything to be done. Rush out and buy another Gor book, or some John Fowles if you wish to seem literary (has anyone noticed that these two writers have the same subject matter but one has class and clout and the other not?), or a Barbara Cartland or some other comfort rag, and just be glad you can get a book at all. Books are on their way out, and video and injectable dramas on their way in. That is the way it is, and nobody loves an sardvark when it's down and out.

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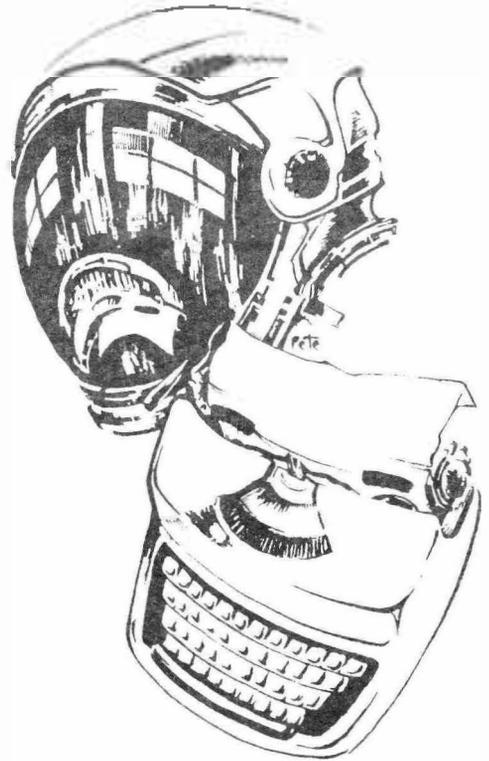


stirring within the disc ship. Strange metallic things; things that were alien to the soft green grass of earth.

Terrifying things, steel things; metal things; things with cylindrical bodies and multitudinous jointed limbs. Things without flesh and blood. Things that were made of metal and plastic and transistors and valves and relays, and wires. Metal things. Metal things that could think. Thinking metal things. Terrifying in their strangeness, in their peculiar metal efficiency. Things the like of which had never been seen on the earth before. Things that were sliding back panels... Robots! Robots were marching... Robots were marching, and were about to spread havoc and destruction across the earth, and as yet the sleeping earth knew nothing of their coming. As mysterious as anything in the great mysterious universe.

# Book Reviews

Reviews Editor:  
Joseph Nicholas



Kingsley Amis - RUSSIAN HIDE AND SEEK (Penguin, 251pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Ray Owen

Until recently, Kingsley Amis was the only writer to achieve "respectability" (signified by appearing on the English literature shelves of academic libraries) with a book about SF, New Maps of Hell. He has been successful both in the bestseller lists and the world of Melvyn Bragg's Pseuds' Circus. Clichéd though the phrase may be, such works as Lucky Jim, The Alteration and even Jake's Thing have added to the tradition of the English popular novel as literary classic. Always at his best when writing a fundamentally serious novel with an element of the satirically humorous in evidence, Amis would seem to have set out to make Russian Hide and Seek both a tale after the fashion of a Russian 19th century novel and a satirical view of modern English society. The story deals with a 21st century England which has been under Russian control for several decades, long enough for English culture and sense of identity to have completely disappeared. The plot concerns a secret attempt by some Russian officers to stage a coup d'état and restore control of the country to the English.

Though a rapid summary of the plot shows great promise, as indeed does an assessment of some of the themes (the impossibility of imposing cultural values, for instance), there are some fairly major problems with the book. There is a noticeable unevenness of style, a good example being a formal dinner party dealt with in a manner reminiscent of Tolstoy, until the main character, Alexander Petrovski, takes a moonlight stroll with one of the female guests, when the

ensuing love scene is related in the style of a Timothy lea "Confessions" story. The novel is also marred by long patches of pointless, uninteresting dialogue, which make the reader so bored that he probably misses the important point made two lines from the end of the speech.

The title of the novel refers to a game played by some of the younger officers outside the mess at nights. It is a variation on Russian roulette, in which the officers shoot at each other in the darkness, having already called out once to betray their position and then being upon their honour not to move. Although honour is judged as all-important by the competitors, no one can actually keep their word while playing the game. As Alexander explains to a new contestant:

"The only reason that lot are still alive is that they break all the rules. Listen, Boris. You're not supposed to move after you've called out. But you must. Move like hell. Run, call out and keep going. Or dodge into cover. Have you got that? If you stand still you'll die."

This game is actually a reflection of the conspiracy to start a revolution, which is treated by most of the participants as little more than a game to relieve the boredom of service in the completely subdued England.

The satirical element of the story, the comments on English culture and society, is largely successful. The incidents concerning the Russian failure to understand why an elaborate tomb should have been erected in memory of a dead pet and the whole convention of the English Tea Party show some of the ludicrous elements of modern-day England. Perhaps the most entertaining section of the book deals with the Russian attempt to reintroduce English culture and religion to a race who have lost almost all contact with the age in which these things were once part of life. The complete failure of the festival to reintroduce old ideas sees its climax in the performance of a genuine English play, Romeo and Juliet, which the peasant audience has been led to believe is a comedy. Patches of true Amis prose are seen at this point, particularly in the description of the theatre audience just before the curtain goes up on the play:

"The ringing of a bell immediately produced something of a hush. When a bell rang, it meant authority was calling for attention, and plenty of those in the bar and foyer could vividly remember when it was wise to respond to that call without reserve. But the word soon got around that taking one's seat was as much as was asked for. This process went on longer than would once have been usual, given the number of parties and couples with no member able to read. In the end it was done and there fell another relative silence, in which this time an immense rustling of paper could be heard as several hundred boxes of chocolates, one to each seat, were torn open and their contents explored. A Russian researcher of unusually wide reading had come across the remark (sarcastically intended) that chocolates seemed to be compulsory at English theatrical performances."

But, though the individual elements of the novel are quite entertaining, the story never seems to achieve a tenth of its potential, leaving the reader disappointed. Russian Hide and Seek simply isn't the type of carefully constructed and well-written novel that, rightly or wrongly, we expect an author as talented as Amis undoubtedly is to produce 100 percent of the time.

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*The robots in their disc ship had arrived...*

*There were strange flickering lights all around the ship. Terrifying lights, weird lights, uncanny lights, awful lights, inhuman lights, alien lights, robot lights; and all around a great hemispherical glowing shield*

Gene Wolfe - THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR DEATH AND OTHER STORIES AND OTHER STORIES  
(Arrow, 410pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Ray Owen

Of good authors, there are those whose style is excellent, but who are a little lacking in imagination (none of whom write SF); there are those with excellent imagination, but who have problems with style (Ian Watson could be mentioned here); and very occasionally there is an author with both outstanding imagination and a good style. Gene Wolfe is one of the few SF authors of this type. If you have already read some of his work, the chances are that you have either bought this collection or have discovered that you don't like his close, complex writing technique. But if you are unfamiliar with him, this collection is an ideal way to sample the scope and depth of his writing. All fourteen of the stories in the book (which vary in length between four and sixty pages of a small but clear typeface) are well worth reading, although some are more successful than others. It would be impossible to here embark upon a sufficiently thorough examination of all the tales, but perhaps reviewing some of the more important pieces is better anyway; the only way to appreciate the sheer artistry of this collection is to read it for yourselves.

Three of the major works in the book are Wolfe's "Doctor/Island/Death" stories, which although confusingly similar in titles and sharing similar themes, are very different from each other in execution. "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories" deals with the childhood of Tackman Sabcock, who lives Mitty-like in the world of his comic-book heroes. Familiar enough, perhaps, but with Wolfe any sentimentality is rejected right from the beginning of the story, which ultimately becomes an exploration of reality due to the fact that the comic-book hero, Captain Ransom, can be seen by others. By subtle changes of emphasis (from "fantasy" to "reality" by a combination of both), tense (mainly in the present, but occasionally shifting to the past) and narrative viewpoint (principally in the second person, but sometimes in the third), the relevance of the fantasy world to Tacky's own traumatic experiences is built up - Dr Death's castle, for instance, is superimposed upon Tacky's home (typically, Wolfe doesn't emphasise this, but leaves it for the reader to spot). Even when the story is all but over, and we assume that Wolfe has made all the points he wants to, he forces his main character to confront the fictional nature of his "real" existence. It is a complex story that repays careful reading, but then the same is true for much of this collection.

"The Death of Doctor Island" concerns a boy who is suffering from some extreme mental imbalance and is treated by being placed in an artificial "world", the climate of which responds to reflect his own moods and emotions. Again, Wolfe surprises the reader not by any "shock" ending but by complexity of motivation and action, particularly that of the God-like computer which controls the therapeutic "island". Even here, the idea of the relative importance of individuals crops up - as it did in "The Island of Doctor Death" - with the realisation that perhaps the boy's recovery is not the true reason for his presence on the "island". The story won a deserved Nebula in 1973, after "The Island of Doctor Death" had failed to do so because some of the voters believed that they were abstaining when they were in fact voting for no award to be made.

"The Doctor of Death Island" deals once again with personality and fiction. The main character, Alan Alvard, wakes up in a prison hospital, where he has been cryogenically frozen part-way through a life sentence. Having made a fortune by developing a speaking book which can converse with the reader, he has killed his partner. Soon, stray characters start appearing in books and files; Alvard must discover the nature of the problem and find a solution. Though there are several interesting issues raised in the piece, including debt to

society and immortality - particularly fascinating is how a sentence of life imprisonment should be interpreted when the prisoner later becomes immortal - I don't feel that it has the depth of the other stories in this cycle. Above all, I found it difficult to judge a story set in a prison hospital after having already read Disch's Camp Concentration.

A theme present in two of the above cycle is that of the importance of the "hero" figure as a concept and as reality. Closely coupled with an exploration of the relationship between myth and reality, this idea forms the central theme of what I believe to be two of the most important stories in the collection, "The Hero as Werewolf" and "Three Fingers".

"The Hero as Werewolf" concerns the life of what we at first assume to be an urban werewolf in a utopian society. However, the small group of renegade savages is actually the remains of humanity in a society that has opted for genetic "improvement". Even though this idea is not particularly original, it is significant, and is well expressed, especially at the end, where love and savagery become indistinguishable. "Three Fingers" is an excellent short story about a young man who makes a living selling Disney souvenirs, and the revenge exacted by the Disney characters themselves. At this level, it is a cutesy piece of pulp drivel; however, the true message of the story is that our modern-day myths, as represented by the Disney characters, are not merely developments of previous folk-legends but have a far more chilling nature of their own. Though short, it communicates this meaning beautifully.

There are problems with the collection, of course. To keep up the standard set by some of the stories mentioned above would be impossible, and some competent but uninspired stories like "Alien Stones" suffer greatly in comparison. Also, there are no author's notes, no significant biographical details, and no mention of the stories' previous published appearances - all things I enjoy reading in a collection. But the fact that such adverse comments are so few and so trivial shows what an excellent collection this is. One of Wolfe's achievements is the ability to use existing ideas and themes without the end-product being at all derivative - a good example of this is "Tracking Song", which includes echoes of Priest's Inverted World, Golding's The Inheritors and Norse mythology, which ultimately add to its impact.

Overall, I have to say that reading The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories was almost enough to restore my faith in SF as an art form.

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George Turner - VANEGLORY (Faber, 320pp, £5.95)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

One of science fiction's characteristic vices is the handling of vast themes in a small way. The equation which unravels the universe can all too easily become no more than what Hitchcock called the Macguffin. The filmic Macguffin would be a stolen jewel, an ultra-classified document: anything to serve as the motivation for people to chase one another with guns and noises of unashamed greed. And Vaneglory, despite solidly good writing and ingenious manipulation of plot and people, settles into a chase after the Macguffin of genetic immortality. The result is a suitable shambles with no real winners, but also a lingering sense of lost opportunities.

For example: the promise of extended life corrupts and the promise of infinite life corrupts infinitely - but while this corruption of upright men appears to be the theme of the book, the process keeps happening offstage. One man breaks down in a "recital of naked greed" and others go tut-tut over his recorded words,

but the reader never finds out what was said nor the thoughts which led to its being said. Another man, a religious fanatic, decides not too unexpectedly that he and his acolytes deserve eternal life on Earth ad majorem Dei gloriam: by what jesuitry does he reach this standpoint from his old, sincere belief in a better life after death? Goodness knows.

Other key points are merely stated. The supporting cast includes 'natural' immortals centuries or millennia old, who call themselves the Children of Time and agree - with the author's seeming approval - that to be immortal is to be other than human. Maddeningly, we are let into the thoughts of one of the Children only to be told that from the Children's viewpoint he is insane, having such appalling mental defects as a love for certain humans comparable to the love humans have for their dogs. (He also boasts unlikely abilities: fine control over facial muscles which makes him a master of disguise, and the ability to 'manipulate' minds, about which we are told no more than that it is not hypnosis.) I don't necessarily disagree with the thesis that immortality means inhumanity, but surely a writer of Turner's ability could have brought this chilly alienness onstage and shown it to us? Instead there's an opening dialogue between Children, one of whom is 'sane', both of whom sound no more or less than human.

This is a sequel to Beloved Son: the people of the odd, bleak society established in that book are already remote enough that immortals can hardly seem more strange. Nor is Vaneglorry improved by its deliberate echoes of Beloved Son. The young/old Heathcote of the first book is echoed by a youthful-looking President of the immortals whose memory goes back 30,000 years but is foggy about new data; each book boasts 'Gone Timers' brought from our century to the 2030s, a demented man-eating woman on the fringe of the plot, a concluding public spectacle, a high-technology handgun which in Vaneglorry becomes a secondary Macguffin (if you can credit the idea that sonic weapons of incredible compactness and lethality would be freely dispensed to untrained vigilantes in 1992's disintegrating Glasgow, yet forgotten and fiercely coveted by the advanced technology of 2037)... A more rewarding contrast is between the artificial biological freaks of the sinister research establishment Gangoil in Beloved Son, and the sequel's natural freaks like the Children and, less convincingly, such delights as eighty-foot mutant tapeworms in the river of 2037 Glasgow.

Glasgow is another disappointment. Half the book takes place there, partly in a running-down 1992 Glasgow of numb crowds (subsequently cleaned out with radioactive dust), partly in a 2037 Glasgow empty except for the Children, the tapeworms and a handful of Macguffin-chasers - most of whom linger for the stagey finale when the city is neutron-bombed on Christmas Day. Despite all this, Vaneglorry's Glasgow is barely more than a scattering of street names. Melbourne is less, the old Melbourne having been pulled down piece by piece. Gangoil is merely a glimpse of a sterile ward. That's it. There is no sense of place.

Nor do we sense the complexity and inertia of a real, functioning society. In 2037 the people at large are simply a mob to be manipulated. A few top-echelon individuals seem to throw their weight about with unbelievably few constraints. The sense of wonder reels as top men rush in person to Glasgow, where one of them makes an offhand decision (his thought processes being characteristically concealed), sends a private radio message and within hours has sixty museum-piece neutron bombs hovering over the city ready to fall when he says the word. For general implausibility this is only equalled by Turner's 'energy blind', an impalpable privacy screen which soaks up all sound and electromagnetic radiation. So what happens when you walk through it? Nothing, says Turner. You fall over dead, say I.

Despite its disappointments, the book is bleakly satisfying. Much is saved by

the character of Donald, a non-immortal from 1992 who for no apparent reason is put on ice in Gangoil and revived in 2037: he has a dreadful Glasgow accent for which the author apologizes in his dedication, but usefully fills the role of a visitor reacting to the future in terms we can understand. But as with the revenant Raft of Beloved Son, it isn't he who changes the world. The final word is spoken by the International Security Council, again offstage, and loose ends are tidied up with unpleasant efficiency. (Even those tapeworms: Turner has assimilated the dictum of that playwright who said that if the stage directions specify an eighty-foot mutant tapeworm hanging on the wall, then that tapeworm must have its suckers revoltingly clamped onto someone's face before the final curtain. Or words to that effect.)

So: a solid, downbeat ending. The rulers have inevitably chosen not to follow the advice of the William Dunbar poem from which the title is taken - "Since for the Death remeid is none, Best is that we for Death dispoine, After our death that live may we: - Timor mortis conturbat me." Instead Gangoil will carve immortality from the dozen surviving Children, for the benefit of a selected few. This, we are told but once again not shown, will be disastrous. All we get is a final piece of hokey contrivance: the last short section purports to be the memoir of one liquidated character, which has been scrawled upon by later hands - the concluding note, many centuries onward, reading Timor vitae conturbat me. Ouch.

End of a well-written, neatly structured book which for all its 320 pages seems too short - too ready to spend time on apparent side issues while skipping the major theme of immortality and its disastrous lure. I gather a further sequel is on the way, and perhaps this will deliver the goods in the areas where Vaneglorry seems to fail.

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Angela Carter - HEROES AND VILLAINS (King Penguin, 151pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

In these embattled days it is rare that one has the opportunity to praise publishers. The "King Penguin" enterprise, therefore, is all the more welcome. It is particularly pleasing to see reprints of those books that belong in the borderlands between SF and the rest of literature, such as Borges's Labyrinths, Lea's Solaris and Carter's Heroes and Villains. Nevertheless, for all their good looks and pleasing list, King Penguins must arouse a few grumbles about price. After all, little short of £2 for a novella of barely 150 pages is excessive - it is the sort of price we are used to paying for slim volumes of poetry, and for all its virtues Heroes and Villains does not qualify as poetry.

Angela Carter is a writer who ignores the artificial boundaries that divide literature - if she feels that what she wants to say is best served by venturing into the realms of fantasy or science fiction, then venture she will. This book is a case in point, decked out as a post-holocaust fantasy with mankind radically divided and civilisation routed. Yet Angela Carter ventures as a visitor, not an habitue, and it would be a sad mistake to read Heroes and Villains as, for instance, just another successor to Earth Abides. It is refreshing, not to say a little disconcerting, to enter a post-holocaust world and realise that one is not meant to sit back and marvel at the author's percipience. Indeed, traditionally-minded readers might go no further. After all, her vision is not particularly original, or even that persuasive, and in SF terms that is enough to condemn the book out of hand.

But that is precisely why her role as a visitor is so important, and why her fellow visitors Orwell, Huxley and Doris Lessing are vital to science fiction.

It is a realm of novelty, and since fresh ideas are seen as what sets it apart we demand a constant supply of fresh ideas. If there is nothing new then a book is judged a failure, no matter what other qualities it may possess. The SF trappings, the decoration on the cake, have become the be-all-and-end-all of science fiction.

The novelty, and hence the freedom, of science fiction are obviously what has attracted writers like Angela Carter. Yet, while imparting freshness to their mainstream readership, they are under no obligation to be fresh in science fictional terms, which enables them to make use of the SF elements as they should be used. No longer are the trappings the whole raison d'être of the book; instead, they provide the background against which the story and the characters are seen to best effect.

Thus, in Heroes and Villains, the story is one of a clash of cultures, and it is told more effectively by depopulating the world and making the cultural divisions between the "Professors" and the "Barbarians" more extreme. That is the vital role played by the post-holocaust background, and it serves the novel well. And, with the SF elements eased out of the limelight, we have a chance to appreciate the more traditional skills of the novelist, such as characterisation and control of language which in SF can too easily be relegated to the sidelines by the obsessive search for novelty. And there is much to appreciate here, though I think that no one would go so far as to claim this as Angela Carter's best book. But the writing has a crisp economy, so sure and exact that it serves better than many longer pieces to capture its world. The characters tend by the nature of things to be archetypes, yet with a breath of life about them. And lest I give the impression that this is a dreary little piece of High Art, let me add that it is also vastly enjoyable - there is a vivaciousness, an eroticism and a delight in the bizarre that make it a pleasure to read, entertaining and enthralling.

Heroes and Villains is a book that can alert outsiders to the exhilaration to be found in science fiction, but more importantly, within our own realms, it can consolidate the advances of our trailblazing ideas-men. It may be a surprise to those mesmerised by novelty to turn around and discover the solidly well-written, good and entertaining novels that are following in their wake.

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Clifford D Simak -- PROJECT POPE (Sidgwick & Jackson, 313pp, £7.95)

Reviewed by Eve Harvey

Impending old age is a problem which we all have to face, and most hope it will be a graceful process. Unfortunately, for some the mind begins to degenerate faster than the body and, from reading Project Pope, this would appear to be a problem facing Clifford Simak.

I have not read Simak widely, but it seems to me that two of his favourite themes are religion (or spiritual experiences) and robots. These themes have played roles of varying importance in his work from City through Shakespeare's Planet to Project Pope. Briefly, the plot is as follows. As human society evolved technologically, the degree of sophistication of its robots became such that the question of whether or not they possessed a 'soul' begged answer. The consensus was 'no' and therefore they were forbidden entry into any religion. This caused a group of robots to leave Earth, settle on a Rim planet called End of Nothing, and set up Project Pope, aimed at developing the perfect religion. This was done by using human telepathic 'sensitives' to send their minds ranging through all of time and space gathering information to provide the basis for their religion. The story commences some thousand years after this when Jill

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Roberts (a journalist in quest of a sensational story) and Dr Jason Tennyson (a physician fleeing a sticky political situation on the feudal planet Gutshot) arrive on End of Nothing. The other human protagonist is Decker, whose lifeboat crash-landed on the planet some years before. Of the non-human protagonists, the most important are Whisperer (Decker's insubstantial, telepathic companion), Cardinal Theodosius (one of the robots who originally left Earth) and The Pope -- the computer program (although Simak insists on calling him 'the computer') established to correlate all the information gathered by the sensitives and eventually becoming the infallible leader of the religion.

The quiet anonymity of Vatican-17 (the only township on the planet) is shattered when Mary, the most experienced sensitive, finds Heaven. This raises a dilemma in the robot society -- is she right or wrong? If she's right, what happens to religion, and if wrong, what about the infallibility of the sensitives which is vital to the whole programme? There are several sub-plots running through the story, but the main action revolves around the attempts of Roberts and Tennyson to validate or disprove Mary's discovery.

Simak's ultimate solution has several twists in the tail, but they are very weak and I finished with an overwhelming feeling of disillusionment. There were numerous opportunities to tackle deeper questions in the plot, such as where does machine stop and sentience begin? What does a religion do when Heaven becomes a physical reality? What happens to faith when indisputable truth is available? What would happen to a society of robots left alone for over a thousand years to develop in their own way? But none of these are dealt with to my satisfaction, and Simak's incredibly pedantic style makes the whole act of reading the novel akin to pushing sago pudding uphill. His characterisation is diabolical: with aliens like Flopper, Haystack and the Bubbles one is constantly reminded of Snow White's seven dwarves, Disney-style, which detracts from their validity not only as highly intelligent beings but also as a possible serious threat to society. As for the humans and the robots, they were indistinguishable as they tripped lightly hand-in-hand through the happy-ever-after ending (having solved the problems posed in the plot to their satisfaction...)

The main area of disappointment, both in characterisation and development of major issues raised by the plot, was the robots themselves. Tennyson touches on the interesting subject of what happens to robots after so long on their own and he comes to the very tenable conclusion that they evolve into a separate, distinct race. Unfortunately, he is discussing this with a Cardinal Theodosius who is sitting on a stool, chin in hand, resting his elbow on his knee -- only distinguishable from his human companions in that he can remember a thousand years ago. At the end of the story he even joins in the celebrations by eating and drinking with his human friends! This hardly constitutes a separate identity for the new race. Simak begins to develop another interesting area with a conflict between the 'younger' robots who were manufactured on End of Nothing and those who originally left Earth. This is the traditional generation gap theme, with the younger generation losing the loyalty and love for humans their elders still possess; but Simak leaves the whole topic up in the air -- never having the courage to look deeper into the ramifications of this dichotomy within the society in Vatican-17. Simak's cowardice is evidenced even more strongly when Decker is murdered by a robot. There is much sadness and wringing of hands, both metal and flesh, over why this happened, but no one asks the question 'how?' Surely a major step away from the standard 'Three Laws' should provide endless opportunities -- but not in this novel.

In conclusion, therefore, I am left with a feeling of utter disappointment with the superficiality of this book. Simak was never an author of high literary kudos, but City proved that he was capable of better things. Reading Project

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Pope, however, it is hard to believe. Like many other writers of his generation Simak doesn't appear to know when to stop, so that he could be remembered at his peak. Agents and publishers are unlikely to let him know he's past it since he can still ring the cash tills for them on the strength of his past works -- but that opens a whole new vista for discussion, which would be inappropriate here. Some people say that we will witness the death of the hardback novel in our lifetimes, and unfortunately books like Project Pope can only accelerate that demise.

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Nancy Kress -- THE PRINCE OF MORNING BELLS (Timescape, 224pp, \$2.75)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

The appearance on a book's cover of the words 'in the tradition of' (or variations thereon) generally means that deducing the author's influences will not be a particularly arduous task. The cover of The Prince of Morning Bells cites The Last Unicorn, and the mark of Peter Beagle can be found everywhere. This is itself no bad thing, provided that it is done properly, and the first half of the book is a very good Beagle pastiche indeed, almost indistinguishable from the real thing. Some of the similes are a trifle overdone, but Kress's grasp of the evocative possibilities of colour in description, together with the sense of the absurd with which she imbues her characters and her writing, are precisely right for the style she has chosen.

The story tells of Princess Kirilia, who decides one day to go on a quest for the fabled Heart of the World in order to find a meaning for her life. She acquires a companion, in the form of an enchanted purple labrador, along the way, and has various adventures before settling down to marry a handsome prince who, together with his family, might well have sprung straight from the pages of T H White. The second half of the book describes how Kirilia resumes her quest in middle age, and is immediately darker in mood. Apart from being a sharp poke in the eye for the happy-ever-after school of thought, it forms a sad little elegy for the lost glories of youth. The compensations that maturity offers in return for said glories is a prominent theme of the novel, but the main theme is a somewhat simplistic allegory of the compromises and sacrifice of personal ambitions that a woman makes by accepting her 'traditional role' as a wife and mother. However, it is by no means a feminist tract, but leans rather towards individualism.

Disciplar novels like this always pose problems for me, simply because the author is camouflaged behind the style of another. Kress tells her story with considerable wit and charm, but the novel's themes and direction seem to out-strip it, as if she were writing within a wordage limit or had suffered at the hands of an insensitive editor. This leads me to wonder about the editorial policy of Timescape Books in general, as this is the second fantasy novel I've seen from them in recent months which is blatantly a pastiche. If this is not a coincidence, it is no less reprehensible than the publish-anything policy of Del Rey, which has produced some ghastly books. One good original novel is worth any number of good copies, and fantasy literature will be the eventual loser if new writers are encouraged to waste their time and talents impersonating already established ones.

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C J Cherryh -- THE WELL OF SHIWAN (Magnum, 253pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Ann Collier

One could be forgiven for thinking that this is a heroic quest fantasy. It isn't. The props of magic swords, buried treasure and all-powerful gates be-

tween worlds suggest that a predictable scenario will be offered; instead, the focus of the book, and its interest, lies in the interrelationship of the characters.

Cherryh's lack of commitment to the fantasy elements is evident in the uneven quality with which they are executed. There is a splendidly cinematic destruction of a city by the arrival in the nick of time of the Arch-Destroyer Morgaine wielding the magic sword to save her allies trapped inside. In contrast, the penultimate climax is woefully inadequate; the narrative momentum is geared to the race to reach the Gate that spans worlds. It is a perilous, exhausting, desperate journey for the characters who eventually stagger into the fortress that guards access to the Gate, but nothing has been evoked by it. Cherryh's lack of interest in the magical can be seen in the line "he did not know how to call what he saw and his thoughts would not hold it" (p.229). The character's ignorance is her indifference, and the reader is left with a feeling of anti-climactic blankness about it all. Whilst it is of the essence of magic for there not to be a rational nuts-and-bolts explanation of phenomena, or even a precisely comprehensible description of them, one nonetheless needs to have some image of the phenomena so as not to feel cheated by the author. All Cherryh gives us is a description of disorienting noise and light which brings cheap discotheque equipment forcibly to mind, but which ill serves a purportedly world-shattering climax.

If this book is not a wholly committed fantasy, neither is it a simple novel of character. Motivation is explored in only one of the protagonists, Jhirun, a peasant girl whose boredom with her limited existence and her dreams of a glamorous fulfilled life elsewhere get her caught up with the exploits of more powerful beings in a drama she scarcely comprehends. She carries the total weight of the reader's need to identify with some element of common humanity in the story, and just manages to do so without being a purely reactive presence. But the two characters destined to star in the series of novels are emblematic. Morgaine is the personification of ruthless destruction, accountable to no one, "implacable in her purpose and disinterested in others' desires". Her psychology is as impenetrable as that of any of the Black Queens and wicked witches of legend. Her henchman is Nhi Vanye, and whilst he does have human emotions of gratitude, duty, shame and need for human contact, his absolute devotion to Morgaine is not wholly explicable by its being a punishment for fratricide. And in this element of elusiveness is a richer vein of interest, for both act out of character in obedience to the strong surges of emotion between them, emotion often denied by Morgaine's insistence that she owes nothing to anyone. That this mutual attraction is left undeveloped is due not to Cherryh's lack of literary expertise or to timidity, but to her desire to permit them their heroic estrangement, and the fantasy setting allows this triangle of relationships, where so much is unexplained, to work.

Their race to reach the Gate through a country hostile in its inhabitants, geography and climate is not odd with a uniform narrative pace. There are fits and starts; long passages where the trio plod wearily on, the dreariness of this sodden planet dampening not only the travellers' emotions but also the reader's (and, with this book and Hestia out of her system, Cherryh will perhaps tire of drenched worlds so reminiscent of Manchester). Interspersed with these passages are rapid, eventful set-piece action sequences which temporarily alleviate the novel's generally gloomy atmosphere. But even gloomier than the climate is the sombreness of the relationships, which are all about power and dominance. Characters are isolated from their peers, lacking any natural, comforting contacts, a lack heightened by the all-pervasive feeling of an imminent descent into chaos, the chaos of the disturbance of time and space that takes place in the Gates. There is the feeling of lost glories and of a dying world.

It is a sequel to The Gate of Ivrel and one's response to it is enriched by re-reading the earlier work, but this is not essential since much background detail is recapitulated. The ending of The Well of Shivan strongly suggests that there will be further books in the series. The danger is that these will be just more of the same: adventure fantasies with characters reacting interestingly together in the foreground against a backdrop of non-natural action. It would be more readable if Cherryh could weave together more successfully the events and the characters so that the action helps develop their inter-relationship. The difficulty in that lies in achieving the delicate balance of drawing the characters sufficiently fully to make what happens between them interesting without detracting from their sense of mythic detachment which is essential for the fantasy.

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Mick Farren -- THE SONG OF PHAID THE GAMBLER (New English Library, 537pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

It is not unknown for an SF writer to hanker after being a rock and roll star, migrations the other way are rather more rare. Back when the Age of Aquarius dawned fitfully and the gospel according to Dr Tim was propounded by the Merrie Pranksters, Mick Farren had the John Peel seal of approval as a Pink Fairy/Social Deviant and worked hard at being the embodiment of the public image of a hippy: mad, bad, and dangerous to know. Never renowned for his musical technique or for the originality of his imagination, what he had in plenty was a raw energetic commitment. These qualities he brought to IT and Nasty Tales, and it was my knowledge of this background which caused me to approach The Song of Phaid the Gambler with some trepidation. I did not expect to find those virtues that I look for in a good book, and I was not surprised. The novel is derivative, implausibly plotted, and demonstrates little more than the most rudimentary language... and yet its energy and pace got to me.

Between now and Farren's future, mankind has lived the technological dream. The planet has been tamed, the weather controlled and the stars reached. Every sci-fi speculation has come true, but since the brightest and best took off for the stars humankind has gone soft. Those who were left behind have forgotten how to maintain the machinery, and the Earth has been sliced up by bands of extreme weather conditions passable only by some technological marvels that must have been developed after the Lords left, although Farren does not tell us how this was managed. In actual fact, this degenerate society would be familiar to a man of the 1980s if he had read the right books and seen the right films and can recognise the toys -- droids, blasters, flippers, et al. Like so many of the effects in the films Farren has so obviously studied, the picture looks good from a distance, but closer scrutiny reveals the mundanity of its component parts.

We meet Phaid, the gambling man, in an upriver ruin -- by Somerset Maugham out of National Geographic's notion of Angkor Wat -- where he has sunk as low as he thinks he can get. A first cousin to George MacDonald Fraser's Harry Flashman, in the first twenty pages he wins a card game by cheating and murders the irate locals who want their money back, a day's work he tops off by laying the river-boat woman who takes him on the first leg of his journey back to civilisation. (As might be expected, sex is one area where Phaid does not have to cheat.) Any resemblance between Christianaville, the civilisation he eventually reaches, and Las Vegas is purely intentional.

But a detailed resume of the plot would be futile -- the book is entirely centred upon action, and Farren throws in everything. Phaid makes his way to Christianaville, winning some along the way and losing an equal number. He is

unwillingly involved in a very confused revolution, and is made a hero by both sides -- which endangers Phaid's favourite person, himself. About every tenth page he has a close encounter with death, usually as a consequence of or a prelude to a close encounter of the sexual kind. He winds up broke, busted and a long, long way from home, but alive, which is more than can be said for most of the characters he has met. He has participated in and witnessed events of great moment, and not a single one of them is in the least credible. Coherent dramatic development is absent from this book; events occur and characters appear (and disappear) for no other reason than to move the plot along, to resolve a situation, to save Phaid or transfer him to the scene of the next set-piece. It is this arbitrariness that is the major weakness of the novel -- after his first couple of close shaves not even the most gullible reader could believe that there will not always be some convenient plot device at hand either to rescue him from or to drop him in the shit. Indeed, Phaid himself is nothing more than a plot device, an escapee from the most formulaic of tales, and even within these limits Farren fails to create a consistent character. During a display of dangerous aerobatics, Phaid is offered a wager on the chances of a pilot pulling out of a dive before he hits the ground, but is horrified at the prospect of wagering against the death of a brave man and refuses the bet. Surely a man with Farren's street credibility would know that the only reasons a gambling man has for turning down a bet are not knowing or not liking the odds. As it happens, Phaid could have used either reason, but the deaths of brave men have been the bread-and-butter of bookmakers back to the Colosseum and before.

As I have remarked, The Song of Phaid the Gambler is derivative. Within its fashionable 537 page length, though, it packs a lot of action. What Farren seems to have done is scoured a vast number of other works and 'borrowed' anything he can use, which ensures a constant suspicion of deja vu on the part of the reader. At times this irritates -- for example, the 'villain' is a member of a higher race of men, the tall, pale, ethereal elaihim. Any more blatant a borrowing of Wells's eloi would be hard to imagine, and is made worse by Farren's taking his mark from George Pal's broken-backed film of The Time Machine rather than the original book. A rather more felicitous film reference is found at the very end of the book, when Phaid plays Steve McQueen in a straight rerun of the final sequence of The Cincinnati Kid, a strangely appropriate choice.

This is a massively flawed work, relentless in its portrayal of non-stop action, yet it is this very relentlessness which redeems it. Its vitality is infectious -- it is a crude, but effective, wallow of escapist fun (despite the claims of a blurb that plumbs new depths of inappropriateness). If you want poster paint action without the adolescent preaching that today appears de rigueur in American books, then you will probably enjoy The Song of Phaid the Gambler, but don't be surprised if you groan from time to time. Groans are inevitable.

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John Crowley - LITTLE, BIG (Bantam, 538pp large format, \$8.95)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

A few years ago, someone persuaded me to read a slim volume called The Deep, John Crowley's first novel. It was enjoyable, I thought, but not great. Then came Beasts, which made no impression on me; then Engine Summer, a stunning book and one of the great pleasures of recent science fiction. All promising, but none had prepared me for the achievement of Little, Big. The many fans Crowley has won with his first three novels will need no encouragement to read it, but I think that even they will be surprised to discover how good it is.

Would it be too presumptuous to consider it as a contender for the mythical title, The Great American Novel? It must certainly rank as one of the most pleasurable - it is big, sprawling, slow and magical. It is the sort of book in which you immerse yourself, so that you are no longer aware that you are actually reading words on a page. Yet I can think of no easy way of describing it that will not give a totally false image. It is a fairy story without being in the slightest fey or otherworldly. It has strong overtones of R A Lafferty, yet it is naturalistic in the extreme. It is a family saga without any of the usual cliches. It is a Victorian novel that is absolutely up to date.

Smoky Barnable leaves an unnamed New York to travel to a strange, rambling house in the New England countryside, Edgewood, where he is to marry Dolly Alice Drinkwater. From that starting point, and with Smoky as its focus, the novel ranges backwards and forwards through the twentieth century, tracing the lives of the Drinkwater family.

From the arrival at Edgewood of Alice's great-grandparents, certain members of the family have been aware of the fairy world around them. At the same time, through Tarot-like cards, they have an imperfect knowledge of the future. They feel themselves part of a "Tale" that had its beginnings long before but whose conclusion lies with Alice's children. Though the novel follows other trails, it is the "Tale" that provides its direction. Yet it is not a dramatic tale, unfolding slowly as it does over several generations, and though it reaches a conclusion this could in no sense be called a climax.

It is the very non-dramatic nature of the novel and the ordinariness of the events presented that are the chief joys of Little, Big, for you feel that you are part of a reality. The excursions are fascinating throughout, for even the minor characters are so well drawn that you are caught up in the triumphs and mishaps of their lives. Indeed, these sub-plots provide the main interest during the early part of the book, for the "Tale" itself does not begin to come clear until halfway through, and even then it tends to drift in and out of view as other events capture Crowley's interest. It is delightful to follow the seemingly random twists and turns of the scenic routes through this enchanted landscape and find that somehow they all come back to the main route eventually.

There are many things to admire here. The characterisation is particularly impressive; the settings are equally well handled. With a few deft strokes, Crowley gives us a very effective glimpse of the 1920s, though even better is the slowly decaying near-future New York with its air of something indefinably lost. And Edgewood, where several different styles of architecture have come together to create a building that is really many houses in one, different from every perspective, is one of those unique fictional creations that is destined to linger in the memory.

I must make particular mention of the quality of the writing. Little, Big owes nothing to Hemingway or to the briskly functional prose that is common in SF. Instead, to suit the nature of the novel, Crowley affects a prose style that follows an older tradition, with all the rhythms and cadences of the Victorian novel. The sentences are long and rambling, with a certain old-fashioned formality to them, and the effect is something approaching Art.

But let me not give any false impression of perfection, for I could catalogue a long list of faults. The sentences are sometimes so long and rambling that they lose both themselves and the reader; a little judicious editing would not have come amiss. It would have been better if the theme had been stated earlier, rather than making the reader go through 200 pages before he begins to fathom what the book is about. In the middle section of the book, but lingering into the latter parts, where the nature of the underlying conflict becomes clear,

there is an element of R A Lafferty-like ludicrousness that does not really belong. The ultimate conflict itself, which involves a reborn Frederick Barbarossa and a secret society known as the Noisy Bridge Rod and Gun Club, comes straight from something by Lafferty, and to me they detract from the novel. And throughout the book, Crowley's oblique approach means that it is often not clear exactly what has happened; in the main, this doesn't bother me, but I find it irksome when it occurs at the book's climax.

In the end, though, a book cannot be judged by a catalogue of its qualities and weaknesses. It is the overall effect, the final reaction of the reader, that counts, and as far as I was concerned it had a powerful effect. I was tremendously impressed by Crowley's technical proficiency, while at the same time simply enjoying the experience of reading the book.

For me, 1981 has been a memorable year for SF, especially for the new books from Holdstock, Priest and, above all, Wolfe. Crowley has moved effortlessly past them all to take pride of place. Little, Big was one of the greatest reading pleasures that I have had for some time, and I can only recommend it to you most heartily.

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Fred Hoyle and N C Wickramasinghe - DISEASES FROM SPACE (Sphere, 241pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

I read this book shortly after recovering from my October cold. I always catch cold in October, and so does nearly everyone else in the university where I work. In my naive fashion, I had always assumed that the explanation for this phenomenon was that the population of the university scatters during the summer vacation to distant corners of the globe, and that some individuals returning for the new term import germs which have not previously run riot within the institution, and which take full advantage of their opportunity. (Universities are Utopia for germs - people spend so much time crowded together in small rooms, and most eat communally.) Hoyle and Wickramasinghe, however, would disagree entirely with this interpretation. According to them, you can't catch colds from other people: you have to be infected by virions drifting into the atmosphere from outer space. The reason lots of people catch colds in more-or-less the same place at more-or-less the same time has nothing to do with contagion and everything to do with the Earth's orbit intersecting the debris of comets' tails. Obviously, there is cometary debris hanging about in the Earth's orbit in just such a position that the Reading University campus gets it in the neck (or, more accurately, up the nose) every October. Indeed, the authors argue that the only reason human beings have such funny noses is because natural selection has favoured those of us least liable to have raindrops score a direct hit upon the nostrils. (I am not entirely certain that this argument fits in with all the other things they believe, because they have some pretty harsh things to say about the theory of natural selection in other contexts: they don't believe life evolved on Earth, for one thing, and for another, they think all the important evolutionary changes in the prehistoric past happened because chromosomes tend to pick up and adopt stray bits of DNA which fall from outer space and which then become new genes.)

If this seems rather mind-boggling (yea, even unto the point of absurdity) then Diseases from Space will reassure you with lots of evidence about the spread of influenza among schoolchildren which supposedly shows up the absurdity of believing that schoolchildren catch influenza from one another. All of this evidence is negative in the sense that it presents anomalies in the conventional account of how diseases spread, but the authors clearly feel that it is enough: after all, if people don't catch flu from each other, where can it come from except

outer space? The main problem with their use of this evidence, it seems to me (as a humble skeptic), is that it overstates the ambitions of conventional theory in order to make it seem wanting. Epidemiology is tricky largely because people differ from one another in their response to diseases with which they come into contact. Symptoms vary in kind and intensity, especially with colds. We find it difficult to explain why some people exposed to some colds don't catch them, or why some fortunate swines get away scot free when the rest of us are suffering the agonies of flu. Because people differ in their reaction it is extremely difficult to track patterns of transmission. Should we really be prepared, though, to cast the whole model out of the window in favour of a rival theory which also cannot explain why some people catch colds and some don't save by hypothesizing that some just happened to be zapped by the particles from outer space and some didn't? There is lots of evidence that at least some cases of some diseases are very definitely caught through contact with sick people; there is no evidence at all that any disease is caught as a result of inhaling viruses from comets' tails.

Occam's razor rules, OK?

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Edward Bryant - PARTICLE THEORY (Timescape, 252pp, \$2.95)

Reviewed by Roz Kaveney

The short fictions of Edward Bryant have all the merit and dignity that intelligence, will and hard work can put into them. You look at them and you see the small wheels turning the smaller ones and you think that if you were smart and hardworking it would be possible to see exactly which tooth moves which, which gear had to be fitted to which rod in what order. They are the stories of a craftsman determined to evoke this mood here and arouse that emotion there, and they work, precisely. Bryant is a determined achiever who most of the time scores his points - but there is never any magic, never any sense that he has taken a risk and got away with it. You look at the stories with their recurrent powerful symbols, credible sensitive characters and tight, neat structures, and after a while you move on because what you can see does its job all right; it is what there is to see and that is all. But, actually, these stories do range from the solid and meritorious to the pretty damn good, so you can relax and go out and buy them.

But perhaps Bryant might have relaxed a little as well, because for all his purity - one of SF's slick ascetics, he lived lean for eleven years, avoiding almost anything that might compromise his commitment to art - there is something quite vulgar about his writing. He makes stong, muscular use of standard genre symbols, symbols so standard that they are by way of being the genre's contribution to the common cultural stock. Far more importantly, his tight, crisp prose always goes a little Hollywood when it becomes time to clearly express strong emotion: "I recoiled internally. 'I've survived. That's enough.' 'No way. You've been sitting around for eleven years in suspended animation, waiting for someone to chip you free of the glacier. You've let people carome past, occasionally bouncing off you with no effect." And of all the lousy gin joints in all the towns in all the world she has to walk into mine. Play it, Sam.... The way Bryant writes his big scenes does have that effect, I'm afraid. And what makes it worse is that you feel the descent to workmanlike cliché is a solid decision based on his audience, the weighting of the story, his talent, his deadline and the windspeed - and except in the most abstract and absolute of terms probably the right decision at that....

The appearance in this collection of stories which appeared in Bryant's two earlier ones - "Shark" is in Among the Dead and "Raves and the Heterogyne" is in

Cinnabar - shifts one's perceptions of them and clarifies one's perception of the sort of writer Bryant is. Among the Dead was dominated by anguished radical populist protest against the standard early seventies targets (pollution, Nixon, the CIA, and so on); read in that company, "Shark" was as much a story of a man who says 'non serviam' to a vicious and vivisectioning state but will die for the virtuous peasants who have given him a home. Read with these more personal stories, the political aspect of the story becomes entirely secondary to the story of a man who has accepted that the woman he loves is keen to go off and become a shark - 'The woman you love, you must not possess' - and now accepts that it is his duty to the fisherfolk to die killing her. That always was the subject of the story, and I wish that Bryant had cut the Bondian melodrama of the incestuous blonde assassins from the World State and let the tale of love and death speak for itself. The whole point of genre vocabulary is that once it has been established, a couple of brush strokes will suffice to fill in a background of, say, post-atomic catastrophe if background is all it is. "Shark" is nonetheless a fine and moving piece, a tragic love story whose extremity could only really be possible within the traditions made available by the genre.

I have always thought - and many disagree with me - that Bryant's attempts to extend his range and imitate the gentle, amusing, decadently erotic mythopoeia of Ballard's Vermilion Sands something of a mistake. Cinnabar, the city at the centre of time, lacks the charm of Ballard's resort and the bawdy, witty, outrageousness of Moorcock's "End of Time"; Bryant makes a gallant effort but the truth is that he is not a barrel of laughs and this sort of story is one not possible to the somewhat earnest. Even when he is portraying the admirable side of his self-centred irresponsible hedonists, his lip is curling with an involuntary Puritan dislike; some of the most effective stories in Cinnabar are those which show the underside of this quasi-utopia and go on about the civil rights of androids or the importance of Real Personal Commitment in relationships. "Hayes and the Heterogyne", on the other hand, is affirmative about sexual equality and the extent to which techno-biological developments will make it practicable. Bryant's heart and head are in the right place, but there is something a little chilly about his celebration, a bit like jumping cheerfully out of bed and doing press-ups. What does work, and what is more immediately the subject of the story, is its portrayal though Harry Blake, carried to Cinnabar by a run-away time machine, of the awfulness of being a 16-year-old male virgin in Denver in 1963 and how being carried off to the future (i.e., by reading SF) can solve part of the problem. But the archetypes who help Harry patch up his psyche - the Marilyn Monroe sister-whore figure and a big brother mad scientist - would be more effective were they not the Tourmalin and Obregon we know from other Cinnabar stories and had we not because of knowing them definite preconceptions of what they are like. Series can concentrate a writer's mind, but they can also limit his preparedness to develop ideas and people once they have become a fixed part of it.

Of the new stories, some are accomplished, bright and minor. "Strata" brings together four school friends years later in an attempt to check whether strange events which threaten an environmentally damaging mineral resources scheme are proof that the land resents its rape: it does. The phantasmagoric visions of prehistory are effective and the journey down a canyon signposted with the geological levels it cuts is an apt symbol of the rediscovery by disappointed adults of adolescent hopes; but the story is prevented from reaching real quality by the dictates of the market, by the final descent into unnecessary cheap theatrics. Bryant has here forgotten the lesson of Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" that once in a long while the spirit of SF can be propitiated by merely making explicit the parallels between the mythic and emotional aspects of a personal situation and a scientific concept; the big Cretaceous seabest which breaks the exploitative geologist's neck is not powerful enough a symbol in itself to make up for this failure of nerve. "Precession" is a competently

done piece about a man adrift in his personal timeline; it lacks overwhelming point save as a subject on which Bryant can lavish his sense of doom and loss and as a display of technical skill. As such, it is efficient, though the virtuosity is obscured by the rather tiresome trick of having the hero's companion's name shift around the permutations of Elspeth, Beth, Liz, etc.. "Teeth Marks" is a ghost story about the way people are scarred by their parents; "To See" a prose poem about the scale of the cosmos; "Winslow Crater" a twee though scientifically accurate poem concrete; "The Thermals of August" solidly and conventionally shows two hand-gliders resolving their internal and amatory conflicts by a deadly game of chicken. Bryant's good stories have the air of being semi-generic reworkings of tales which might have worked without the trimmings; "The Thermals of August" is pushed into genre by Bryant's wish to raise the emotional temperature to extremes and keep actual death vaguely ornamental in a way that is possible with fliers and not with, say, motorcyclists.

Exploration of extremes can include what in other contexts would be called bad taste: in "The Hibakusha Gallery" Bryant comments interestingly on the exploitation called confessional art and for which he has from time to time gone in. The eponymous gallery is a rather unpleasant cultural response to some vast unatated nuclear accident - people go to it to have their own faces superimposed on photographs of the victims of the catastrophe. The man who runs it survived the accident with a whole skin; his lover died quickly; one of her earlier lovers is dying slowly and comes to tell him off. The narrator reacts with what may be real shame or simply an obeisance to what he knows he ought to feel but does not. Bryant is talking about the impossibility of reacting adequately to the unthinkable; his clinical, crisp prose slips into terse clichés at moments of tension but here this seems an accurate description of human behaviour rather than a slick refusal to risk incompetence.

"Stone" has always left me cold ever since its first appearance in *F & SF*, partly I suppose because I have never been all that interested in the cult of Janis Joplin and am accordingly cynical about the concept of a great blues rock singer who decides to fry herself with the worship of her fans. Significantly, the other good Janis Joplin *SF* story - Michael Swanwick's "Eve of St. Janis" - turns out to be about something else entirely once it has got its mileage out of the cult and the pain.... Still, given that the emotions "Stone" describes are backstage star-making retinue-suffer clichés and that in the real world a proportion of theatricals really do act theatrically, this story has nothing clearly wrong with it, makes all the right gestures, and clearly moves a lot of people.

And then there is "Particle Theory" itself and "giANTS", which along with "Shark" make this story collection more or less essential as opposed to one which doesn't insult you but of which you might get tired. In his article on the sci-distant "Labor Day Group", Tom Disch categorised "giANTS" as a dumb story built around a cliché that everyone knows, viz: that giant ants would drop dead and that induced gigantism would be one way of stopping a plague of ants. Had this been the point of the story, his rebuke would have some force, but as Orson Scott Card (credit where it's due) pointed out, the display of virtuosity implicit in writing such a story is here part of the objective correlative of vast threats surmounted by human intelligence in the literal details of the plot - which is in turn, in the area of the story's real subject, a way of symbolising and intensifying the way the old scientist and the young ace reporter work through professional roles to intimate rapport across the barrier of the scars of the past and a habit of privacy. Sometimes the majority is right and the intelligent and sensitive are wrong; "giANTS" is a vulgar story in its way, but it is also an effective and moving one.

In it, "Sharks" and "Particle Theory", Bryant shows people overcoming grief and pain instead of being swamped by it; but he has to work harder to make affirma-

tive noises about life and I suspect that this is why these stories are better than the tales of defeat. Bryant's victories are always Pyrrhic - in "Particle Theory", there are literally obscure but emotionally convincing links between the radiation therapy which has cured the hero's prostate cancer and the epidemic of supernovae that seems about to fry the human race, but there is no sense that his doctor is responsible for mass death, only that she made a valid decision on the side of life. When Bryant's hero says amid the microsecond of burning "At least I have lived as long as I have now by choice", he may be uttering a cliché but at least it is the right sort of cliché. Bryant is a symbol of what the right attitude to the art of SF can achieve - his work does not have everything, but it has enough.

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Michael Moorcock - THE WAR HOUND AND THE WORLD'S PAIN (Timescape, 239pp, \$12.95)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

Graf Ulrich von Bek, mercenary captain in the Thirty Years War, owes his soul to Satan; but Satan will relinquish it if von Bek undertakes a quest for him - to seek out the Cure for the World's Pain, and thus establish as genuine Lucifer's wish to be reconciled with God. This is the intriguing premise of The War Hound and the World's Pain.

Von Bek himself is the kriehhund of the title: the Cure for the World's Pain is known by various names, notably in the Celtic and Arthurian legends. There are many literary (and other) myths strewn throughout this book, often stood on their heads - the spectacle of that most impure knight, von Bek, setting out on a black Grail-quest, leaving his dubious lady behind him in Satan's castle, has a certain attractive irony.

The first section is leisurely: von Bek's laconic description of his career amid the bloody lunacy of the Thirty Years War; the castle 'where no birds sing'; the descent into Hell... 'Pity Lucifer', says the book, striking an immediate chord with all those readers who ever had a sneaking sympathy for the Fallen Angel. Metaphysically, it's interesting: Satan, having no communication with God, begins to doubt Hell's purpose. "What if I am supposed to show mercy?" he asks rather pathetically, while playing Virgil to von Bek's Dante.

Moorcock puts forward convincing reasons for supporting the Devil, and off goes von Bek on his quest. As is compulsory, he acquires enemies - Klosterheim, a religious fanatic - and his own Sancho Panza, a Cossack youth called Sedenko. The quest meanders across a burned and desolate Europe, and through Mittelmarch, an opposite and enchanted realm, demon and wonder-haunted, but equally dark and bloody. Paradisaical valleys, hermits, magicians, and the rest of the Grail paraphernalia duly make their appearance, before von Bek is trapped at the edge of the world by the hordes of darkness. Not that Prince Lucifer has gone back on his bargain, simply that some of the lesser demon lords don't take kindly to being redeemed in their absence, as it were, and losing their power. 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven', said Milton, rather more concisely.

Where the book falls down badly is in having a first-person narrator. Von Bek tells his own story; therefore the reader assumes he's survived it. As a character the mercenary-with-a-noble-heart is a pretty good bet in fantasy fiction, but difficult to bring off in the first person. The semi-archaic language is awkward rather than realistic. Ulrich von Bek, being Everyman, needs to be seen from the outside. The interior view raises questions of reliability: people, after all, have been known to lie to themselves; omniscient authors are presumed to tell the truth - at least about their characters. Von Bek just doesn't sound convincing as a seventeenth-century nobleman, and his attitudes -

## Book Reviews

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powerful religious and emotional experiences - are difficult to put across without his being either stilted, embarrassing, or ineffective.

However, there are some remarkably pragmatic and attractive demons and supernatural creatures here. Outright evil, in fact, is solely the province of human beings. Moorcock brings this to its logical conclusion in the Forest at the Edge of Heaven. The ending is helped along by a deus ex machina (but, to be fair, one that was planted in the text at an earlier point); and while it isn't the end to most Grail quests, it's a right ending, and well handled. 'The marvellous is of necessity a lie,' says von Bek (which is heresy in the fantasy genre, if nowhere else), preferring 'justice and sanity'. The marvellous is not necessarily a lie, says Moorcock, using fantasy to prove some very human conclusions.

Chalk isn't cheese, and the reviewer therefore shouldn't carp if The War Hound and the World's Pain isn't Gloriana. Nevertheless the impression remains that, inside the melodramatic genre trappings of fantasy and the remnants of the Elric/Corum/Hawkmoon multiverse, there is a thoughtful, amusing, and intelligent novel struggling to get out.

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PARALLEL LINES: THE SCIENCE FICTION ILLUSTRATIONS OF PETER ELSON AND CHRIS MOORE (Dragon's Dream, 95pp, £4.95)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Books of SF art pour forth in profusion these days; here's another, purporting to showcase the work of the eponymous artists but proving of little use to anyone seriously interested in it. The pictures are presented one after the other, jumbled up together in any old order (presumably to allow the reader to draw comparisons between the two artists but, beyond the fact that they both produce covers for SF paperbacks, are they really so alike that they can be so easily and so witlessly lumped together?), with the credits for each coming later: first a page listing which of them painted what cover, and then (in a stroke of genius that borders closely on the lunatic) several pages of small black-and-white reproductions of the paintings with (at last) their titles (some incorrect -- have you ever heard of A E Van Voight?). And what on Earth is there to be gleaned from that? Nowhere in the book is there the slightest shred of biographical information about the artists, their techniques, their interests, life-styles and ambitions; instead, such text as we do get is confined to a perfectly inane (and often ungrammatical) preface by Roger Dean, who says nothing of any consequence (but says it at mercifully brief length), and an almost incomprehensible introduction by one Pat Vincent, who seems to have lifted his style from Buckminster Fuller: if you rush along at top speed and at least give the impression that you're saying something profound, no one will notice that you're not making any sense. Like this, for instance: "As well as being vehicles, transmitters and armaments, spaceships are also floating architecture, home and protection for man against alien or hostile environment (sic). Such architecture reflects the way in which man senses himself in opposition to the undefined, the unpredictable, the 'uncivilised'. It reflects his imaginative measurement of self and his aspirations as much as did the ancient necropolis, temple and palace. This is architecture that seeks not only to emulate the lost cities of God but also the divine artifice that shaped all the creatures of the world and engineered the diversity and ingenuities of nature." (p.11) Yes indeed: the spacemen of the future will be as the priests of old, bringing enlightenment to the savages and the heathen. Erich von Daniken would probably love it; but it is in truth a pretty shoddy compilation, and one to be avoided.

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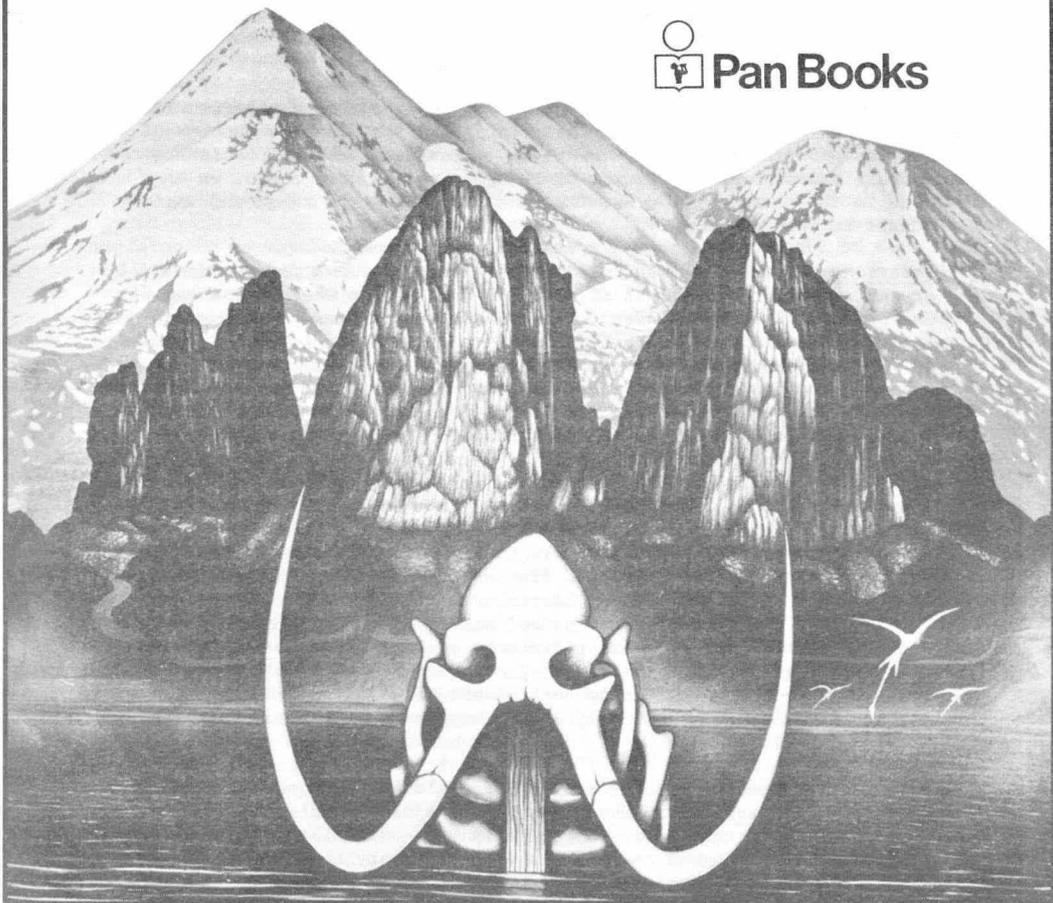
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Science Fiction Review

 Pan Books





Simon G Goeden  
25 Avondale Road  
Rayleigh

Congratulations to Paul Kincaid on a penetrating expose of the mercantile policies of the publishing houses. The editorial was a scathing indictment of their blatant and often unsuccessful quest for the greatest profits and it's about time more opposition to this was mooted. There can't be many areas of the financial world where the vendor doesn't sell what the consumer wants, and indeed wastes large amounts of revenue on advertising trying to persuade the purchaser to buy the unwanted products.

I do think, though, that to expect publishers to calmly change their business structure, in the present economic climate, is a little naive. I would hope that the BSFA will stand as a strong lobbying group and demand change rather than wait for it to occur.

Interzone is a step in the right direction and will provide a platform for promising young writers to display their talents. The ultimate success of the venture, presupposing this happy event, may persuade hidebound publishers to desert their narrow-minded policies of the present and once again, as they have done in the past, provide us, the consumers, with the range and variety of products we deserve.

|| *Interzone is indeed a step in the right direction, but its success will depend entirely on how well it sells — that is, on whether you buy it. One very good way of influencing the decisions of business organisations is with money. Spend it on Interzone rather than the large rubbish put out by publishers. Be discriminating in your choice of SF. It's very unlikely that you can afford all that is published, and impossible that you can keep up with reading it all, so it makes sense to choose the good stuff. (Just remember to save the 16 for your BSFA membership...)*

*A number of people agreed with Paul Kincaid -- and more to the point, no one disagreed.*

Keith A Mackie  
87 Comely Bank Avenue  
Edinburgh

I wholeheartedly agree with what Paul Kincaid said in his editorial 'The Death of Science Fiction'. The very survival of literature itself, never mind science fiction, is being endangered by the profit-mad moguls of the paperback industry. Brainless mediocrity such as The Number of the Beast, Ringworld Engineers, etc, is being mass-produced and advertised by self-centred 'entrepreneurs' who know absolutely nothing about the genre we all love. Quality is being substituted by quantity. It's happening with the mainstream fiction market as well.

This is a serious matter. Soon the SF genre could be wiped out, replaced by endless sequels to Dune, Titan and Ringworld: series of series, ad nauseam. We have the future to think of. Do we really want our children and our children's children to be reduced to gibbering imbecility by the endless stream of mass-produced bile emanating from TV sets with 30,000 channels, and paperback

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novels published at the rate of six a week containing such wonders as the ten thousandth episode of the Areides saga? The death of literature and good taste is facing us.

Fortunately, I have an idea. Interzone is a good start. We need to get away from the financial greed of big business and set up our own readers' and writers' publishing co-operatives. That way we can print anything we damn well like and circulate it to a readership of what is only going to be tens of thousands, instead of the millions which the big publishing companies have to cater for. That way we can keep SF going, good SF, that is, through the days of Dallas-type cretinism.

One last word. I liked the way John Hobsen cut Poul Anderson down to size. About time, too. All those glib, 'libertarian' writers have to be told that what they're advocating is the law of the jungle. Still, perhaps they know already, and are just fascists at heart. (Still, they'll be the first against the wall when the revolution...)

44 *Funny you finish with John Hobsen, Keith, since he wrote a Standpoint piece entitled 'Punk SF' (Vector 101, April 1981) expounding the idea of independent publishing. Perhaps you two should get together on this. A word of warning, though: don't expect sales of 'tens of thousands'. That's what publishers aim for with ordinary (as opposed to 'bestseller') SF paperbacks. Interzone is, I believe, aiming at around three thousand.*

John Brunner  
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Reading Vector 105 left me with a sense of depression that I feel I need to exorcise before I can get on with the story I'm currently tackling -- as much, I think, to clarify my own reasons for doing what I'm doing (a hard task, since generally speaking I do what I do because 'it seems like a good idea at the time' and only the passage of time

explains to me why that was so), as because a few of the contents of this issue are infinitely depressing.

Chris Priest and Lisa Tuttle called on us recently, so I had heard about the trouble he's having in placing The Affirmation; Ian and Judy Watson are due to stay with us at Xmas and in between arranging the dates on the phone we also heard about the difficulties he's having in getting his work properly published and distributed. But let it not be thought that they're alone. Elsewhere in this mailing someone referred to me as a 'father figure' -- good grief! How does he know how much I look like my father now? -- but Players at the Game of People, which won me a 'Porgie' award last year from the West Coast Review of Books, has yet to find a British publisher, and about the only works of mine currently to be found on sale in Britain are either rehashed versions of early works, like the appalling two-in-one paperback of Web of Everywhere and Out of my Mind which the blurb writer called "a MIRV of a read" -- an insult to someone who has worked so hard against nuclear weapons! -- or else being remaindered in spite of contractual obligations that any such remainders be offered first to the author. I am still smarting from an encounter with a huckster at a recent con who boasted that he was going to make £300 out of selling a batch of NEL paperbacks which contractually should have been offered to me first. People come up to me constantly at conventions asking why they can't get hold of a copy of such-and-such a major novel, one of those on which my reputation as a serious writer must rest, and I simply can't tell them. I do not understand the workings of a publisher's collective mind. Just yesterday I had a very apologetic editor (publishing-house type) on the blower saying that the administrative side of her firm had dumped large numbers of SF and other paperbacks, and she was being inundated with letters from angry authors like myself. What can one do? One can't afford the time to sue, let alone the money...

Speaking as one who has generally operated outside the so-called mainstream of contemporary fiction, who reads less and less fiction (though far more non-fiction) as time goes by, who cares relatively little for the critical fads and academic biases which seem to shift almost as quickly as the weather, and yet would hope to continue ploughing a personal furrow across the landscape of literature -- now there's a spark of fine writing for you! -- I am as much depressed by the constant sense of disappointment I find in Vector this time as by the commercial problems faced by many superb writers like Priest and Watson. Let me amplify and give examples.

It starts with regret at the blockbuster phenomenon and its inevitable consequence, that good and often better work is then neglected owing to lack of funds. It continues with the 'reassessment' of Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang; I haven't read it, though in the normal course of events I do eventually get around to the major award winners in order to keep in touch, but if half of Jim England's strictures are accurate, then I can be damned sure it would leave me with the same sense of being let down that many similar books have evoked recently. This is not a fault confined to SF; I have read too many novels in the general field which offered a superficial gloss of quality, carefully-textured writing, splendid 'set-pieces', clever portraits of minor characters, and so on, yet ultimately proved to leave nothing behind save a sense of hollowness, like fairy-fruit. And often these, too, were books that had been greeted with critical adulation and considerable sales.

And beyond that my depression is fuelled by a reminder that the barrier between the SF readership and the readership of 'establishment' authors who use SF themes and imagery is not, as I long hoped, being eroded, but actually being rebuilt. It gladdens my heart when, as nowadays often happens, someone at an SF con pillories examples of E E Smith's appalling prose (I remember reading my first Smith when I was an impressionable teenager at a time when SF was almost impossible to come by, and wondering what could be wrong with me because I thought this Grand Master's work was so lousy!)... but there seem to be an awful lot of people who, not content with asserting what is after all true, that in the SF field proper there are some excellent craftsmen, largely superior to their opposite numbers in other branches of genre fiction, are blinkering themselves to the way in which the previous epochs of SF have influenced, even occasionally directed, trends elsewhere in fiction, rather as though they would prefer the future, worlds of fantasy and magic, and the rest, to remain private property. Remain? Become, I should say. It never was and never can be.

David V Barrett.  
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Harrogate  
N Yorks

Paul Kincaid's article I agree with very much; a copy of it should be sent to the SF editors of all our major paperback publishers, with an invitation for a reply. Even if none of them responds at least they'll know how we feel. Another reason for the emphasis on blockbusters is that it's a hell of a lot cheaper to print and distribute one 400 page book than two 200 page books. I don't know the figures, but I'd also imagine that one book at £1.95 brings in more profit than two at £1.45. And I've noticed that the likelihood of a book being awarded a Huge & Nebulous seems to be in direct proportion to its thickness.

The dig at the 'faceless stock-controllers' of W H Smith and Bookwise was not entirely justified, however. On the whole they distribute books (yes, of their choosing) only to sweetshops with a book rack, or to the very small branches of, e.g., WHS -- the 'community shops' -- that are too small to have a book manager. In the larger branches far more depends on the whim of the book manager or paperback orderer. My ex-wife completely restocked and revitalised the SF shelves of two shops (including a WHS) where she was i/c books or paperbacks

(I was unpaid adviser). And at one successful interview she was not asked how good a salesgirl she was, but simply, "Do you love books?" This attitude may not be universal, but it does exist; the shame is that it appears now to be rare in publishing houses.

A quick comment on Jim England's Reassessment of Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang: it stank. You could do exactly the same thing to any book, quoting bits out of context and wandering sarcastically through the story. To quote England on his own review: "in short, the whole thing is odious." A sheer bad review.

A brickbat and a bouquet. Vector is not the place for political statements; I refer to John Brunner's 'Open Letter'. If Brunner wanted to make an appeal to all BSFA members, he should have had it printed on a separate sheet, to be distributed with the mailing. And printing it in both Vector and Matrix is totally needless, as all recipients of the latter also get the former. But there are too many non-SF items in both publications: unemployment, disarmament and feminism spring to mind. There have been other subjects. These are only relevant to the BSFA in the context of SF -- and here I present the bouquet. Stefan Lewicki's 'Work in Progress' was an interesting article, and an excellent example of how it should be done.

In reply to Jeremy Crampton's 'confusion' over 'fans who believe in FIMWOL' and the BSFA (Letters, Vector 105) you say, "The two are by no means synonymous and quite a number of fans see the BSFA as irrelevant." Might I venture to suggest that quite a number of members of the BSFA may see fandom as irrelevant; several years of reading Matrix is leading me to that conclusion.

14 *The publication of John Brunner's 'Open Letter' twice was a result of a failure of communication between Graham James and myself -- probably my fault since it was indeed more outside the scope of Vector than of Matrix. However, I wanted to print it.*

*At the risk of getting into Matrix territory again, let me amplify my remark about fandom. SF fandom and conventions would keep going if the BSFA fell apart tomorrow, and in that sense the BSFA is irrelevant to fandom. I happen to think that the BSFA does still fulfill its original purpose of introducing people to fandom, or, to put it another way, fans to each other. (I often wonder if people ever use the addresses I print with each letter in Vector to start private correspondences or arguments. That's what they are there for.) On the other hand, if fans were made to choose between fandom and the BSFA, there would be nothing much left of the committee and the editorial and production staff. It's a good job we can, and want to, do both. (Some of us, anyway. We are still looking for a Vector editor. The next issue is waiting for one.)*

Allan Lloyd      I enjoyed Vector 105 very much, but one or two of your critics' Quabb Cottage      remarks had me reaching for my pen.

Eardisley

Hereford

HR3 6LP

"Almost no Dick novel so far has been fully successful."

"...how little development in Delany's style there has been over the past fifteen years."

"Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang...pure Mickey Mouse, as phoney as a plastic lemon"

For the first quote -- if no Dick novel has been fully successful then I know of no SF novel that has been. Now that Dick has finally achieved the popularity that he so richly deserves, do we have to start knocking him, especially in such a dismissive tone as used by David Penn. I do not claim to understand

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all of Dick's works, but there are at least six novels that I go back to and read again and again, and get more from them each time. I am not saying that Dick is perfect, but why not have the courage to say that his major novels are supreme examples of thought-provoking metaphysical fiction?

The Delany quote must strike anyone familiar with his work as arrant nonsense. Can the style of Dhalgren be compared to that of The Einstein Intersection? Is Tales of Neveryon in any stylistic way similar to Mova? It would be difficult to find a writer more concerned with the power and effect of words (I would go as far as saying obsessed) and this has shown a constant improvement in his work throughout his career. Delany's novels are not all completely satisfying, but he aims so high that he can surely be forgiven for not achieving all his goals. Again, do we have to knock him just because he is an establishment figure? There is so much rubbish about that we should surely be grateful for so much ambition and intelligence. Why not show enthusiasm once or twice?

As for England's reassessment of Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang, I find it hard to know where to start. Kate Wilhelm's style and characterisation, her sheer story-telling ability gave me so much enjoyment that I suspect that Jim England must have bought a Vonda McIntyre book wrapped in a Kate Wilhelm cover. Amazing how one book can affect two people so differently. This does make me somewhat cynical about your own attempts at a critical standard.

I like the idea of your Reassessments but once again it does open up the door on even more knocking just for the sake of it. It is so much easier to knock than to praise, and possibly your Reassessments are encouraging just such a practice. All the people who are writing these articles joined the BSFA because they enjoy SF, so why not encourage features about novels that have given pleasure. It is so much more interesting to discover hidden masterpieces than to read of yet another book that it is not worth reading.

## *I agree that it is better to find good novels and tell the world about them than to be continually denigrating each and every book that comes along. I prefer to publish favourable reviews, not least because it means that there are some good novels being published, but also because it is positively directing people to books they might well enjoy reading — and I can't actually think of a better reason for the existence of a book review column. BUT — (It is a big 'but', which is why I put it in capitals...) BUT, science fiction is a big field, and contains some very different works. No one is going to like them all, no one can. And I am not going to ask any reviewer (or rather, Joseph Nicholas is not going to ask any reviewer) (are you, Joe?) to write any kind of review contrary to the reviewer's beliefs. In the instances quoted, you happen to disagree, Allan. Fine! And you have said so publicly. Even better! We have a debate.*

Simon Boetock  
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DE7 4BW

One of my biggest criticisms of Vector is the large amount of book reviews included. Surely such an item belongs in Paperback Inferno. A few wouldn't hurt, as you also have outside (of the BSFA) purchasers and they may never have seen PI, but half an issue seriously depresses the magazine. Which may be the reason you're getting a hell of a lot fewer letters than you expect, book reviews are hardly stimulating enough to merit immediate response. An interview, maybe, but not book reviews. Never. Or at least not when there are more important matters to be discussed.

Machinery is brill, Kev, good spacefiller (and I don't mean that as an insult).

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One thing though: it seems to have absorbed the quotes, which were a major part of Vector for me. I'd be willing to find quotes if you resuscitate them, eh?

## Please do, Simon. I left the quotes out last time for two reasons: one, to see if anyone noticed, and two, I didn't have any. Several people did notice, two of them while they were collating Vector at the mailing session. Personally, I like to have them in (although as I type this page I do not have any to hand, and may have to do some hunting around; fortunately, I recently removed a couple of dozen bad books from my shelves and put them all together in a cardboard box, which is quietly festering in a corner, so the hunting shouldn't be too difficult. Did I succeed? Only time will tell...)

As for too many reviews, well, I sometimes think this to myself, but then Joe gives me another batch to be used up, and the feature article file looks a little desolate (not so desolate since Paul Kincaid began doing his stuff, I hasten to add) -- so in they go. Actually, though, some of those reviews are little essays all by themselves, and several reviewers tend to make generalised comments as well as ones specific to the book under review. The next editor (ahem!) might well agree with you, however, and all could change.

Mark Greenier  
2 White Hart Close  
Buntingford  
Herts

Radio is, I believe, a dying medium. 90% of people hate thinking, they prefer to stare at a box. Radios 1 and 2 work, as they play 'background music'. Television plays work, as all the information is layed out in front of the audience. Radio drama, on the other hand, you have to sit and listen to; the pictures are inside your head. It is an effort to sit and think, so radio drama does not work -- on a popular level. Radio has a great advantage in that you can make, visually, what you want of the scenarios presented. For example, my visual interpretation of Hitchhiker's Guide... was totally different from the way it turned out on the telly.

## And I bet yours was much better, too; I know mine was. As another example I can quote the Goon Show. There were scenes in that which could only be visualised in the mind. I doubt if all the special effects in the world could recreate some of Milligan's flights of fancy -- and if they could, in all probability they'd ruin the joke along the way. The ludicrous and the outrageous cost much less on radio, too. A sudden thought: if Blake's Seven were on radio you'd never know that the spaceships were made of wobbly cardboard -- in fact, they wouldn't be!

Dorothy Davies  
3 Cadels Row  
Faringdon  
Oxon.

I wish Stefan Lewicki luck with his research into Feminism and SF. I don't, however, envy him the task. I just thought it rather nice to know someone is getting pleasure out of reading the stuff!

I read a copy of Crystal Crone all the way through. I tried to convince myself that the lesbianism and the fact that most of the writers completely ignored the male sex, or mentioned them so casually in passing they might well have been hamsters, were relevant to the plot. In the end I came to the conclusion that it all had as much to do with the plot as Anna's Shakin' Stevens posters have to do with my work. I decided, after careful thought, that it was shoved in, in a manner of speaking, to make up for the lack of plot.

I sent Crystal Crone one of my stories. It was a small cameo piece, a woman waiting for her man, who had gone far far away. It worked through her emotions from rage through despair to joy, you know the sort of thing. They kept it for six months, until I wrote and asked for it back. I don't think they knew what

to do with it. The letter which accompanied it made it clear they were confused, and couldn't understand why, after my comments, I wanted to appear in the book anyway. My intention was to try and establish some balance to the overwhelming female bias. But as with all my good intentions --

I am a wife and a mother, by choice. I am a woman by accident of a few genes a long time ago. I am a writer by compulsion. None of these things has very much to do with the others; i.e., because I am a woman it is not incumbent upon me to write as a woman, surely. I can just as easily write as a man. What I am aiming for is a complete neuter state, when the writing is more important than what I am, and therefore should come across relatively sexless, without being flat and dead. Several people now have given me the compliment 'you don't write like a woman' and that to me is extremely important.

When I listen to, or read, the aggressive attitudes of Virago Press, or the stated aims of Writing Women (19 Osborne Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, if anyone's interested) I wonder what happened to the sheer joy of just creating. I probably waste a good deal of my precious writing time creating stories that are never to be read by anyone, but I get a tremendous pleasure and satisfaction out of it, and surely that is more important than anything else. Remember the statement 'first you write. If you sell, that's a bonus.' And there can be no other way of looking at it.

*Cy Chauvin*  
14248 Wilfred  
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Mich. 48213  
U S A

I think you are the wicked one. If David Penn truly meant that James Blish (in 'Common Time') 'told' his story, rather than 'showing' it (which is preferable), why does he say before this "the best way to handle a grand theme is not to illustrate it wholesale" -- which he at least implies Blish has done in 'Common Time'? If one illustrates a theme, one is certainly shown it. In any case, if one reads the story at all, it is rather obvious that the events in it are not simply told (from a distance, or offstage), but shown, and I say this not from childhood memories of the story, but from a rereading five months ago. I would agree with Penn that 'A Work of Art' is a much better story, and seemingly less acclaimed; it deserves to go in an anthology of modern literature, and not just as a token SF story. But 'Common Time' has its merits as well, if less of them.

I read Zelazny's Roadmarks, reviewed by Martyn Taylor. I don't know what Taylor found about the book that made it "a difficult one, intriguing and stimulating" -- I was trapped into reading it, on a long bus ride, and it was boring and empty. Zelazny has a certain stylistic grace and witty humour that is at times superficially involving, but nearly all of his novels are like potato chips; when one has finished the bowl or the novel, one is still hungry. Well, maybe he is an improvement over Heinlein: as Taylor says, there is no hint "of patronisation by the author", but I can't understand what anyone would find mysterious about it.

'Blind Man's Movies' is quite an interesting article. A couple of the plot summaries for proposed science fiction radio dramas sounded rather bad -- I mean, "In the belly of the big ship were the wingships, two-man craft that were a handy size for darting down black holes..." (p.12) Uh, sure. And the rockets will make noise, even in outer space. Actually, I don't mean to be patronising; I wonder if all such plot summaries sound as bad. Plot summaries of the Ian Watson novels (at least from the reviews in Vector) make them sound fascinating, but it seems to me that the focus of radio SF drama may be at a lower stage of development (and I always hate it when others write about the 'development of a genre').

Paul Kincaid's guest editorial reads like one of your Standpoints (the better

ones.) I agree with him entirely (how boring, you yawn). Sometimes I think puffing up letters into Standpoints seems unnecessary -- and it puts a sort of emphasis on the writer's letter that he or she may not have wanted, or deserved. It (and those puffed up book reviews called Reassessments) make Vector seem a little like a bowl of puffed rice cereal. I'd really rather read a few good articles or even an interview (although they've been overdone by other fanzines to such a degree that I wonder anyone has anything to say). I know your reply, I suspect -- "Then write one." I don't imagine that any articles have been pushed out of Vector because of the Standpoint column, and anything that might provoke a response from the torpid BSFA masses is good, to a degree.

☛ You got my reply just right, Cy. However, I tend to agree that they are overdone by fanzines -- and I also think they are very rarely done well, and are frequently tedious. Interviews, that is.

As for whether I'm 'wicked' for interpreting David Penn's piece as I did -- well, let's see what David has to say (and I assure you that I didn't solicit this letter)...

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Merseyside  
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As Kevin pointed out in his reply to Cy Chauvin's statements on my Galactic Cluster article, what I objected to about 'Common Time' was that Blish tells us rather than shows us what it is like when a man's time sense is distorted. I admire the imagination that explored this particular metaphysical avenue, and the theme of man's isolation from other possible forms of existence is a powerful one which Blish puts into an interesting new context. But look how he handles it: the story takes off and we go and look at the philosophical notion and then come back. I mentioned Arthur C Clarke when I discussed this point because it is he more than anyone who has set the modern precedent for this rather poor form of writing. In his work we go to look at an alien spaceship that has entered the solar system, we explore a space elevator... There is a Nietzschean background to his stories which makes Clarke more than just a goggle-eyed guide on a cosmic package tour. But is he anything more than an expositor of fanciful socio-philosophical notions in these particular works? And is Blish any more than a metaphysical equivalent as the writer of 'Common Time'? Is it too much to ask of science fiction writers that they do not simply allow the grandeur of their ideas to work up our interest, but in addition supply the subtlety and multi-facetedness that distinguishes the fiction writer from the philosopher? Not even Blake, who among British writers came closest to leaving the pale of poetry for that of seerdom, is inspiring simply because of the impact and power of his visions: no one who has read the 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience' can forget them afterwards, and that is because of the power of Blake's words to summon up an inexhaustible array of images in our minds. The superb vision that went into the creation of these poems is the driving force behind their beauty, not an end in itself.

What I'm getting at is that the short story is not such a miniature, limited little squib as Cy Chauvin seems to believe. The problem is not of any limitations inherent in the form itself, but of those that unambitious writers have encumbered it with.

Borges doesn't revel in the concept of the Aleph or any other of his weird products of fantasy, letting their profundity or universality alone be the measure of his work. What he understands in fact better than any other writer is that a writer is a teller of tales, and whatever the notion at its core, the main object of a story is to be a story. Perhaps this is why when he omits to present character -- which, contrary to Chauvin's remark, is not always the case -- it can be taken that character is unnecessary within the format of the

story at issue. My argument against Blish's failure to present character was that I felt that such an element was necessary in 'Common Time', since the astronaut gains admission to the greater universe by letting go his own self, and it would have enforced this aspect if we had known what his 'self' was like in the first place. It's not that I believe in character for character's sake, but I do think that where it would as a matter of course be an integral part of a piece of writing, it should be present. What I think is that Blish left character out of 'Common Time' not because he regarded its inclusion as undesirable, but because, employing the paradigms of this genre, he was unused to the idea of character as a part of the source of science fiction writing. Once he got hold of an original idea, there came out even in him vestiges of the feeling that 'If it's inventive, it doesn't matter how I write it' -- like a scientist delivering a paper.

To argue that one writer need not use character in a story because another writer doesn't is no argument at all, and to say that the portrayal of personalities in a short story is impossible because one writer doesn't do it is absurd. Many writers can describe characters in a few lines, let alone in the 'very limited scope' of a short story; if I may be allowed to mention Hemingway, Lawrence, Joyce and Dylan Thomas in this context, those are a few examples of writers who have got round to it in the past. Doesn't Cy Chauvin himself remember writing 'word portraits' at school? Of course it is a long step from sketching a character to writing a story which rests inherently on that character, but it can be done, as those writers I've mentioned proved eminently.

But it isn't the inclusion or exclusion of character alone that I want to make an issue of. There are an infinite number of elements in the short story as in any form of fiction, and which are brought into focus and which ignored doesn't depend on some sort of limitation of space: a story develops its own internal demands and laws as the writer writes it, just as a novel does, and sometimes these may not entail character, or other possible elements. Again, Borges above anyone else has shown the full range and complexity of the short story, and that it can have all the diverse facets and overtones of any other form of literature. Borges's stories can be read again and again without loss of interest because of their power as structures. Blish put none of this potential richness into 'Common Time'; not only is character lacking, but also the plot is too obviously a device for exhibiting the properties of time-distortion, without any organic development of its own. Blish, in this instance at least, ignored the full value of the short story form -- the full poetic value -- and so however astounding or wide in cosmic implication the concept of 'Common Time' is, the story is still lacking in many of the qualities of good fiction.

But thanks to Cy Chauvin for recommending 'Darkside Crossing', in which Blish obviously recanted his earlier sins! I'll try to get hold of it.

Andrew Sutherland  
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Aberdeen  
ABI 9HJ

It was worrying to read about the problems facing Christopher Priest as he attempts to find a paperback publisher for The Affirmation. The latter part of Paul Kincaid's article did reveal a certain degree of hope, however, since Faber may publish the book. Paul is probably justified in his claim that "the publishing

scene may not be quite as bad as I suggest", since a good deal of high quality SF is getting paperback publication. Arrow are bringing out Gene Wolfe's The Book of the New Sun, for instance, although they probably hope that this will itself take its place on the 'blockbuster' bandwagon. They have also had sufficient faith in Wolfe's abilities to bring out a collection of his short stories. This shows that one publishing firm at least has the courage to invest in talented and intelligent SF writers and is an example followed by

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Penguin with their publication, under the King Penguin imprint, of volumes by Angela Carter and Stanislaw Lem.

It seems to me that SF publishing in Britain is still fairly healthy, and I feel confident that a novel as imaginative as The Affirmation will eventually find a paperback publisher. It would not be the first time that an important work has received publication in paperback only after a long and difficult struggle.

14 The good news is that The Affirmation has found a paperback publisher -- our good friends Arrow again. (The slightly less good news is that it won't appear until 1983.) Naturally a publisher hopes that his novels will become best sellers (note, two words); that's how he makes his money. The authors, too, would very much like to sell millions of copies... Note that Arrow are not just hoping about Gene Wolfe's books; The Shadow of the Torturer, I seem to remember, had a 5" x 3" advertisement on the books page of the Guardian a few months ago -- and that would have cost a bit!

### We Also Heard From...

Bob Ardler wrote about the book reviewers in Vector, identifying what he termed the WABOF (What A Boring Old Fart) school of reviewing which needed to hate the old established writers as a matter of necessity, and pointed out the very salient point that 'has-beens' have been -- and who are the reviewers? Worth remembering, that, so long as the reviewers don't let it dominate them.

Jeremy Crampton gets his second WAHF in a row, this time telling of the development of his reading preferences, which seem to be along lines that Joe Nicholas would approve of.

Nic Howard was yet another who agreed with Paul Kincaid.

Christopher Mills told of how he enriches his library 25p at a time by ordering the latest SF hardbacks.

R Nicholson-Morton ('Nik') said he would volunteer for Vector editor (cheers!) but (boos!) was sure that other members with more SF knowledge and background were more suitable and already nominated. You heard the man: where are you? Care to try again, Nik? He also sent a Focus-type article which, for reasons obvious this mailing, I'm passing on to the Focus editors...

Wait a minute! How come Focus has three -- yes, three -- editors, and poor old Vector don't have none? (Just two 'something editors'.)

Disgusting (Harrow and Devon branch) wrote about how much he approves of books like Julian May's Many-Coloured Land (don't say you haven't heard of it) which do up all the old SF cliches new, since that's just what we all want -- a new look at all those exciting old cliches. Perhaps he meant to call himself 'Disgusted'. On the other hand, he generally seems to write what he means. (I, on yet another hand -- making three so far, if you're counting -- write lots of lies...)

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sprang up. A thing with a pale, greeny blue luminescence. An electronic thing, a mechanical thing. A thing that was part of the robot genius. A thing that was as strange as the ship and its occupants. A force field, a glowing greenish blue force field...

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