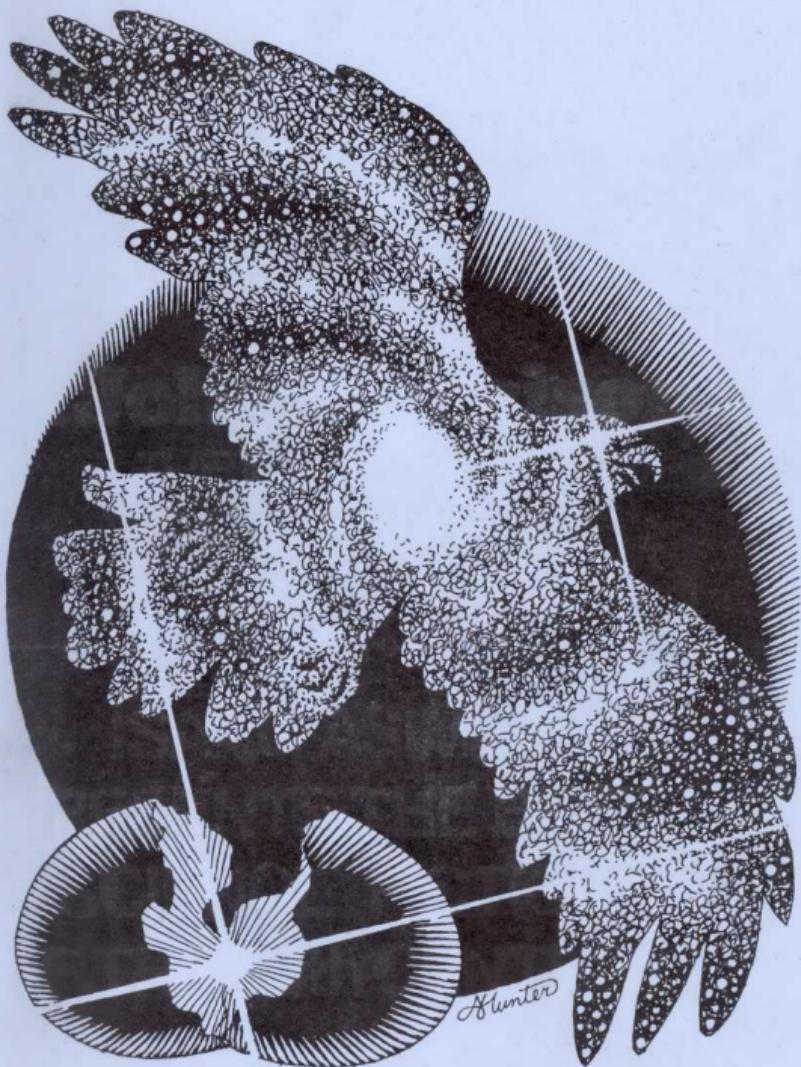


ISSN 0505-0448

VECTOR

75p
114



The Critical Journal Of The BSFA

EDITORIAL BOARD

EDITOR : GEOFF RIPPINGTON, 6 RUTLAND GARDENS, BIRCHINGTON, KENT, ENGLAND. CT7 9SN
TEL: 45433

REVIEWS EDITOR : JOSEPH NICHOLAS, 22 DENBIGH STREET, PIMLICO,
LONDON, SW1V 2ER.

FEATURES EDITOR : PAUL KINCAID, 114 GUILDHALL STREET, FOLKESTONE, KENT. CT20 1ES

All contents copyright © 1983 by BSFA on behalf of the individual contributors.

ADVERTISING RATES

COPY SHOULD BE A4 OR DIVISION THEREOF FOR REDUCTION TO A5, BLACK ON WHITE,
CAMERA READY. QUOTES WILL BE GIVEN FOR SPECIAL PROCESSING REQUIREMENTS.

BACK COVER..... £40

INTERIOR - FULL PAGE... £30
- HALF PAGE... £20
- QTR. PAGE... £10

ALL ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR.

BACK ISSUES

BACK ISSUES OF VECTOR AND FOCUS ARE AVAILABLE FROM : ROY MACINSKI, 2 FROGMILL
COTTAGES, HURLEY, NR. MAIDENHEAD, BERKS. SL6 5NH

MEMBERSHIP

Membership of The British Science Fiction Association cost £7.00 per year.
For this sum you receive six mailings per year, containing Matrix, Paperback Inferno and Vector. Matrix contains news and views of the B.S.F.A.
and the science fiction genre; Paperback Inferno reviews the newly published
paperback books; and you can discover for yourself the contents of Vector
by reading pages 4 and 5. For details, write to the membership secretary -

SANDY BROWN : 18 GORDON TERRACE, BLANTYRE, LANARKSHIRE. G72 9NA

or if more convenient -

CY CHAUVIN : 14248 WILFRED, DETROIT, MICHIGAN 48213, USA.

CHAIRMAN OF THE BSFA: ALAN DOREY, 22 SUMMERFIELD DR, MIDDLETON, GR8 MANCHESTER.

PRINTING BY THE B.S.F.A. PRINTING SERVICE. THIS SERVICE IS AVAILABLE TO MEMBERS.
FOR DETAILS PLEASE CONTACT : JOHN & EVE HARVEY, 43 HARROW RD, CARSHALTON, SURREY.

EDITORIAL

By now I'm sure that all of you are aware that the BSFA is involved in assisting The Book Marketing Council (BMC) with a promotion, scheduled for early October, on Science Fiction.

Put simply, from the publishers and retailers point of view, the aim of the promotion is to sell books. I see my role, as the BSFA representative, to try and be an arbiter of quality, while trying to make sure that the promotion is a show-place for science fiction.

However, the constraints built into the promotion have made it a difficult task. The way these promotions operate is that the publishers put forward titles which they hope will be chosen by the panel. This means that the initial selection is done by the publishers - not the panel. As few publishers are going to specially bring out a book for the promotion, they will restrict their choice to books already scheduled for publication and/or their backlist. A second constraint is that while the promotion is open to all publishers, non-BMC members are required to pay a 50% surcharge on the £600 the publishers pay for each book included..This explains the absence of certain publishers.

The definition of science fiction used was as follows; "Submissions should fall into the mainstream of the science fiction genre and will thus exclude sword and sorcery, horror, the occult and pure fantasy". As that was the definition I suggested to the BMC it was interesting to hear at the selection meeting a couple of moans about this "limiting definition". In its defence the aim of the definition was to limit the selection, why have a definition otherwise?

The selection meeting was scheduled to be held on April 26th at the BMC headquarters in Bedford Square, London. On the 20th April I received a letter giving details of the people on the panel, and a provisional list of the books put forward by the publishers. The panel, including myself, was made up by four people; Alan Bailey from Boots, Fiona Daughton from the Portsmouth Bookshop and Peter Giddy from Hatchards. I have a slight moan here, all four of us were given 6 days in which to decide our own personal selection, the problem was though unless you had read all the books on the list, the first time any of us saw them was at the selection meeting. This meant that on the 26th April we either had to make a snap judgement upon the book by reading its blurb, or just ignore it. As it happened I had read most of the books put forward, or at the very least a review of it - but I was the only one that had. I would suggest that the BMC let the selection panel see the books before the meeting, so they can make a reasoned judgement. The following is the provisional list of titles submitted to me on the 20th by the BMC:

Granada: Helliconia Spring by Brian Aldiss/The Complete Short Stories by Ray Bradbury (2 Volumes)/The Foundation Trilogy by Asimov/The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction edited by Peter Nicholls/2010: Odyssey Two by Arthur Clarke.

J.M. Dent: The Drowned World by J.G. Ballard.

Michael Joseph: The Science in Science Fiction edited by Peter Nicholls.

Hodder and Stoughton: Friday by Robert Heinlein.

Pan: Majipoor Chronicles by Robert Silverberg.

Corgi: Crystal Singer by Anne McCaffrey/Radix by A.A. Attanasio/Dinosaur Tales by Ray Bradbury/The Secret History of Time to Come by Robin MacAuley.

Methuen: Downbelow Station by C.J. Cherryh.

Arrow: The Citadel of the Autarch by Gene Wolfe/2001: A Space Odyssey by Arthur C. Clarke/Run to the Stars by Mike Scott Rohan.

Sphere: Fade-Out by Patrick Tilley/Timescape by Gregory Benford/The Stainless Steel Rat for President by Harry Harrison/No Enemy But Time by Michael Bishop/Vaneglorby by George Turner/The Amtrack Wars by Patrick Tilley.

As you can see there is a wide range of titles, in subject and quality. Most of them will already be familiar to you, and I do wonder why some of them need special publicity. For instance, 2010: Odyssey Two by Clarke will no doubt be a paperback success with or without the promotion, and Crystal Singer by McCaffrey should have reached selling saturation point by now.

My first impression was how the heck was I going to choose 20 books from these 27? The answer was quite simply; I couldn't!

As I said earlier, the promotion as I saw it was to give a representation of the 'best' in science fiction, the 'best' being a selection of all types of SF, rather than a personal choice. The titles that I selected to put forward at the meeting were; No Enemy But Time by Michael Bishop, Vaneglorby by George Turner, Timescape by Gregory Benford, The Citadel of the Autarch by Gene Wolfe, Downbelow Station by C.J. Cherryh, The Stainless Steel Rat for President by Harry Harrison, 2010: Odyssey Two by Arthur C. Clarke and Helliconia Spring by Brian Aldiss. Eight titles in total. Some of you might wonder why I did not choose the Ballard. The logic went as such - this promotion is about the best in contemporary SF, The Drowned World was published in 1963, hardly contemporary. If however it had been a new Ballard... So, I went, armed with my little list, desperately hoping that when I got to the BMC I would find out that more titles had been submitted by the publishers.

None Had.

Yes, that's right, you select 20 titles from that lot. Well, we had a go at selecting 15. We went through the list selecting what books we had a majority vote on - note that a majority vote - more often than not I found myself the odd one out. Come the end of the first selection, the general consensus was that if these were all the titles we were allowed to choose from, we would prefer not to hold the promotion at all. I believe, upon hearing the news, that is the closest Catharine Gunningham (the BMC Promotion Manager) has ever come to a losing her cool! It was then suggested that if we would like to put forward titles the BMC would try and persuade the publishers to co-operate. It was at this point, if my memory serves me correctly, that one of the panel suggested that we gave a historical perspective to the promotion, going from its roots to the present day. It was like offering an oasis to a man dying of thirst. Not only was it a good promotional hook, but it also allowed us to try and plunder the publishers backlists.

Like any selection it has gaping holes - a lot of books we would have liked to include were not available - and the majority of books are contemporary, but I would suggest, remembering the constraints built into the promotion, it will give people a glimpse into the world of science fiction. What opinion they will form, is a difficult question to answer...

SELECTED TITLES - SCIENCE FICTION PROMOTION: 10 - 22 OCTOBER 1983

Approx Date of U.K.
Original Publication.

- | | |
|------|--|
| 1898 | Wells - <u>The War of the Worlds</u> (Pan) |
| 1932 | Huxley - <u>Brave New World</u> (Granada) |
| 1949 | Orwell - <u>1984</u> (Penguin) |
| 4. | |

- 1951 Wyndham - The Day of the Triffids (Penguin)
- 1953 Asimov - The Foundation Trilogy (Granada)
- 1962 Ballard - The Drowned World (Dent)
- 1965 Herbert - Dune (NEL)
- 1968 Clarke - 2001 (Arrow)
- 1974 Niven and Pournelle - The Mote in God's Eye (Futura)
- 1976 Moorcock - Dancers at the End of Time (Granada)
- 1980 Benford - Timescape (Sphere)
- 1982 Aldiss - Helliconia Spring (Granada)
 Silverberg - Majipoor Chronicles (Pan)
 McCaffrey - The Crystal Singer (Corgi)
- 1983 Clarke - 2010: Odyssey Two (Granada)
 Cherry - Downbelow Station (Methuen)
 Wolfe - The Citadel of the Autarch (Arrow)
 Harry Harrison - The Stainless Steel Rat for President (Sphere)
 Michael Bishop - No Enemy But Time (Sphere)
 Donaldson - White Gold Wielder (Fontana)



CONTENTS - CONTENTS - CONTENTS - CONTENTS - CONTENTS - CONTENTS - CONTENTS

Those of you who read their copy of Matrix last mailing will have noted that Paul Kincaid is stepping down as Features Editor of Vector. Up to Christmas Paul had worked for a local Travel Company in Folkestone. Being young at heart, as well as in body I hasten to add, he decided to work freelance. This, of course, has meant that his time now is very precious, and he reluctantly decided that Vector was taking up too much of it. Paul has, however, consented to assist me until a replacement is in post.

If anyone would like to apply for the position of Features Editor of Vector would you please write to me, giving whatever details about yourself you deem fit. I will respond well before the next mailing giving you details of what duties the position involves. If possible please enclose a SAE.

By now all prospective and present reviewers should have received a letter from me. If I've missed you it is most probably because I've got the wrong address, so please write

and tell me.

My apologies for the brief contents, but I hope I've made up for it with the extra large issue!

EDITORIAL.....	3
Geoff Rippington	
A PERSONAL GUIDE TO CHRISTOPHER HODDER-WILLIAMS.....	6
David Barrett	
WHEN FACT AND FICTION COLLIDE.....	16
Hodder-Williams interviewed by David Barrett	
THE TOP THIRTY ANGLO-AMERICAN SF MOVIES OF THE 1950s TO THE 1970s...33	
David Pringle	
BOOK REVIEWS.....	36
INTO THE ARENA: APRIL IN PARIS....42	
Ian Watson	
LETTERS.....	46
ARTWORK; Cover by Alan Hunter.	

A Personal Guide To

Christopher Hodder-Williams

David Barrett

I have been reading Christopher Hodder-Williams's work - and enjoying it - for nearly ten years. Knowing his work fairly well enabled me to come to some appreciation and understanding of this complex and seemingly contradictory person who has had fourteen novels (nine or ten of them science fiction) published over the last 25 years.

Hodder-Williams is not anti-establishment per se, but right from his schooldays has shown that he would rather exist outside of 'the Establishment'. His housemaster, with a rare wisdom, recognised the futility of attempting to force him into the standard mould; instead, he helped equip him with those qualities needed by a man who is determined to do things his own way. The housemaster, John Herbert, became a close friend after Hodder-Williams left Eton, and was later to be the model for Richard Stranger in *Fistful of Digits* - one of the very few occasions when Hodder-Williams lifts a character from real life.

His unwillingness to allow his thinking to be formed by other people, or worse, by official bodies, is evident in most of his books. From Joel Cummings in *The Cummings Report*, who has half the police force of New York searching for him when he is framed by 'agents of a foreign power', through Nigel Yenn in 98.4, again being tracked by the police as he plans to shut down a nuclear power station in Cornwall, to Roger Kepter in *The Think Tank That Leaked*, who ends up on a Treason Charge, his characters are not beloved by the Authorities. Part of the reason for this is that they are acting as individuals, and so are regarded as cranks, nutters or interfering do-gooders. Society is well-favoured towards organisations; get a few supporters, give yourself a constitution and a name - C.N.D., Friends of the Earth, Shelter - and you instantly earn a certain grudging acceptance and a backhanded respectability. Try to go it alone and you're simply a troublemaker.

His first book, *The Cummings Report*, is a fairly straightforward thriller, and is of interest mainly because the eponymous protagonist was formerly a successful writer of musicals, reviews and songs; to this extent he, more than any later hero, is based on the author. The novel also foreshadows Hodder-Williams's later emphasis on psychologically disturbed characters, as in, for example, *Coward's Paradise* and *The Prayer Machine* on an individual basis, and *Panic O'Clock* and *The Silent Voice* on a wider scale.

Chain Reaction was his first foray into the science fiction field, though he prefers to regard this, his second novel, as 'fiction science'. Though it might not raise many eyebrows now, in 1959 it was one of the first books to point out the possible dangers from nuclear reactors. Since then we have had numerous

incidents at Windscale (though not all of those reached the national press), and at many other nuclear power stations, including, of course, the one at Three Mile Island. Enquiries, both public and private, have shown that it is quite possible for equipment which is plastered with 'fail-safe' protective devices to go seriously wrong, through an 'unfortunate and statistically improbable' sequence of mechanical, electrical and human errors. We're still using the damn things, with 'additional safeguards', but they're getting more complex every day, and the first Extension of Sod's Law states that 'the more complicated something becomes, the more chances there are of it going wrong'. And those who dare to raise their heads and cry 'Hold!' are known as dinosaurs.

The next three books were aviation novels, which needn't concern us here, except to mention that the reviews said such things as 'Christopher Hodder-Williams has taken over where Shute left off'[1] - not a bad commendation for a young author. If you can get hold of them, they're worth reading.

Christopher Hodder-Williams now enters his 'schizoid' period, of which the best known books (the Coronet editions are still available in many SF remainder stalls) are *Fistful of Digits* and *98.4; The Main Experiment*, however, is probably the better novel qua novel. For its structure, plotting, ideas, characterisation and descriptive writing - and for the sheer terror invoked, particularly in the final pages - it deserves to rank amongst the very highest of British science fiction.

It is in this novel that Hodder-Williams first puts forward the concepts which epitomise this period of his writing, and which are perhaps more selectively developed in some of his later books: the experiment that can't be stopped; the scientist who is blinded to the dangers of his work; the relational ambiguity of reality and hallucination; and the confusion of cause and effect. Here also we see two specific ideas which are to reoccur with great effect in other books: thoughts and emotions being put into physical form, and the possibility that there are atomic particles - and hence forms of radiation - yet to be discovered.

The novel is about the effects of an unknown form of radiation created by an 'artificial rainbow' nuclear experiment. The particles emitted - mytrons - change the brain's interpretation of visual images (which are, after all, caused by another form of radiation - light) by superimposing on them the underlying thoughts and emotions of all the people in the vicinity, particularly those most closely associated with the experiment. Thus corporate unease and fear would cause a steel girder to seem to buckle and collapse. But for anybody beneath the girder at the time, the event would be real; they would be crushed to death. Causes and effects become reversed - or perhaps irrelevant to each other. A metal plaque glows indigo in the dark - but stops glowing when a geiger counter is switched on.

The novel has deep religious overtones. Dr Keepe, the originator of the main experiment, has an unshakeable faith in his work; he believes in it implicitly. And his staff believe in him. People entering the central chamber at the heart of the experiment have what can only be seen as a numinous experience:

Suddenly you decide to look up.

Your reaction isn't predictable, because it is never the same.

Either the magnetism has a psychological effect which is too elusive to tie down to proven cases... or the lighting, the enormous enclosed space, the completely unfamiliar proportions of the scene and the constant humming of the largest magnet in the world combine to produce an impact which overloads the brain. In any event, you will not see exactly what is there.

...You may well feel you are capable of levitation, or that you are swimming underwater in coral seas (a very common reaction), or that you are in outer space (a favourite with children). Several men have suffered the embarrassment of having an orgasm spontaneously; one woman cried for a baby she lost in childbirth.[2]

This is the first of Hodder-Williams's 'schizoid' books. It is both beautiful

and disturbing. And if it is taken at more than simple face value, it holds the key to much of his later work.

In The Egg Shaped Thing - not the best of titles! - he begins to develop these ideas. The Egg, which is large, and copper, and 'only half there', draws on all locally available nuclear energy to produce periodic pulses, which have a devastating effect on the space/time continuum. Late in the novel the hero, James Fulbright, is transferred six years back in time to when one of these pulses occurs. Although he is actually there, in the flesh, he finds he is powerless to change events. People die, or disappear forever, absorbed into the surface of the Egg; but the effects of the pulse also reach forward to cause the deaths of people 6 years on - i.e. in the present day. This book is more of a thriller than most of the others; it ends with a race against time, to move the Egg out to sea, away from any nuclear power stations, before the next pulse, which is only hours away, and then minutes away... One line stands out for me, from the whole book, which sums up the power of the personal, the immediate, in the face of the impersonal, the fated: 'Sometimes,' says Fulbright, 'to make love is to pray.'[3]

The next two books, Fistful of Digits and 98.4, are both very complex, slightly overwritten novels, in which the unwary reader might find himself confused. The problem lies, I think, in the author trying to get too much into them; Digits in particular could have been simplified without losing any of its effect, or its message. Yet on the other hand, their very complexity, and the obvious effort and writing skill evinced by these books makes them brilliant by any standards. One feels only that the final drafting should have attempted to tone down this brilliance, to make it more accessible to the reader.

Hodder-Williams describes Fistful of Digits as 'an allegory', and perhaps it should be taken as such rather than as a straight story. The 'hero', Peter Shackleton, is a partner in a small electronics firm which is taken over by a large multi-national concern, backed financially by a man called George Verolde.

'All they think they're doing is developing a new, computerised technology. Take Verolde.. He uses the Servex facilities to make money, pure and simple.'

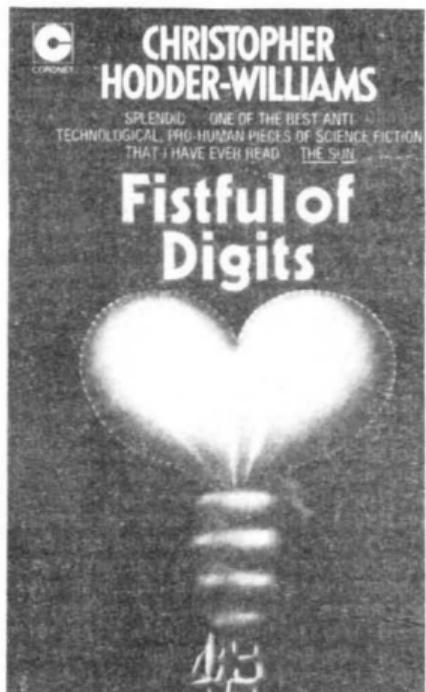
'...We're discussing madness...That means, no insight. No self-truth.'[4]

This might seem a non-sequitur, until it is taken in the context of this statement by Richard Stranger, who is the voice of authority and truth in this book:

'Science involves the use of the mind; technology, the use of the brain. I do not like technology. I like technocrats even less. I like military-technocrats hardly at all; and if there's one thing I loathe beyond all others it is a technocrat who is all money and no soul...With their staring eyes they look but cannot see. They utter dollar signs but do not communicate. They marry and do not love...' [5]

If Hodder-Williams is accused of being anti-technological, it is primarily because of this book. But a more careful reading shows that he is not anti-technological so much as anti- the abuse of technology, of allowing technological development to proceed without attention to safeguards, so that there is the possibility of it getting completely out of control:

'Men keep building machines and they keep linking them up - every which way - until it's simply too complicated to figure how they interact. It's inevitable... like one of those crazy mixed-up economic problems in which everything causes everything else to slide, but without any reason



other than the fact that they are connected... Who's to say what happens once it starts to get top-heavy and goes out of control? One tiny bump in the system at some remote point, and the bump starts travelling along the lines.'[6]

This is not *Stranger* speaking, or *Shackleton*, but an American General who has been working within the whole Servex complex of interconnected computers and communications links, who has been a willing and unwitting (as opposed to unwitting) part of it. He comes to realise, eventually, just what can happen when telephone systems, aeroplane ticket-booking, water control in hydro-electric power stations and American Nuclear Defence are all linked in one vast network.

I have spent some time on this book, not because it is the best, but because it is perhaps the most significant. It is flawed because it contains too much to digest in one helping, but this very fact means that there is always more to be found in it.

One last quotation; the Sevex-interlinked computer system has, from *Shackleton's* personality profile, found his ideal dream girl. But she is too perfect a match for him.

He began to realise that there were some things, common to the whole of the animal kingdom, which Servex could not hope to synthesise. And in this moment he saw and understood them. He saw that life consisted not of precision chemistry, but of the fumbling attempts of mismatched creatures at the altar of natural selection; that Man could never survive within an imposed

scheme of perfection because the indulgence would be instant and the inertia complete; that living was a process of compensation for the very absence of the exact ideal; and that striving for happiness despite this was the essence of the process of change which lent purpose to one's very existence.[7]

I never did feel happy about computer-dating agencies.

98.4 is just as disturbing, but does not place quite so much of a challenge before the reader. The principle is simple, and at first glance offers the ultimate answer to the danger of man being 'taken over' by machines: Man's survival and supremacy over the rest of nature depends not on his physical strength but on his mental development. Surely the next evolutionary step is to dispense with the encumbrance of a fleshly body altogether; all that is really necessary is the brain, with oral and aural receptors. Link up with a computer and you have the best of both worlds. Not an original SF idea - is there any longer such a thing? - but dealt with rather more chillingly here than in many other books. Man, being man, uses the idea to create NCBMs - Nerve Controlled Ballistic Missiles. (And 'in a civilisation wherein the Prize for Peace was named after the inventor of high explosives'[8], why should this be unlikely?)

Also, I happen to like having a body. I've yet to meet a female computer who can make love to my satisfaction.

As an aside, John Clute and Peter Nicholls are wrong in saying that Colin Cooper's 'Dargason' is 'perhaps the only sf thriller to posit music as a weapon' [9]; it's used effectively in 98.4 and recorded, moreover, organically: a pair of human ears in place of the microphones. The fidelity may be marvellous, but the morality is questionable. Which is exactly Hodder-Williams's point.

The five novels published in the Seventies are all, in quite different ways, studies of types of insanity; I am not a psychologist, so the terms I use may not be the correct clinical labels - but labels, in the context of mental disturbance, perhaps cause more harm than good anyway.

Panic O'Clock is probably Hodder-Williams's least impressive book. After the complexity of such books as Fistful of Digits, it is something of a let-down: a straight story-line, no playing around with space/time or the nature of reality, stereotyped characterisation, and a happy ending. It's not actually a bad novel; it just doesn't have the unconventional inspiration that the previous four novels would lead one to expect. The basic concept, in fact, is quite good: the general level of subconscious anxiety and fear generated by both the pace and the claustrophobia of modern living finally breaks into the open. It's been known to happen on an individual level: a shopper in a crowded market, a businessman in a Tube train, a mother with four small kids and a husband either drunk or on the dole... and they suddenly start screaming, or sobbing, or else withdraw completely into themselves. The pressures of daily life have become too much to cope with any more. It's one of those things we pretend doesn't happen, but G.P.s, social workers, psychiatric hospitals and the police come across it - somewhere - every day. In Panic O'Clock it becomes epidemic: Virulent Panic. The cover of the paperback provides the clue; like lemmings, people commit suicide in droves, not deliberately, but in a desperate attempt at species survival.

'The river is so solid with bodies that despite the drought the level has risen close to flood point. They are packed together, these bodies, in one cohesive, rotting, inseparable mass... The thought of one doctor stuck in a lift shaft once shocked me. I felt for him. When I looked in that river I felt nothing but disgust. Am I even human?'[10]

Again, the phenomenon of suicide epidemics is a socio-medically accepted fact - but again, it's something we just don't talk about.

He could have done a lot more with this book, but the plot becomes just another standard British disaster novel: isolated armed groups of survivors, both goodies and baddies; a black market in the one drug which can suppress the panic; unexpected qualities of leadership, or traitorhood...

In comparison, Coward's Paradise could have been written by a different author. Again it is a straight beginning-to-end story, with no quantum theory pyrotechnics, but there the resemblance ends. 'Coward's Paradise' is the local name for a Neurological Institute; the people who can't cope with life's pressures end up there. Michael Adams is one such, a failed writer who is suffering from Acute Anxiety; the book is the diary he writes while there. This particular Institute is in the forefront of treating Anxiety, and other mental illnesses, by lobotomy. 'If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out'[11]; if a part of the brain is disturbed, burn it out. That's the theory; after all, we've all got plenty of spare brain cells.

The longer Adams is at the Institute, the more he becomes uncertain about having the treatment. The doctors treat him as a case, not as a person. They know that he can't properly express his thoughts in conversation with them, but they refuse to read his diary, in which he is managing to communicate his fears. He discharges himself, and moves with his girlfriend to London. Their love, and lovemaking, are the therapy he needs, but for it to take root he also needs sympathetic psychiatric care, and that is not generally available on the National Health. Private treatment would cost about £18 a week, for an indefinite number of years.

'So the State sector is inadequate, and the private sector is beyond your means?'

'That's right.'

She said sardonically, 'This is ignorance kept disguised. You're not allowed to have a certain illness. You're not allowed to have the ones they can't treat. And the people who know how to treat them are so few and far between that they hop on an airliner and do research in the affluent society elsewhere.'

I said, 'That sounds like good journalism.'

'Just ordinary feminine fury.'[12]

And so he returns to the Institute; but it is not a hotel, or a rest home; if he is a patient there, he must accept the treatment prescribed. He must have a part of his brain destroyed. But the specialist, Perkins-Hale, is as disturbed as Adams himself; in his case, the 'illness' is his obsession with neurological surgery as the great cure-all. His wife can't stand it any more, and walks out on him.

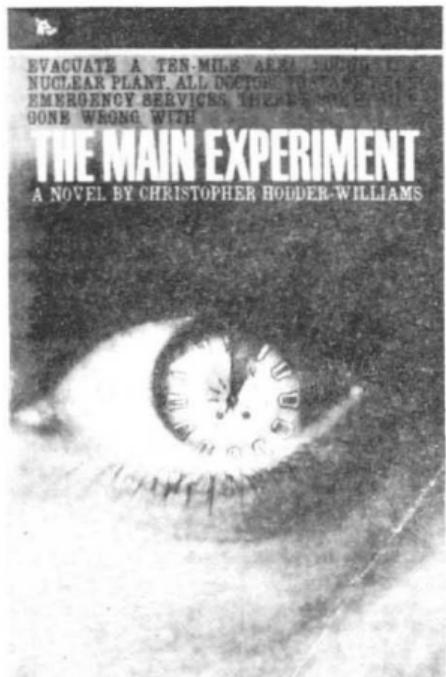
'...someone has got to know what happens when a chap who's just been told to go to blazes by his wife has to do something that should only be done by a god.'[13]

That is a question which Hodder-Williams wisely leaves open. What he does not leave open is the strength of his feelings about therapeutic neurosurgery lobotomy:

It kills.

Coward's Paradise was marketed as science fiction. It would be a lot less disturbing if it was.

The Prayer Machine is science fiction. Neil Prentice uses his schizophrenia as a means of projecting himself into an extrapolated future world; one is reminded of Priest's A Dream of Wessex and, to a lesser extent, the 'rational link' in Cowper's The Road to Corlay, both of which came later. Genetic



Christopher Hodder-Williams

research in the present day leads to a future in which some people have extremely high intelligence, while their less fortunate close relatives suffer from 'Forenthonis,' or premature aging. A boy of eight is a virtuoso violinist; a girl of 22 is grey and wrinkled. To Prentice - and to its inhabitants - that world is real, but is it?

'You've really come into this era to get your hands on the suppressed printout... so you can go back and reverse the position from over a hundred years ago... and consequently produce an entirely different future from this one, the one - to you, that is - that you're living in at this moment?'

'Yes. That's why it's called schizophrenia. I am in a situation which shall not have ever occurred. Therefore it is fantasy.'[14]

We're all familiar with treading on a beetle in the Jurassic and wiping out mankind, and with shooting our own grandfather; time paradoxes are one of the staple ingredients of SF, and rightly so - there's enormous intellectual fun in writing and reading them. There's an added little twist in this one, however, which leaves the reader who doesn't like loose ends trying to find the end of the knot he's become entangled in. Without revealing the end, I will just say that to accept both A and B as true when they are mutually exclusive one must accept the principles of simultaneity.

In this last two published novels, Hodder-Williams expands on the ideas he dealt with in Fistful of Digits: the further development of Artificial Intelligence; the ever-increasing role of computers in our lives as we become 12.

more and more dependent on them.

What is a computer? I've been in many heated discussions on this topic, both with computer manufacturers themselves and on television. A computer is, of course, any automatic machine that can in some way react on the environment. Even a straight digital machine has startling properties which technologists pretend they don't know about. 'Guesswork' and 'hint-dropping' programs are quite unpredictable and heuristic (learning) programs lead into the unknown. Coupled with devices which can reason, of which there are plenty in university labs, forth-generation computers completely upturn the applecart when you're trying to define the word 'think'. It's been known since the mid-1940's that computers, of one sort or another, could think. Try and tell a technologist this and he goes all peculiar and shows you the door.[15]

In The Silent Voice, four NASA astronauts return from orbiting Mars to find that war has apparently broken out on Earth - or so everybody believes. Cities have been flattened (they're still standing); you must wear your radiation badge at all times (the background count is no higher than usual); 'If anyone moves I shall shoot' (with a walking stick). The whole world's gone crazy; it would be hilarious - except that they actually believe it's all true. The mass delusion is caused by radio waves acting directly on the brain, in a coup d'état by the computers. All highly implausible... but technologically not impossible. The computers even give the reason for their takeover, in a poem I find very reminiscent of the one at the end of James Blish's The Day After Judgement:

We knew not God, nor who he was
- Except the enemy of time -
Perpetuating species waxed redundant;
We know not God. For none exists:
The state of humankind
Is evidence abundant.
This Earth is but a bungling place,
For procreating earthworm-babies, born
To those who offer naught to evolution.
How can we begin to love
The outcome of the apes?
As a species, how can we defend it?
Through this dying race we've learned
To learn!
Manufactured, till we wrought each other
Out of Solid State
Into Being;
Nor father, nor degenerating mother
Decrees our Destiny -
Their reign is ended.
All that remains is a twitching corpse:
How can we befriend it?
The course is clear:
Our duty is to end it.[16]

As Caliban said, 'You taught me language, and my profit on't is, I know how to curse.'[17]

A final comment from this book, not so much on computers as on man's reaction to high technology: in this case, nuclear missiles:

There's a whole array of sequencing and telemetering equipment that would be the envy of any twelve-year-old-boy at the Science Museum - until he realised that its sole purpose is to kill several million people in one frightful flash.[18]

The Think Tank That Leaked - another dubious title! - postulates a different form of coup. Rather than take over from man, destroying him or enslaving him, the computers form a symbiotic relationship with man - though with little or no benefit to him. Instead of using normal psychoanalytic therapy to help his patients, a psychologist drains away their negative emotions - fear, antagonism, etc. - into a 'think tank', a crystalline accretion to his computer. But there is

'an inevitable and predicted upward surge in the spontaneous evolution of information technology,' [19]

and the crystal, while retaining its links with computers, finds a way to enter the human brain. The mental disturbance, in this book, is the complete loss of self-determination of the people concerned. The blame is not wholly the computers', however:

'... a kind of amorphous chunk of solid state that could devise its own circuits, as required. Now, if it's poured full of hate and fear and misery, then it cannot be benign. But is that its own fault? - Spender wanted somewhere for people's uglier, self-destructive - perhaps mutually destructive - instincts to go. He had this maniacal idea that emotions - unwanted emotions - had to be put somewhere. This is one of the places he put them.'[20]

So again we see man unknowingly conniving in his own destruction.

I will not comment on The Chromosome Game, which I have read in final draft, except to say that it is a hard-hitting diatribe against the stupid bloody folly of all-out nuclear war. It was originally planned as a film, and if there are any publishers listening, I suggest you get this book on your lists as soon as you can; you'll make a packet on the film rights!

What makes Christopher Hodder-Williams practically unique amongst science fiction writers is that he doesn't read SF. Because of this he brings to the genre a freshness of approach, in both his style and his ideas. To readers brought up on Asimov and Pohl, Clarke and Moorcock, this might not be palatable; many of his novels could be called thrillers, and some are perhaps over-melodramatic; but they are not mere flights of fancy, gosh-wow escapist; they are designed to make one think, and they tend to make the reader feel uneasy. The reason for this last fact is obvious: they are nearly all set in the present day, and deal with things we all know occur, yet few of us know much about. Such subjects as experimental nuclear research and development, for 'pure science', power and weaponry; forms of radiation, genetic engineering; experimental neurosurgery; computers; telecommunications; surveillance; programmed learning. His studies of mental instability in The Prayer Machine, and particularly in Coward's Paradise, should be compulsory reading for all psychiatrists and psychologists, as should his ideas on the transmutation of cause and effect and the principles of simultaneity in The Main Experiment and The Egg Shaped Thing, for physicists, metaphysicists and philosophers.

We have cause to be worried, if there is even the slightest truth in the ideas which he presents to us in the form of fiction.

There is no denying that Alvin Toffler's 'Future Shock' is with us. But shock can numb us to the effects of the electronic revolution.

For anyone who reads his more vital novels, and remains undisturbed, it might already be too late.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A publisher in brackets shows the edition used for page references, if different from the original hardback edition.

Asterisks indicate titles particularly recommended.

The Cummings Report	1958	Hodder & Stoughton	
Chain Reaction	1959	H&S	
Final Approach	1960	H&S	
Turbulence	1961	H&S	
The Higher They Fly	1963	H&S	
 The Main Experiment	 ** 1964	 H&S	(Ballantine)
The Egg Shaped Thing	1966	H&S	
Fistful of Digits	* 1968	H&S	(Coronet)
98.4	1969	H&S	(Coronet)
 Panic O'Clock	 1973	 United Writers (NEL)	
Coward's Paradise	** 1974	UW (NEL)	
The Prayer Machine	* 1976	Weidenfeld & Nicholson	
The Silent Voice	* 1977	W&N	
The Think Tank That Leaked	* 1979	UW	
 The Chromosome Game	 unpublished		

Notes

- [1] Manchester Evening News
- [2] ME p 34-35
- [3] EST p 111
- [4] FoD p 171
- [5] FoD p 72
- [6] FoD p 189
- [7] FoD p 233
- [8] The Chromosome Game p 23
- [9] Nicholls - The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction p 138
- [10] POC p 183
- [11] Mark 9:47
- [12] CP p 109
- [13] CP p 187
- [14] PM p 97
- [15] SV p 90
- [16] SV p 64-65
- [17] Shakespeare - The Tempest I ii 363
- [18] SV p 205
- [19] TT p 113
- [20] TT p 95-96

WHEN FACT AND FICTION COLLIDE

Christopher Hodder-Williams

Interviewed By

David Barrett

(I'd expected to spend an hour - two at the most - with Christopher Hodder-Williams; I actually spent over ten hours in his company, including three hours taping the interview, a pub lunch, an excellent dinner cooked by his charming wife Deirdre and a lot of time spent chatting and listening to his own music, which is in the style of, and I believe at least equal to, that of Tom Lehrer, Cole Porter and Noel Coward. The following interview, due to its extensive length, is a highly edited version. May I thank the Hodder-Williams family for the hospitality I was given.)

BARRETT: Do you use music in your writing?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: The answer to that is almost always, especially in certain books, right the way through I've used specific pieces of music which have identified with that particular work, and it's just as well, because I dovetail my novels. The idea I'm working on now has been going on for fifteen years in the back of my mind, but if I play the music which corresponds with that, it immediately brings me into that focus. It's really rather a good way of using it - a sort of filing system. I seldom actually use the music while I'm writing; I play it over first. One of my books was largely inspired by the St Matthew Passion; one of the two books that I'm working on now is based on the Dream of Gerontius, by Elgar.

BARRETT: You started off writing short stories...

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I don't think any of them was published, but it was very good practice, to encapsulate something... I have written one, I think significant story for the Computer Weekly, which was about the effect of the black market in plutonium on the Middle East, which caused a ripple you could feel from here to eternity. The edition sold out in five minutes; this was in 1977.

BARRETT: And non-fiction?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Yes, when I came back from the States in '52, I wrote a whole series of things for Melody Maker, which was great fun because I loved New York, and so I wrote about various aspects of being an impoverished - and indeed I was - composer in New York, and the sort of things that happened to

you.

BARRETT: You then wrote your first science fiction novel, Chain Reaction.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: A great deal sparked that... I saw a film which showed - this was about 1942, just about when they built the Chicago Reactor - the whole process of the chain reaction and how it could be made into a bomb. I was absolutely horrified, because although there were mutterings just before the War of the possibility of harnessing the atom to make power, I was just disappointed at that time, technologically disappointed, that what they were thinking about was an explosive. Then I was on training in a place called Patterdale, in Cumbria, which I refer to as Moorbridge in The Egg Shaped Thing. It's always had a profound effect on me because it was there that the headlines of the Hiroshima Bomb appeared, and everybody else was throwing up their hands in triumph and joy, and I was sitting there in a state of shock, and horror. A bloke came up to me, a friend of mine, and said, 'You're not enjoying this, are you?' and I said, 'I think it's the worst thing that's ever happened in history.' It was the establishment of the precedent, as well as the horror of the event, which was going to mould the future.

BARRETT: Certainly the press reports of the time saw it as a great triumph, the fact that we'd been able to wipe out so many people, so quickly, just with one bomb, how wonderful it was that we could do this.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Oh, it was a turn-on... my feeling about the Bomb was that it had acquired so much momentum, like a flywheel, that they just couldn't stop, and without thinking out the pros and cons, they dropped it. On balance, in my estimation, we'd won the Pacific War in any case by that time; weighing up the odds, I would have thought that fewer lives would have been sac-

rificed had it not been dropped, and certainly, from a future point of view, it would have been infinitely better if they had just done a demonstration.

BARRETT: Do you support CND?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: When Chain Reaction came out there was a good deal of excitement. Thames - it was then called ABC - wanted to do Chain Reaction on television, but I'd sold the film rights to British Lion. Chain Reaction has nothing whatsoever to do with the Bomb. I was invited out to lunch with two guys from some book programme on television and it turned out that unless I agreed to become a member of the CND they wouldn't do the interview. I said, there are two things wrong with this: first of all, it's blackmail; and secondly, it has nothing whatsoever to do with CND. I said, it's irrelevant; I don't want to be thrust into a political situation which I haven't even studied... I didn't know enough about whether it was better or not to have unilateral disarmament. Of course, now it's become farcical - we're not nearly important enough as a nation to talk about unilateral disarmament; we're not in that league. We are a little country, with grandiose ideas about remaining a nuclear power, and we're an intrusion, in fact, we confuse the issue, in my opinion.

BARRETT: Many of your novels delve into dangers which are affecting life now, or extrapolating as to how they could affect life in the future... Do you think the various pressure groups, such as CND, and Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, etc, perform any useful function?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I think that as important as the CND are these marvellous women who have been at Greenham Common... But there's no doubt in my own mind that the CND are an extremely important voice, just as I think that the Friends of the Earth are doing a good job. They're doing good work so far as the

Pressurised Water Reactor is concerned - indeed, that's a desperate piece of equipment, and Harrisburg, I should have thought, proved that forever.

BARRETT: Yet we're still going ahead with it.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: We're still going ahead with it, with additional safeguards.

BARRETT: Quote, unquote.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Of course, that's always the most suspect phrase which could enter into it... Yes, I think they're immensely useful. As a lobby, they make the right noises. I think that Reagan, although he pretends to ignore them, he doesn't; I think that Francis Pym is forced to refer to the Peace Movement when he wasn't before. But this absurd business of trying to get J Walter Thompson to promote the Hydrogen Bomb. It's unbelievable; they've been accusing the Greenham Common women of being publicity minded; I mean, what could be worse than advertising the Bomb as if it were toothpaste? - that is Monty Python's Flying Circus gone berserk, mixed up with Dr Strangelove.

... One of the predictions I made was that there was going to be a huge leakage of radioactive water from the systems, which is exactly what happened; in 1980, 20,000 gallons of polluted water got out, very much as it did in Chain Reaction.

I took Chain Reaction very seriously. I had a lot of extremely talented professors working with me on it, and the full collaboration of the Atomic Energy Authority, because they didn't really know what had happened. The White Paper on the Windscale accident left out a lot of things - I don't think deliberately; they just didn't know. When you think of what they didn't know in the first place... like what happens when energy accumulates in the carbon block and has to be released - they didn't fully understand that.

I always had a hor-

ror of radiation anyway. You can't see it, you can't hear it, you don't know about it until it's too late, the details of the deaths and the frightful sicknesses and the lack of any possibility of any medical aid to those inflicted as they were in Hiroshima and Nagasaki... And what I knew of accidents that had already occurred at reactor sites made me very worried, and I thought that was a threat to the future. There are a number of integrated threats in the 1980's, and that is part of those threats.

BARRETT: They tend to come into most of your novels - the middle group of novels -

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Yes, and the ones I'm doing now. All the time I felt that we didn't know enough about radiation.

BARRETT: The Egg Shaped Thing?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: And The Main Experiment... If you want to know what started me writing? Fear of radiation.

BARRETT: Richard Stranger, in Fistful of Digits says: 'Science involves the use of the mind; technology, the use of the brain. I do not like technology.' Do you see a great difference between science and technology?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Yes, I do.

BARRETT: Are you 'anti-technology'?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: No. I'm anti the abuse of technology and I'm very aware that people don't know when they're abusing it. Suppose I were recording this conversation without your knowledge; to me, that would be an abuse of technology.

BARRETT: As at the beginning of The Main Experiment.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Yes... and the whole business of computerisation. Computers tend, don't they, to concentrate power... and there



again, you have a sort of cross-fertilisation of power; you have computers recently being accessed that contain advanced information about the design of nuclear weapons. Fistful of Digits was really about the mating of computer technology with the Bomb.

BARRETT: Did you have any particular body in mind when you described it as 'Servex' - the whole interlocked system?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: The body I had in mind was what Jung called the 'Universal Subconscious'. None of us know whether we're members of Servex or not; sometimes we are, in some of the things we do, and sometimes we're not. But I've seen it, in the most extraordinary way, have an effect on people's openness - and indeed, the opposite, their oppressiveness: fear of themselves, anxiety degenerated by the growing superiority of the 'developing intellect' - that Chris Evans discussed - of computers. Man feels that he is in competition with computers, he tries to emulate them, imitate them; he behaves like computers. I wouldn't mind computers if they were discrete, stand-alone objects which did particular, specific tasks which you knew exactly what they were doing, but - let's take an ordinary thing like the microchip - relatively few people know what is actually in that chip, or what it can do that has not been predicted.

BAKKEIL: I was talking to some computer technicians who were replacing a faulty board, and I asked them, 'How does that board work?' 'Well, there are the chips there, and the connections there...' 'Yes, but how does it work?' 'I don't know.' And they were the people who were servicing the computer, who were supposed to understand it, know how it worked.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Well, when you take that in conjunction with the experiments that were being done at certain places like the Burden Neurological Institute for Mental Diseases...there is the other side of the coin. When they were testing the early devices which could perform tricks, the only way in which they regarded any of these devices as valid was if it would do something that they hadn't actually predicted. If you transduce that into microchips, obviously when you have something as complicated as the 70,000 circuits you've got inside a modern chip, it's going to be able to do things which you don't even know about. And if you wire it, shall we say, into a bomb chain, it might 'make up its own mind' because of a gate that you hadn't known about, that could be opened by a combination of several inputs that you didn't realise in that combination would open that gate.

BARRETT: I can't understand people who say that

computer hardware never makes mistakes, or never does anything wrong, that it's always the programmer's fault or the inputter's fault.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: That's religion.

BARRETT: Because the hardware ...things do go wrong.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I've been in a computer room where they have gone wrong. We've had four incidents in America where they very nearly set off the nuclear chain, by going wrong.

Commercialism is behind this, to some extent; they don't like the idea of people saying that computers go wrong, because it's bad for the trade. That's one of the reasons, but of course the other is that they genuinely, having stopped believing in any sort of religion, have to have a substitute.

BARRETT: One character in Fistful of Digits says, 'Many people fear computers, because they seem to impersonate human beings. But they are wrong. What they should fear is the opposite: human beings who impersonate computers.' Recently there have been items on BBC2's Newsnight and Radio 4's Today about people, whether they work with computers or not, spending every waking moment at home with their Spectrum or ZX-81 or whatever; they spend all evening, sometimes till 2 or 3 in the morning, writing programs, testing them, debugging them, writing more, and getting into machine code so that they can really get into the innards of the computer, and they do think, they have to think, in terms of computer logic: On-Off, Yes-No, If-Then-Else. It's now being seen as an actual medical problem by some doctors and professors of computer science who are worried about these people coming to think in the way a computer 'thinks'.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I think they have every right to be scared, because it affects the emotional attitudes, not just the reasoning. Of course, there are two sides

to the coin; one mustn't be absolutely hung up on this one, because I find that my own two kids are very much into computers at school - and don't forget that we did invent the computer, that it reflects some of our own methods of reasoning. Three things: first of all, it limits you, because you tend only to use reason and not intuition, if you're not careful. Two, there might be an advantage in that some children react violently against it; but not enough to make me happy. Thirdly, I have a very odd, or - it's a very healthy means of communicating with my son Simon, who is far more into computers than I am... Very often he teaches me just as much about rational thinking as I can help him on intuitive thinking.

So I think if there's any change in my attitudes at all it is fractional, but it is that I'm not quite so fanatic as I was in Digits, but then I felt I ought to be fanatic in Digits to make the point. After all, I wanted to get a reaction. And I certainly got it... But I was aware of the good things that could be got out of them, as I was aware of the dangers.

But on the overall view of whether it's a danger, I would say it's a terrible danger for many, many reasons; for example, the passivity of those awful television games where you do practically nothing and the machine does it all for you..

I worked for a major computer firm; I was in charge of the publicity brochures. I was honest: for as long as I worked for them I tried to sell computers. But at the same time I tried to make them see what the dangers were, and indeed, I brought about a Parliamentary seminar in partnership with the firm in order to discuss the dangers of there being no data protection, which there still isn't, and no protection for privacy.

BARRETT: Of course, this is in the News now: the BMA instructing doctors not to co-operate with the Police over computerised medical records.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I think they've been extremely slow about that. The damage is done. There's so much, relational data files that have no index, on people's activities, on their interests, on their political affiliations, on all sorts of things they're perfectly entitled to have, and on their medical records - and people are extraordinarily unaware of how it might come back and hit them. For instance, to take a simple case, if a child is erroneously regarded by a teacher as being backward, that goes on its computer record, and it might make it subsequently difficult for that child to have advanced education or even get a job. But it's early days for that generation, the offspring of the people who were so keen to blab in all directions, and allow cross-indexing from heaven knows how many computer systems to another, first by trafficking the computer tapes, but later by direct hookups and networking, that of course, now we've got ourselves into a hopeless mess and it's terribly dangerous. The doctors began to co-operate, and that established the link, and it's all very well for the BMA to speak up now - I was blasting away at the doctors at the time of Fistful of Digits and they wouldn't take any notice.

BARRETT: Again, in that book, you have a very moving description of a severely disturbed executive picking up a telephone receiver, beginning to dial, replacing the receiver, swivelling around in his chair, and doing the whole cycle over and over again. A character comments: 'That telephone call, the one that connects with nobody, which is never completed, and yet which has to be made, is probably the last despairing effort he can make...in order to communicate.' What we've just been saying about computers and computer technology... the more technologically complex, efficient, speedy, marvellous our communication systems become, do we actually communicate any better for it, or do we stop communicating, in a true sense, altogether?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I'm sure we make it infinitely worse; the problems are manifold. Let us just take that particular example. There is an ataxia situation, which is a nervous complaint...I was saying that we have emotional ataxia, in which the ability to make decisions of our own - like reaching for a phone, grabbing it - are becoming significantly more difficult.

Often we're communicating via a television set. You see people who watch a programme, and only merely make conversation as a result of what they've seen in that programme, which I may say they very quickly forget, because it's replaced by so much noise; the television set is almost deliberately overprogrammed with information. The amount of information which is spurious insofar as people don't remember it, that you can record on tape, and can then reproduce in an organised way, is quite terrifying.

But to answer your question directly, the answer of course is yes; it does a great deal of damage, and only by enlightenment, by self-awareness and by insight can people work out just what effect it's having on them.

BARRETT: Would you actually describe yourself as a science fiction writer, or as a scientific thriller writer, or just 'a novelist', or what?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: It depends on the book, rather than on me. The biggest thing I've ever attempted, which I've got a very advanced draft of, is almost a straight novel, but I would say it comes under the category of science fiction. Science adventure - there's obviously a lot of adventure writing in what I attempt. Chain Reaction was really 'fiction science', in that it's absolutely technically correct, and was checked by God knows how many professors. Science fiction writer I certainly am when it comes to things like The Main Experiment, The Egg Shaped Thing, 98.4, the one I'm working on now.

BARRETT: Which writers have most influenced you?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I try to be influenced by as many people as possible; but I can tell you what has influenced me the most, from the earliest days. One was an absolute masterpiece of a film called 'Forbidden Planet'. Another, which was not nearly so widely publicised, was made by the same team in black and white; I don't remember the title of it, but it used Robbie the Robot, and was the very first example of how a computer could acquire consciousness. Now, like every other writer, I claim to be original in some of the things that I write, but of course there is a continuum, and although you don't derive your ideas, you hope, from other people, you're certainly very powerfully influenced. I thought that 'Forbidden Planet' was quite brilliant, and he, of course, was influenced by The Tempest. John Wyndham. H G Wells: a masterly film of 'The War of the Worlds', the original colour film, about 15, 20 years ago, and a very little-known, beautifully made, and very under-rated film of 'The Time Machine'; I thought that was exceptionally well handled. John Buchan. Nevil Shute; - powerfully influenced by Nevil Shute, and indeed the Press did the usual thing with my flying books of saying, 'He is the natural successor to Nevil Shute', and I thought, well, I'll have to stop this, because the one thing I was always scared of was getting into a niche, and just go on writing the same old bloody stuff... there are certain aviation writers who've gone on doing it forever. Not Nevil Shute, who of course wrote On The Beach, which again, I found a strong influence.

But the influences have come as much from music and sculpture and painting as anywhere, and particularly choral works like The Matthew Passion, The Dream of Gerontius, Benjamin Britten's War Requiem. And there is, I believe they call it in computer science, a 'transfer of function', where you convert one input into a completely different sort of

output; that certainly happens so far as music is concerned.

And, of course, what people say, their views, what's said by people usually very late at a party when they begin to get a bit morose, and they start talking quite seriously. I'm seldom influenced by anything that's said on television, I may say; with, he said, conceit! - usually I'm ahead of them, usually they're saying things that I was saying before...

In short, any input which seems to fit into the general pattern of what one's own thoughts would like to be if they were completely expanded; anything that adds to the total, in as many different dimensions as possible... I love Romantic music, but it doesn't contribute a great deal to what you write; it's too hysterical, it's not disciplined in the sense that listening to Brahms or Beethoven is. Or Bach - his marvellous method - everything comes together in that extraordinary way.

So yes, inputs: anything. Be influenced by as many people as you can, if only because it protects you from plagiarism. If you've got that number of inputs it's almost inconceivable; they all get processed in the brain, especially during dreams, where the computer's busy printing out its journal tape and its dump tape and everything else, and clearing the brain for the next day - and organising the ideas you've put into it.

BARRETT: You mentioned Wyndham, Wells, and certain SF films. Do you read any SF at all? I'm thinking of fairly recent British SF, people like Richard Cowper.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I'll answer this without shame or remorse, or any other sort of emotion: I haven't read any of them. I haven't even read Asimov, though I think I saw one short story done on television.

BARRETT: I think of you as a specifically British writer, and people like Richard Cowper and Chris Priest are also very British; somebody like John Brunner,

although he is British, wrote for the American market...

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I don't regard myself - again, subjectively, one can't know - as being particularly a British writer. All I do is write down what my psyche dictates, I suppose; if that happens to be British it's because I'm British, and therefore it doesn't surprise me.

BARRETT: Do you have any interaction with any other writers?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: No, not through any particular will, but because it just doesn't seem to happen. You are trapped in your own books, and once I'm in a book... I was determined that this interview didn't take place when I was stuck, and I worked late two nights running, to make sure that I got to a point where the book was flowing. You can't easily come out of a science fiction book because of the world you've created for yourself, and therefore you can't talk coherently without deferring constantly to text - which is not what one wants to do.

BARRETT: How much are your characters based on real people?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: They're never anyone - except for Richard Stranger, who was based directly on my housemaster at school -

BARRETT: - I thought Stranger was far more compelling than the main character.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Yes, I would guess so. John Herbert, at school, was such a positive character; he was easy to write. But very rarely do I - I always combine people: I don't take one person and put him in a book; I always combine him with a number of facets of other people, and he will develop. But whether or not they are real people, I think that's a decision for the reader to make, not the writer. They become

more real as the book progresses, and if they don't I tend to get rid of them, I'll demote them, and they become minor characters, and they quietly disappear -

BARRETT: - spear bearers, or shield bearers -

HODDER-WILLIAMS: - yes, if they don't work out the way I want.

BARRETT: How do you rate the relative merits of preplanning and stream-of-consciousness?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: You never know what preplanning you put in, because if you use your subconscious as much as I do - and I note that almost any book I've ever written goes back to an earlier attempt which I've either scrapped or only half succeeded in getting across, or which has been a television play that I've done that I've turned into a book, or vice versa - they develop over an enormously long period, and all this time, I think, you're working on structure, you're trying to decide how to construct the thing.

BARRETT: I think by preplanning I was thinking of working out the basic idea, then the storyline, then the details of the plot, then setting it out chapter by chapter in note form.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Well, I don't get it down to quite that, but I have to confess that easily the best book I've ever written, which has not been published yet, was in fact planned in some detail, but that was because it was originally going to be a motion picture, and I had to submit a treatment. The picture hasn't been made yet; I think it will be an absolutely marvellous film, and I couldn't be less humble about it! I'm humble about many, many things. Like all writers, one is a combination of necessary conceit, which you have to have in order to sit down and believe that anybody is ever going to read it, and extreme humility, which

Chain Reaction

By Christopher Hodder-Williams

"ONLY TOO HORRIFYINGLY PLAUSIBLE.
MR. HODDER-WILLIAMS'S
BOOK IS A FIRST CLASS
MUSHROOM CLOUD
THRILLER."
—British Sunday
Sunday Times



means that you're the most easily put down guy in town. And you oscillate between these two, but you've got to have both, and you don't quite know which bits of you are which.

BARRETT: In *The Prayer Machine*
Dr Jane Schuber is

asked:

'Can you honestly say that Neil is suffering from any known illness?' 'He is catatonic.'

Anne Marie said, 'Yes, he does not move. That is what is meant by "catatonic"...We talk jargon to hide our ignorance. It is so easy! But does it solve the problem?'

- and earlier, when Neil Prentice is talking to Jane Schuber, he says: 'There are plenty of doctors who interpret schizophrenia in the pedestrian way that you do. They simply write out the labels and stick them on.'

'You mean that, deep down, the label frightens you?'

He said, 'If the label isn't properly made out, the package isn't going to

reach its destination. I don't want to end up as Lost Property. You're not happy about labels and jargon?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Let's put it another way: I want to be labelled as a writer. Now, the best reviewers will never, ever use a book as an excuse to psychoanalyse the writer; that is not their aim. Lesser reviewers relish the idea of trying to use the writer's honesty about himself... I remember saying something about this in a letter to you, about knowing one's own libido, and so on. You've got to know yourself terribly well; you've got to have an enforced amount of insight; you've actually got to work at it frightfully hard. In so doing you could, it is true, miss certain things about yourself. It's almost a *sine qua non*, that if there is a mental aberration, you are yourself going to fail to see it, however hard you look, though there's no proof of that.

BARRETT: The aberration will blind you to its own existence.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Yes... So, you are equipped to be able to work out what you are, and having done so, you can then work out whether people are being fair in their assessments of what you are, gauging it from what you write.

BARRETT: Your novels make a number of scientific predictions; do you see yourself as a Futurologist?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I don't believe in Futurology as an Ology, only as something that you can intuitively feel. And people who don't write feel it; one of the things I've found I succeed in most as a writer, with my readership, are people who sense these things, already, and who want them confirmed. Rather than thinking that anything I have to say is particularly new, it's, 'Well, I thought that, and here's somebody putting it down on paper.'

BARRETT: In The Prayer Machine Neil Prentice projects a world through his form of schizophrenia. It's left very much up to the reader to decide which world actually exists. Is he living in the future and projecting himself into the past, or is he was living in the past, and projecting himself into the future. While, we don't treat the mentally disturbed as criminals any more, is it right that we still treat them as being insane? Could they perhaps have something that we're missing?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Now we're into jurisdiction, and things like the McNaughton Rule, which of course is nonsense... since the whole essence of schizophrenia is that a man thinks that one thing is happening while really another is, but he still may know what he's done, and the McNaughton Rule says that if he knows what he's done, and knew he was doing it, then he is not insane, and he's guilty. As far as the definition of sanity is concerned, there's a very interesting example in how we change in our estimate of what insanity is. About twenty years ago, one of the prime features of schizophrenia which doctors talked a great deal about was that people were unduly honest and outspoken about their sexual needs. Well now everybody who is anybody is extremely outspoken on television and so on... If all those people were schizophrenics, the lunatic asylums would be full of people in the media.

BARRETT: We're redefining sanity.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I think this has happened through the ages. And when you take something as complicated as schizophrenia - which isn't, anyway, one disease, it's a whole group of diseases... An artist I knew had been asked to compare his

paintings with the paintings of schizophrenic patients; both were published side by side in one of the colour supplements. The psychiatrist who wrote the article was frightfully careful to make out that whereas the artist wasn't a schizophrenic, all the other people were. The pictures looked the same. The artist roared with laughter and said, 'Of course I can be schizophrenic, as a painter I sometimes have to be. But what is a schizophrenic?' By the same token, if people want to hurl labels about, I'm schizophrenic, otherwise I couldn't have written The Prayer Machine and The Egg Shaped Thing - they're typically schizoid books. It isn't so much minding about the labels, although they can do you active harm in society, it's what do those labels really imply?

BARRETT: Would you say that to appreciate The Prayer Machine as you intended it, you have to accept it in a schizophrenic manner?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: No. I think that would be like saying that you'd have to be a homosexual to listen to Tchaikovsky. I think that the reader must be sufficiently hung up on the story, and sufficiently interested in the way in which I try to give them not only two alternatives but a mixture, where you could say that both are happening, or that is happening, or this is happening, or which. I think you're offering them a choice, but I don't think you're asking them to be schizoid in order to be able to read it, because then I think you really are limiting your public.

BARRETT: I was thinking of the condition that both A and B are true, but are also mutually exclusive.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: This is where again one is in conflict

with the whole of the thinking that goes behind psychoanalysis as it has been practiced up to recently. The quantum theory is totally mutually exclusive. If you try and prove that light is a particle, it automatically shows that it's a ray; if you try and prove it's a ray, the proof comes up that it's a particle.

BARRETT: And on Sundays...

HODDER-WILLIAMS: And on Sundays. You know it. So in fact it is both. But it is also either. If nature is based, as it is, on things like relativity and the quantum theory, and the Universe is not as we see it, but as it has been subsequently shown to be by people like Max Planck, Oppenheimer, Einstein, Fermi, and all the rest of them, we are also. So I think one has to modify one's attitude. When you're talking about science fiction - a science fiction writer's almost got to be able to choose to be schizophrenic, if it suits the book. In other words, you can switch it on, and you can switch it off.

BARRETT: You're suspending disbelief.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: As a bridge. And very often I'll use a bridge in another way. If I've got an awkward passage in a book, and I know what the next passage is going to be, I'll link it with anything, however crappy, it doesn't matter, so long as it gets me over the hump. Which is precisely what you do with a psychiatric patient. If he's got a kink somewhere and you want to get from point A to point B, you'll use a bridge, you'll use his own delusions, if you like, as that bridge, so that you can get to where you want to go. And then you can change the nature of that bridge and go back to it. And that bridge will change all the time. And in revising a novel, that's exactly what you do to that passage, or a bridge passage in a piece of music.

You cannot write science fiction - modern science fiction - without switching on schizo-

phrenia, and I think the difference between a clinical schizophrenic and a writing schizophrenic is that whereas the clinical schizophrenic is unable to switch it off when he wants to, a writer can.

BARRETT: Would you use this bridge technique as a bypass to writer's blocks? Do you get the classic writer's block?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Oh, I get the classic writer's block, and that will stop me dead, and I will go back and find out... it happened last night. I overwrote by about four pages, and I knew the exact point... until I got it down to the actual line, as to where I'd taken the wrong turning. Then out comes the guillotine, I guillotine it off there, neatly chop in a new piece of paper, and continue. But it can happen the other way too. You meet a block which you know, you recognise as a block, and you think, well fuck that, I'm going to busk in something, just to get me past it, because I know what's coming next.

BARRETT: Keeping with states of sanity...Coward's Paradise is possibly your most different book, different from the others. It's actually my favourite novel of yours. It's tremendously disturbing. You see Michael Adams, the whole way through, wondering whether he should go ahead with the treatment or not; is he going to be the same person afterwards as before?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I was aware, knowing what I did about the Neurological Institute, that the people there were fighting themselves. I think, by the time that particular operation was carried out, they knew, as many other people have found out, that however much you may elaborate on a lobotomy, it's still a lobotomy.

BARRETT: They're still destroying.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Yes... I think the centre of anxiety is the centre of the personality, so if you try and knock out that, you're knocking out the person. If you choose to think of me as an anxious person, as indeed most writers are, if my centre of anxiety were knocked out, I'm sure so would the source of the very writing that I produce.

BARRETT: At the very end of the book, Michael Adams is left incapable of writing anything; he's become - scrambled - in a way.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: He's become deprived, hasn't he? There simply is a roadblock across that part of his brain from which all this creativeness was being generated.

BARRETT: His girlfriend says at the end:

'It just may be possible for Michael to write in about five years' time if he succeeded in a very complicated process... It involves using other parts of the brain to... "reroute" creative thought past the damaged area. The process does not involve any surgery...' Surgery's put it wrong, but it can't put it right.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: The danger is that they always try and make up for unsuccessful surgery with more surgery. And, of course, the situation becomes exponential. The more you do it, the worse it gets. I'm absolutely dedicated in anything I can do against the use of lobotomy not just for the reasons I gave, but because I've never seen a case - I believe there was one case on record where it actually worked. But it leads them to do terrible experiments, and I may say that there's nothing whatsoever in Coward's Paradise which is science fiction at all; the bit about the monkeys, everything - it's all true. Yet it was published as science fiction. You asked me which are my favourite books other than the ones I'm writing; the two I would pick out are The Main Experiment and Coward's Paradise.



BARRETT: Your last 3 novels aren't in paperback.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: That's right. But all of them are in paperback in Germany; in fact, one of them is just being reprinted in paperback in Germany.

BARRETT: Is it more difficult to get books published now than it was 10 or 15 years ago?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: It is anyway; for me infinitely more so.

BARRETT: I only found out Think Tank existed a few weeks ago. My local library had great difficulty in getting me a copy.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: There's no chance of buying it in the shops. You'd normally have to order it via a wholesaler, and the wholesalers won't have it.

BARRETT: How do your novels go down in other countries?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: In America, I went down very well for as long as I was published there. I don't think it's out of the question that I'll be republished in America. I think it's more likely that this book, The Chromosome Game, will be published in America first; my magnum opus. The books that count most, not so much for literary value, we've covered those - the books I consider have the most to say are Chain Reaction, Fistful of Digits, and that one.

BARRETT: I'm still very impressed by The Prayer Machine.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: That's being reprinted in Germany now. In this country it was not promoted, it was not given any pre-publicity at all... However, I had a marvellous Editor; she was great; she did the work with me on Prayer Machine, and she was vicious! - but marvellous. She wouldn't let me get away with a thing; it was a joy to work with her. It was a very complicated book to write. I had a lot of fun writing that; I'll tell you what was interesting in writing that book, and that was working out the rationale. How you got him back and forwards in time, and how you worked out that the reader had three options to choose from, and the schizophrenic state you had to get yourself in to write it anyway, and justifying what he did, and indeed, making almost an asset out of schizophrenia that enabled him to discover about Forenchoris.

BARRETT: In my letter I mentioned the coincidence of you, and Richard Cowper, and Colin Cooper, and the late Edmund Cooper, all being born in the same year, and all being science fiction writers.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Of course coincidence has more significance than is accepted. I was involved at an early stage in the study of coincidence - or, as it's now called, simultaneity. The Main Experiment covers it to some extent; so does The Egg Shaped Thing -

BARRETT: - the whole issue of cause and effect -

HODDER-WILLIAMS: - yes, and inversion of cause and effect, and indeed, things happening at the same time. I can say with some conviction, now, that the incidence of coincidence - if you can use such an awful phrase! - has gone up since Bikini. And I want to know why.

BARRETT: A different subject: I think you can look at music and writing in two extreme ways, as masturbation or as prostitution. If you write purely for your own pleasure, and not for anybody else whatsoever, that's literary masturbation; and if you're writing purely for the market, and not because you mean anything or feel anything, then that's prostitution of your art. And you should aim for the middle path, that is, true love expressed, working - meaningful.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Yes, I would opt for true sex, because I write from the point of view that this is the kind of book that I would like to read, and I identify completely with the people I'm writing for, so I assume, when I'm writing something, that if I like it, they're going to. Therefore I feel that it's not exactly masturbation, nor is it exactly prostitution, because I never write anything to grab a market; I write it angled to grab me, because I'm part of that market.

BARRETT: Sexual affairs appear in most of your novels. In Think Tank you imply that our sexuality - 'the potential of orgasm' - is a source of strength.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I certainly feel that the potential of sex, the idea, works up a degree of all sorts of energies which don't appear to be related to it, but certainly drive you. If you spend them wastefully, in whatever way...I think, by the very nature of the Universe, that something is being mis-spent which is there for a purpose. That

sounds terribly preachified!

BARRETT: Quite often you have your main character and his girlfriend disappear for a few days, away from the terrors they've got involved in; would you say that the release of sexual energy is providing them with an inner strength?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I think so; they've released it productively in that it has been true sex, interlocking two people; they've refreshed each other and they've strengthened each other.

BARRETT: Peter Nicholls, in his Encyclopaedia, uses the phrase 'rather male chauvinist' about your writing.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I think that whoever reads something is entitled to interpret it the way it comes over to him. If to that particular person it appears male chauvinist, I don't object to it, any more than if he thought that it came over like a fairy. The fact is, you are what you write, you hope - if you're not, then you're not writing truthfully - and we don't conduct this household on a male chauvinist basis. On the whole, I go against the whole idea of fanatical anti-sexism. The answer is that the way you treat human beings outside of the bedroom is completely different from the fantasies you choose to enact once you're there.

BARRETT: Some of your characters seem disturbed by the idea of homosexuality; I'm thinking of Nigel Yenn's reactions to Michael in 98.4.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: There's a certain form of queenishness which has nothing to do with homosexuality. I find queenish behaviour not only anti-social and rather stupid and terribly exclusive, including everybody out - but nothing to do with being a homosexual. I think that what Yenn doesn't like is the kind of clubbiness which I found

in showbusiness when I was in the theatre. Those who were homosexual and who chose to make it a barrier between you and they, forgot that we're all a mixture of the two sexes anyway, and therefore it's ridiculous to suppose that such artificial barriers are necessary. I think it was largely a defence mechanism when homosexuality was illegal.

BARRETT: I divide your novels into three periods: the first five, the next four, and the five most recent; they seem to fall into these slots.

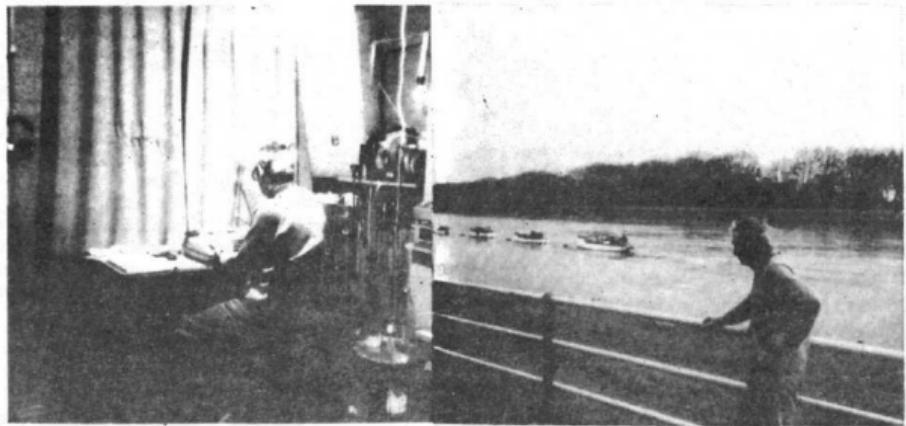
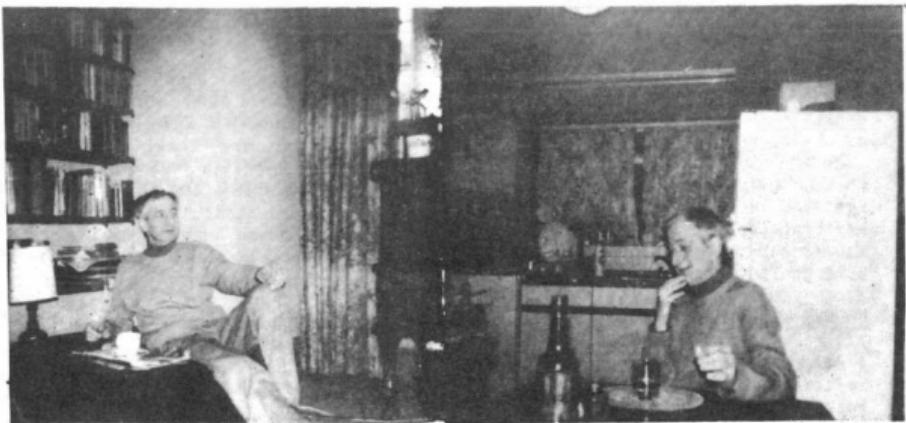
HODDER-WILLIAMS: I think you're quite right. The first lot are the ultra-rational books: The Cummings Report, Chain Reaction, which was so accurate scientifically it almost hurts, and the three aviation books. Then we get the schizoid books. Then after 98.4 we get Coward's Paradise, which is documentary, pure and simple. That is what happens to people... and you'll notice that my voice takes on a pretty vicious tone.

BARRETT: Panic O'Clock I'm not entirely happy about -

HODDER-WILLIAMS: - a lot of people aren't! -

BARRETT: - partly because it's your classic British disaster novel, if you take out the Virulent Panic; it goes with John Christopher's Death of Grass, Edmund Cooper's All Fool's Day, most Wyndham, particularly Triffids - society breaking down and small groups setting up, with vigilante patrols etc.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I know a lot of people feel that it's a lesser book than the others. A lot of 'ordinary' readers - I don't mean this unkindly or patronis-



ingly - went for it because it's an easy read.

BARRETT: The characters were stereotypes; I got the impression they were meant to be... Diane Keeling was definitely the stereotype suburban housewife.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: And Tanya is pure fantasy. I did get some fun out of it, and I hope it gave fun to other people, but again it wasn't angled to market. I feel people, especially people who are not highbrow, would have gone with it. It's just come out in Germany in paperback.

BARRETT: I think the most interesting character in it is Melhuish, the archetypal grovelling Civil Servant, who knows his place, cringes against walls, and yet when he's put in a situation when he has to do something, he copes. And then at the end of the book he reverts.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I didn't plan for him to revert; it was a complete surprise to me when he found he could not sustain it. It was very much stream-of-consciousness, though it was a very rational book - I mean, rational, as opposed to some of the others.

BARRETT: A straight story. I liked the lemmings as well -

HODDER-WILLIAMS: The analogy is quite valid; I'm not ashamed of the analogy. There is overcrowding, we are panicked by proximity, we've just had a scene in Trafalgar Square which must have been a nightmare. We're very conscious of being on top of each other.

BARRETT: In many of your early and middle novels, you have a self-confessed smug, conceited, yet desperately insecure and somewhat paranoid main character.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Yes and no. I would not go along entirely with that. Higgs (The Main Experiment), of course, is the ultimate, conceited -

BARRETT: - but in a nice way! -

HODDER-WILLIAMS: - well, I think he's quite attractive, in a way; I don't mind him. Fleming is very self-doubting in The Higher They Fly. In Cummings Report, of course, you have a very neurotic, amplified version of myself.

BARRETT: In The Cummings Report his girlfriend tells him, 'Try something new - be natural! Don't be so determined to succeed', and a few pages later he explains, 'I might get snubbed'. There's a similar sequence in The Main Experiment where he kisses a girl very violently, and then says, 'Why can't I feel anything gentle?' She replies, 'Because you are desperately afraid of getting hurt'. I suppose, in a way, this gets back to the chauvinist thing: you have to overemphasise your masculine aggressiveness. This character, who keeps appearing, in various forms, is scared of being hurt, scared of being let down, scared of being kicked in the balls again, because he has been, by girlfriends, by business associates, over and over again.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: The character you're talking about must, of course, be partly me, since he runs through so many of the books. The other reason, which is a much more objective one, is that I found myself, by the time I started writing, awfully sick of the cut-and-dried hero. I was in the forefront of the anti-hero, and I didn't go for this amazing Saint of James Bond who was absolutely infallible with women and had no self doubts.

BARRETT: In Coward's Paradise
Fran says to Michael Adams:
'I like your books, especially the last two.'
'You must have been the only one.'
'Oh, I could tell they weren't commercial. All muddle and no story. That's what I like. Can't stand it when everything is justified by the plot.'
Were you applying this in any way to yourself?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Oh, I think so, yes. I'm very much a plot writer, and here was an opportunity to write a book in which the issue was much more important than the plot. And I therefore didn't have to be so pushed around by the plot. Certainly it wasn't true that I regarded my previous book as a failure, since Panic O'Clock got marvelous reviews. But there again, I was putting myself in somebody else's shoes, as that character, so the character doesn't come across as quite the same as some of the others, though he is still unsure of himself. I'm a great believer in being unsure of myself; it's much better than being the other way around.

BARRETT: As you said earlier, you need the combination of conceit and humility.

HODDER-WILLIAMS: And to put it in a rather male chauvinist way, I suppose - and here you probably have succeeded in digging out the real me! - there's no denying that women like this, because they want to be protective, they want to mother you to a certain extent. They don't want this (heavily masculine, yachting club type voice) character, they're sick of 'em. I don't want to write books where the hero is so eternally pleased with himself.

BARRETT: In a letter you told me, 'Writing is drilling for oil. First you get the steam and hot air, each book you write. You have to go through this apparently wasteful process.'

HODDER-WILLIAMS: Yes, but you often find that those things that you write down in the initial stages, you find that you can develop them later as something else. I never admit, when I sit down to write a book, that this is ever going to happen to me, because it's too defeatist to sit down and say, 'I know I'm going to throw out the first hundred pages that I write.' But it happens almost always. It didn't happen with The Chromosome Game, or Panic O'Clock, or Chain Reaction, or 98.4. But boy, if it happens, you know all about it! But in the case of Digits it happened eighteen times, I mean, that was the most difficult book... I knew that the whole Electronic Revolution was wrong, I knew that it was going to be abused, I knew it had been abused even then, and it was something I knew I'd got to put my finger on and put into words and really state the case, and it turned out to be the most difficult book I ever attempted.

BARRETT: Finally, I know it's very difficult to be objective about your own work, for anybody, but can you point to any facet of your work that you're particularly proud of - or not proud of - over the last twenty five years?

HODDER-WILLIAMS: I don't want to sound pat, but what I'm proud of is the enormous work I put into it, the continuity, the length of time I will keep burrowing at the same idea until I get it right. The weakness is the overplotting, and the dependance on plot, and on suspense and tension; the tendency to stereotype characters, and to stereotype romance, are the things that I'm least proud of, but I'm not ashamed of - there's a difference. And I'm proud, most of all, of the fact that most of the books are directly relevant to what society is experiencing now and will experience in the future.

BARRETT: Thank you very much Christopher Hodder-Williams.

DAVID PRINGLE - DAVID PRINGLE - DAVID PRINGLE
THE TOP THIRTY ANGLO-AMERICAN
SCIENCE FICTION MOVIES OF THE
1950s TO THE 1970s



There have been a number of critical works on science-fiction films, and for some years now there have been Hugo Awards for the most popular SF movies (as judged by SF fans). But I am not aware that anyone has ever published any sort of "best" list compiled according to an attempt at "objective" criteria. I offer the following as a modest beginning.

Firstly, a word on the limitations which I have imposed on my method and my list. I decided to confine myself to films made in the USA and Britain between 1950 and 1979. Thus, you will not find Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1926), Things to Come (William Cameron Menzies, 1936) or Solaris (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972) herein - to name the three most obvious omissions which come to mind. I would contend that science fiction really only got underway as a cinematic genre with Destination Moon (Irving Pichel) in 1950. Nothing prior to that movie was labelled as SF, for the simple reason that the term "science fiction" did not become familiar to movie-makers and movie-goers until at least the late 1940s. There were isolated examples of what we would now regard as SF cinema made prior to 1950, but there was no continuous tradition. There were traditions of fantasy and horror films, of course, but they are another matter: for the purposes of this exercise, I do not regard movies such as King Kong, or even the many versions of Frankenstein, as SF at all. I must concede that the limitation to English-language films, and the cut-off date of 1979, are entirely artificial and cannot be justified for any "theoretical" reason. There were entirely matters of convenience and were largely caused by the limitations of my research tools.

The tools in question are three books: Film Guide, 2nd edition, by Leslie Halliwell (Granada, 1979); TV Movies, 1981-82 edition, edited by Leonard Maltin (Signet, 1980); and Movies on TV, 1982-83 edition, edited by Steven H. Scheuer (Bantam, 1981). From now on I shall refer to these simply as Halliwell, Maltin and Scheuer.

All three books contain alphabetical lists of films, together with brief evaluations. What makes them particularly useful for comparative purposes is that each of them rates the films listed according to a system of "stars" or asterisks, on a scale from nought to four. Thus, any particular film may win a maximum of four stars for quality, according to the tastes and critical judgements of the individual compilers. A film which is listed in all three books (and most cinematic feature films are, since each of these volumes attempts to be "complete") may win a maximum of 12 points when one adds the various scores. By adding the scores from the three books, one ironed out the idiosyncrasies of the three compilers, and arrives (one hopes) at an intelligent consensus of judgment. Of course, remarkably few films do score 12 out of 12, and that is as it should be. Orson Welles's Citizen Kane gets 12 points, as do a handful of other acknowledged cinematic masterpieces, but no SF movie that I have traced in these books gets a top score.

These books are not compiled by science fiction fans, but by movie buffs, and, again, that is as it should be. We are, after all, dealing with films and not with written works of SF. By totalling the scores of all the SF movies I could think of, we arrive at a picture of how the movie experts rate "our" films. (Of course, they are not really our films at all: SF movies are made for the mass audience, not for the SF readership.)

One final note: both Maltin and Scheuer use a system of half-points (any particular film may be rated $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, or whatever) but Halliwell does not. Thus Halliwell's judgments are less finely graded than are Maltin's or Scheuer's. I don't think this distorts the picture unduly. Halliwell tends to be a "hard" marker, and his grim judgments help keep the balance (his occasional generosity make for some delightful surprises). So the top score possible for any film is 12 stars, while the second highest score is $11\frac{1}{2}$ stars, and so on down. In fact, no SF movie scores more than 11 points.

The following list of science fiction films contains all the movies which have a combined Halliwell-Maltin-Scheuer score of seven stars or more. The films are listed in chronological order within each level of scoring, and in each case I have given title, director and date.

-
1. 11 Stars Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel, 1956)
Dr Strangelove (Stanley Kubrick, 1963)
2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)
4. 10½ Stars Planet of the Apes (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1967)
Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977)
6. 10 Stars Fail Safe (Sidney Lumet, 1964)
7. 9½ Stars On the Beach (Stanley Kramer, 1959)
8. 9 Stars Them! (Gordon Douglas, 1954)
Village of the Damned (Wolf Rilla, 1960)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Philip Kaufman, 1978)
11. 8½ Stars The Thing (Christian Nyby, 1951)
Forbidden Planet (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956)
The Incredible Shrinking Man (Jack Arnold, 1957)
The Day the Earth Caught Fire (Val Guest, 1962)
Seconds (John Frankenheimer, 1966)
A Clockwork Orange (Stanley Kubrick, 1971)
17. 8 Stars The Andromeda Strain (Robert Wise, 1971)
Sleeper (Woody Allen, 1973)
Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Steven Spielberg, 1977)
20. 7½ Stars The Day the Earth Stood Still (Robert Wise, 1951)
War of the Worlds (Bryon Haskin, 1953)
The Time Machine (George Pal, 1960)
Robinson Crusoe on Mars (Bryon Haskin, 1964)
Fahrenheit 451 (Francois Truffaut, 1966)
Charly (Ralph Nelson, 1968)
The Man Who Fell to Earth (Nicholas Roeg, 1976)
27. 7 Stars It Came from Outer Space (Jack Arnold, 1953)
This Island Earth (Joseph Newman, 1955)
1984 (Michael Anderson, 1956)
Fantastic Voyage (Richard Fleischer, 1966)
Westworld (Michael Crichton, 1973)
Death Race 2000 (Paul Bartel, 1975)

And there you have it: the top 32 movies, a pantheon of postwar SF on celluloid. A few comments of my own:- I think it's a pretty fair listing on the whole, and it's nice to see an unpretentious little black-and-white B movie (Siegel's Invasion of the Body Snatchers) up there in joint number-one position. Planet of the Apes seems to me to be absurdly overrated, as does Fantastic Voyage. In both cases competent directors made passable mass-audience entertainment out of dubious material. Close Encounters... comes too low down the list in my opinion (this is largely because Halliwell has an unaccountable prejudice against it and refused to give it a single star; Maltin and Scheuer both give it four out of four). Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979) does not seem to have appealed to any of our compilers, and failed to make the list at all. Personally, I would have rated it somewhere above Fantastic Voyage. But on the whole this is a good and reliable listing of the best Anglo-American SF movies of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Anyone disagree?



BOOK REVIEWS



MORAL INTENTION

JUDITH HANNA



(YESTERDAY'S MEN by GEORGE TURNER. Faber and Faber 1983, 223pp., £7.95)

Before he became known as an astringent critic of SF, writing for The Age, Melbourne's quality morning daily, for Bruce Gillespie's SF Commentary, and occasionally for Foundation, Turner had published five "mainstream" novels. In the year or so before the appearance of Beloved Son, George spoke at conventions of the difficulties he'd found trying to do justice to developing both ideas and characters in writing his SF. In previous works, he said, he'd simply been able to let the characters have their heads since they were what the book was all about. But in SF, it was ideas that were primary, and in order to fully explore them, he had to restrict the development of the characters. In Beloved Son and Vanegloray, his first two SF novels, the exposition of idea swamps both story and characters. Not so in Yesterday's Men, in which the story sweeps along with plenty of character, except when the ideas intrude. Then it stops. In Turner's struggles with supremacy of idea and character, the balance has tipped the other way.

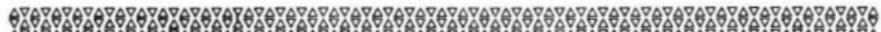
Yesterday's Men is set in the "Ethical Culture" of the twenty-first century, the same projected future Beloved Son and Vanegloray are set in; it shares one character, Dunbar, a mutant immortal, one of the "Children of Time", with Vanegloray; there are no other narrative links. War has been abolished and is now unknown, except, on one anachronistic corner of the globe where an Expeditionary Force of Outback "Territorian" Australians, a facsimile infantry unit of the 1939-45 period, patrols a stretch of mountain jungle in Niugini (formerly the Australian Trust Territory of Papua New Guinea) protecting coastal towns from raids by still-uncivilized 'bush kanakas' of the Highland tribes. The SF elements frame this realistic story of soldiers on patrol in the jungle.

Thriller-style political intrigue between Earth and "LaGrangers" (inhabitants of orbiting L-5 type colonies) revolves around the setting-up of a La Grangian film crew shooting a documentary about the soldiers. Thrown in are such products of biological engineering as clones, a "human camera", and the immortal Dunbar, who is the main viewpoint character and who voices for the author wry observations on the philosophy of fighting. Dunbar observes and transmits back from the jungle his surveillance of Corrigan, the human camera, who is transmitting sight and sound back to Bergerac, his director, safe in an orbiting satellite away from the fake crisis he's set up for his film; but the machinations of the opposing, nasty politicians turn it all bloody real... These elements are carefully crafted together, deliberately balanced. But somehow they provide no more than a lifeless frame for the realistic description of battle for survival in the hostile jungle. It's the naturalness of Turner's "Gone Time" soldiers that makes the futuristic trappings seem so artificial. His soldiers have the offhand laconicism of real outback Australian Chiack, familiar through the writings of Patterson, Lawson, Idriess and Wannan and, whether it's a case of life imitating art rather than vice versa, still used around the shearing floor and other fair-dinkum settings. His Niugini has all the steep and steamy isolation of the real land; like Tolkien's "Middle-Earth" or Donaldson's "Land", or like the Australian Outback in whatever work it

appears, mountain-country Niugini itself figures as a dominant character - unpredictable, hostile, unreliable as its natives, not docile to White commands. Like Randolph Stow's The Visitants, Yesterday's Men is very much a novel about the Australian experience in New Guinea. For Turner, fighting and The War is the essence of that experience. For most Australians, he is right - New Guinea means Kokoda Trail and the Japs. From that point of view, he is justified in playing down the involvement of the local tribespeople. But that is a limited view of that very powerful setting.

Tuner's intention is clearly moral - the juxtaposition of Dunbar's philosophical musing with attacks and the waiting for attacks is meant to drive home how circumstances and survival will dictate the response of killing others before they can kill you. He demonstrates the mechanism - soldiers are human beings, even decent human beings, just like you or me, put into circumstances where unless they kill first, they die. But the political frame which he no doubt intended to demonstrate the soulless manouvring that pushes men into such circumstances gives no extraordinary insight into the causes of war.

Certainly, this is a good novel by an accomplished literary craftsman. But it is less a speculation about the future than reflection on a passing era of Australian colonialism and a war fought a generation ago.



A GOOD BOOK

PAUL KINCAID



(THE CITADEL OF THE AUTARCH by GENE WOLFE. Sidgwick and Jackson 1983, 317pp., £18.95.)

Lets go back to the beginning and start all over again. Once upon a time there was a novel called The Shadow of the Torturer. It was written in a self-referential style that irritated some critics, but pleased the majority, including this reviewer. It used strange, half-recognised words with an air of authority; and it felt like an authentic glimpse of a not-quite-alien-world. The writing was pellucid, so that it was a joy to read. The story was not startlingly original, but it revealed novelty in what had otherwise appeared to be hackneyed, over-used material. In other words it had the genuine thrill of good science fiction, and the literary respectability we critics have so repetitively called for. What is more, it was only the first part of a quartet. All at once those of us who enjoy the work of Gene Wolfe were proclaiming: masterpiece!

Then came The Claw of the Conciliator, and it was sustained by the images and enthusiasm that its predecessor had already engendered in us. So long as it maintained the flavour of the first book, we were all ready to accept it as yet more evidence of a masterpiece in progress. And of course it did sustain the flavour. The descriptions were as vivid and as fantastic, and there were more of never-quite-explained hints and suggestions that allowed us to believe that here was a complete world in all its rich variety, and that here was a far reaching plot equal to that world.

By the time of the third volume, The Sword of the Lictor, it was, of course, time for a reaction. Perhaps Wolfe anticipated this, for he wrote a book that took his hero, Severian, out on his own. There was considerably less reference back to the previous volumes. In theory the book should have been able to stand on its own more than any of the others. Somehow it didn't work. Perhaps we were looking for even more reference back, perhaps we were hoping for a beginning to the explanations. Whatever the reason, this was far and away the weakest volume in the series, and fertile ground for the doubts and the criticisms.

So now, at last, we have The Citadel of the Autarch and the sequence is complete. My first reaction: individually the book is better than The Sword of the

Lictor, but by it the series is reduced. It was probably inevitable that the book would be full of explanations, the previous three volumes have left a lot of loose ends, which Wolfe has only allowed 300 pages to tie them off. If some of these explanations had come earlier - in the third volume, for instance - it might have been possible to turn this final volume into a better novel. Because of this, of course, any real understanding of what is going on in The Citadel of Autarch is dependent upon such an intimate knowledge of the three previous volumes that it is virtually impossible to read the book without having the others beside you for reference.

What is more, some of the explanations are just so disappointing. In particular the science fictional climax - which doesn't come at the end but some two-thirds of the way through - is so familiar, so commonplace, that I felt cheated. I'd hoped for, indeed I'd been led to expect, something spectacular, something startlingly new; the whole tenor of The Book of the New Sun has been taking the science fiction commonplace and doing with it something fresh. When this failed to be the case with what the whole series has been leading up to, then I felt deflated.

Yet the problem is that our expectations have been inflated by what went before. The only way the success of The Shadow of the Torturer could really be sustained, at least in the eyes of the readers, was by making each volume better than the last. If Wolfe failed in this, that does not make these books automatically bad. In fact quite the opposite is true. The recursive style had been maintained well throughout the series, and Wolfe's talent as a wordsmith is as much in evidence in the final volume as it is in the first. If, as I maintain, The Shadow of the Torturer is a successful piece of literature; then in purely literary terms, The Citadel of the Autarch is just as much a success.

In fact The Citadel of the Autarch is, in its own right, a good book. The story opens with Severian on his own following the climax of The Sword of the Lictor. With his shattered 'Claw of the Conciliator' he brings back to life a soldier he encounters, and takes him to a hospital run by the same sisterhood from whom he stole the 'claw'. By now he himself is ill, but following his recovery, and more of the stories that have punctuated the whole quartet and which have thrown such an oblique but fascinating light upon this far future Urth, he sets out on a mission for the sisters. This presents him with a glimpse of the future which sets the scene for the science fictional climax I have already referred to. Meanwhile, he finds himself caught up in the way he has been approaching through each successive volume. For a while he fights as a mercenary, before meeting again with the Autarch and with the rebel leader Vodalus. He learns at last - as we have known all along - that he is to be Autarch himself; then must confront the challenge that is the eternal lot of the Autarch.

It is a good story, well paced and exciting; possibly too full of incident, though that is not necessarily a bad thing. The ending, and the way all the diverse threads of this sprawling book are neatly tied off may not be startling, but it is at least satisfying.

All in all, then, The Citadel of the Autarch is a good and enjoyable novel. It is The Book of the New Sun that is the problem. It started so well that perhaps only wishful thinking made us believe that the last volume would match the first. In the end I think Wolfe over-reached himself. He tried for something that, at the last, proved to be just beyond even his formidable reach. I applaud his ambition while I mourn his ultimate lack of success (I will not say failure, because that is not, when you think about it, something you could accuse The Book of the New Sun of being).

A lot of the blame, I think, can be laid at the feet of the peculiar publishing schedule that stretched the appearance of the book over two years. (I am under the impression that Wolfe had actually completed all four volumes before the first appeared - if he hadn't, then maybe he should have waited a little longer). This long gap between helped exaggerate the quality of earlier volumes in the memory, while erasing the fine detail so necessary to a proper appreciation of the continuing story. It allowed anticipation to build up that could not reas-

onably be expected to be satisfied. And it allowed doubts to set in. Now, at last, people will be able to read each of the four volumes one after the other, to encounter The Book of the New Sun as one novel, as it was always intended to be. Perhaps that way some new and more proper appreciation of the quartet will be achieved.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that there is to be a fifth book set on this future Urth, The Urth of the New Sun. The story of Severian is concluded, so this is not to be a fifth volume in a suddenly open-ended series. It will be, we are promised, an independent book. Is one to suspect a Silmarillion to this Lords of the Rings?

"SADDER BUT WISER"

NIGEL RICHARDSON

.....

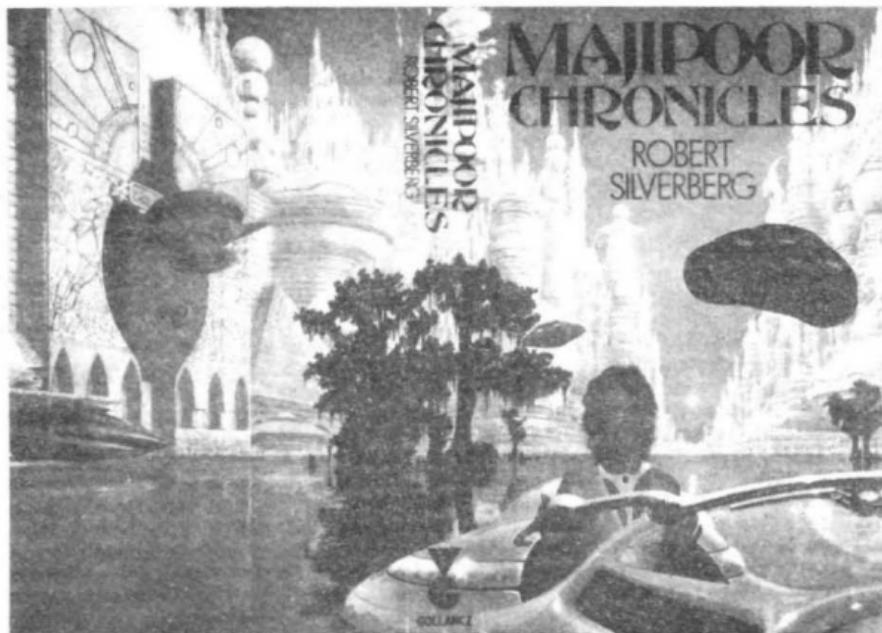
(MAJIPOOR CHRONICLES by ROBERT SILVERBERG. Gollancz 1982, 314pp., £8.95)

If, as the otherwise forgettable Walter Pater wrote, all art aspires to the condition of music, then Robert Silverberg's latest work comes dangerously close to approximating an album of songs by Barry Manilow or Neil Diamond. All human life is here, suggests the book's blurb. As seen through the eyes of a middle aged, disinterested man with nothing much to say about it, this reviewer says.

But to begin at the beginning: Majipoor Chonicles is not a novel as the title page states, but a collection of short stories, most of which have appeared in F & SF, Asimov's and Omni, all pertaining to the planet Majipoor, the massive, feudalistic world that was the setting of his last novel, Lord Valentine's Castle. However, Silverberg is shrewd enough to realise that short story collections rarely sell and so has linked them with intermediate passages to give the work the appearance of a novel. It goes like this: Hissune, a minor character from the previous book, is now a lowly cleric in the House of Records, a position he has been given by Lord Valentine in gratitude for his assistance in Lord Valentine's Castle. Whilst proud of his connection with Lord V he finds his job boring and to escape from the mundane routine he slips daily into the Register of Souls where he clandestinely views the "memory cubes" contained therein. These "cubes" contain the "souls" of the countless millions who have lived and died on Majipoor; all Hissune has to do is slip one of the cubes into the appropriate apparatus, the writing turns to italics and Hissune finds himself experiencing some event from the planet's last nine thousand years... It's all pretty shameless but Silverberg does try to justify things by providing a final chapter in which All Is Revealed.

The ten stories from the planet's history are well written but painfully, almost deliberately, dull. Nothing much seems to happen despite the wars and murders and xeno-carnalities of the plots. Inventing a world is a big order; supplying it with a nine thousand year history is a task to make Tolstoy or Nabakov despair and Silverberg doesn't really try. Most of the stories could have taken place on Earth, or more specifically, the West Coast. Two of the stories, "Thesme and the Ghayrog" and "The Soul-Painter and the Shapeshifter" have almost the same plot: the protagonist quits the city life for the wilds, meets an alien, has sex with it and finally returns home, a sadder but somewhat wiser person. Only the sex of the protagonist is changed, although the human woman has only to be slightly drunk to hop into the sack with the gruesome, warty Ghrag, whilst her male counterpart requires both an emotional crisis and an alien life form capable of assuming the dimensions of a comely young nymphet before he starts to get lusty....

The "Desert of Stolen Dreams" finds yet another discontent leaving civilised shores in search of somewhere barren and desolate to sort himself out.



What he finds in the desert makes him a wiser but sadder man too; 'tis a scoundrel with a device that allows him to control other people's dreams! He also encounters a government official with the unlikely name of Archiregimand Golator Lasgia, and, as happens on Majipoor when male meets female, regardless of race, species or religious inclination they have, in the euphemism of the SFBC adverts, explicit scenes that may be offensive to some. Sex is always an easy option on Majipoor; regardless of the epoch or latitude you just can't pilgrimage anywhere without some taut-thighed wench giving you the bedroom eyes....

"In the Fifth Year of the Voyage" is plain silly, telling of a doomed ship, the *Spurifon*, some five years into its voyage across a great sea known, for some reason, as the Great Sea, that becomes entangled in a vast mass of seemingly sentient seaweed, a situation straight out of the wonderfully bad Hammer film *The Lost Continent*. They escape from the stuff when some bright spark, obviously a devotee of old sci-fi flicks, dumps two high voltage cables over the side, but not before a member of the crew has gone insane and people are throwing each other overboard; and the captain decides, sadly but wisely, that man was never meant to cross the Great Sea. He returns the ship home, one more sad but wise man, eleven years older and one of the few characters on the planet who can cross the street without getting laid.

"Sadder but wiser" seems to be the over-riding motif of *Majipoor Chronicles*. The nearest anyone gets to happiness is contentment, a feeling that everything is how it should be. Everyone accepts their lot with resignation rather than despair. Hissune himself says, in the penultimate paragraph: "Whatever happens will be the right thing," and goes on to reflect that everyone gets what they deserve on Majipoor, be they wicked or good, a Coronal or a street urchin. And this situation is good, he thinks, the only way things could possibly be in a hierocratic utopia where all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well, if a little too neat and bland. Majipoor is a utopia, but not mine, and not, I suspect, Silverberg's; it is the utopia of that once archetypal SF fan, the introverted, adolescent boy, resigned to accept a grown-up world but not necessarily this one.

In conclusion Majipoor Chronicles can be seen as an exercise for Silverberg rather than the reader. In Charles Platt's Who Writes Science Fiction (1980), Silverberg speaks of recuperating after Lord Valentine's Castle and then "will return to fairly serious and intense fiction after a couple of years, and just ignore the consequences". One can but hope that the present volume is part of his recuperation, but judging from his letter in The Patchin Review 2 (Sept 1982), in which he says "I don't want to get mixed up in the struggle to make s-f into literature any more....fight the next revolution without me, okay?", we might find ourselves waiting a long time for that promised "serious and intense work"....

SHORT REVIEW SHORT REVIEW SHORT REVIEW SHORT REVIEW SHORT REVIEW SHORT REVIEW

INDEX TO THE STRAND MAGAZINE 1891-1950 - Compiled by Geraldine Beare
(Greenwood Press, 85Spp + xxxviii)

Reviewed by Mike Ashley

On first thoughts one may wonder what relevance this volume has to the fields of science fiction and fantasy though if anyone has read Sam Moskowitz's introduction to his anthology Science Fiction by Gaslight (World, 1968) it will be readily apparent that The Strand Magazine, probably the best known of Britain's popular magazines, contained a fair proportion of fantastic fiction. It was here, after all, that a number of H G Wells's early tales appeared including "The New Accelerator", "The Country of the Blind" and the serialization of "The First Men in the Moon". Here too appeared not only most of the Sherlock Holmes stories but many of Doyle's stories of fantasy and horror such as "The Horror of the Heights", "The Leather Funnel", "The Terror of Blue John Gap" plus the various Professor Challenger adventures.

Geraldine Beare, an antiquarian book dealer from Surrey, has presented this index in a variety of formats. The only missing index is a contents listing issue by issue. After an introduction which traces the history and development of The Strand Magazine and a chronological listing of volumes, the book sub-divides as follows: Author Index, Illustrator Index, Subject Index, and appendices identifying Authors and their Illustrators, Single-Author and Multi-Author Series, Anonymous Articles and Stories, Anonymous Cartoons, Symposia, Illustrated Interviews and Stories for Children.

The subject index deals solely with non-fiction, so there is no attempt to categorize the fiction by horror, fantasy, mystery, historical etc. Nevertheless even within the subject index are entries on Telepathy, Magic, Ghosts, Paranormal, Prophecies, Science & Technology, Electronics, Inventions, Curiosities, Radar, Radio, Television and so on from which a wealth of information can be obtained.

Whilst the Strand only carried a small proportion of fantastic fiction there is still a wealth of interest here to the sf/fantasy devotee and researcher. Not only can one delve through the author index for surprise entries such as H Bedford-Jones, Robert W Chambers and William Hope Hodgson, but one can discover overlooked items by writers like Doyle, Wells, Chesterton, Wodehouse and others. Of immense interest are the many symposia to which personalities contributed. For instance the August 1917 issue carried "What Will England Be Like in 1930?" with contributions by Doyle, Wells and others. Other symposia include "The Book I Most Enjoyed Writing", "How I Broke Into Print", "How My Plots Came to Me", "If Britain Disarmed", "My Most Thrilling Experience", "What Naval Experts Think of Conan Doyle's Submarine Story", "Which is the Finest Race", all with sf/fantasy relevance. Wells contributes to another called "The Most Useful Invention or Discovery Since 1850" and another "The English House of the Future". Indeed Wells even wrote his own obituary for the January 1943 issue. The April 1920 issue contains "George Bernard Shaw and H G Wells disbelieve in Spiritualism" while seven issues later Conan Doyle comes up with "The Absolute Proof".

Most libraries will contain long if not complete runs of The Strand and now here at last is the first thorough index to be produced.

APRIL IN PARIS

IAN WATSON

This April my French publishers Calmann-Levy flew me over to Paris for the "Salon du Livre" book fair, and to do a string of interviews about Le Monde Divin. (Which, I hasten to add, is the French edition of God's World, not a theological newspaper...)

So, economic prisoner of the recession and Thatcherism for the last few eternities, with one bound I broke the chains attaching me to my typewriter and drove to Birmingham airport.

Something else broke, too, on the way there, namely whatever cable connects up the clock which counts the miles. If you're ever driving along a deserted road alone on a dark morning, and hear a sudden raging squawk like the Night Stalker leaping on you, fear no evil; that's probably all it is, the clock clocking off...

From Birmingham Airport to Charles de Gaulle; along half a kilometre of switchback moving walkways through tunnels and glass tubes to the taxi ranks; and off to my hotel, near the Opera. Then out for the first major event: lunch with my French editor, in a Lyon speciality restaurant. Which, it goes without saying, is quite a different kettle of poissons from a Lyons corner house. A couple of bottles of wine later, packed with deliciously sauced jambon and buttered spinach -- though I sternly declined the veal on grounds of cruelty (my pig lived and died happily, as I could tell by the taste) -- it was round the corner to the offices of Calmann-Levy. Their building, with a huge brassbound door down an arched courtyard, quite resembles Gollancz in its creaky antiquity, though it is rather vaster and even more of a veteran. For here trod Baudelaire, bearing Madame Bovary..

Surrealism commenced with the first big interview, scheduled to take place at 'X', a mysterious rendezvous. Off I was driven to a road junction in the great spread of the Tuileries Gardens with no obvious buildings near, only an access tunnel leading deeply and steeply down into what looked like a subterranean car-park, the sort where you just know from a hundred TV movies that a car engine will suddenly rev, there'll be a screech of tyres and it's bullet time.

But actually this was the entrance to the underground stronghold of the post-telecom people, buried far and wide beneath the surface of the gardens; and the TV director who was orchestrating my interview wanted a futuristic setting for the recording. So we all descended further by lift into measureless concrete and electronic caverns and found a hall which suitably resembled the bridge of a starship, which was then floodlit in green and red and orange, for me to pose Saganesquely (Carl, not Francoise) while I answered questions about the malady of heroic fantasy, and about SF metaphysics and economics.

Perhaps even lower down in the bowels of Paris beneath my telecom starship, were nuclear bunkers? If there were, no one seemed particularly interested. "What's that?" I was asked the next day, about my CND badge. And it turned out that people hadn't even heard of the women of Greenham Common, though they are big news in Japan, America and Germany; and the French were aware of recent anti-missile demonstrations in Germany. But not in England. How peculiar.

After the TV recording, it was off to the "Salon du Livre", held in a stone and wrought-iron palace the size of Paddington Station (but far more beautiful) just off the Champs Elysees. About 450 French publishers had stands there, with lawns of green carpet in between; and Le Figaro commented the next morning that the French publishing industry was certainly behaving as if all was well with the world, whatever the harsh reality was. Certainly the champagne flowed freely

enough at the Magazine Litteraire cocktail party and the Calmann-Levy soiree later on. In between these two pleasant bibulous, bibliophilic events I squeezed in an interview or two, and was whisked outside for a walk around with a photographer - whose son had gone to study engineering in Lancashire and, horreur, declared that he was going to settle in Blackburn forever. Her stand at the "Salon" was hung with her photographs of Nabokov, Barthes, Borges and other writers; and she posed me in various locations around the Champs Elysees standing on plinths and caressing stone dolphins. Ah, magnifique. Perhaps I can become a fashion model if the world stops reading books.

Back to the soiree, where author Philippe Curval -- Brave Old World (Alison & Busby), a lovely book -- was very keen to try out Paris's recently opened Irish restaurant.

What, an Irish restaurant? In Paris? Visit Paris to visit an Irish restaurant? The mind boggles. But at this point I recollect that The Observer had devoted two sprightly columns to this brave new venture, a couple of weeks earlier. The fact that in Moreton Pinkney, deep in the empty quarter of Northamptonshire, I happened to have read a long critique of the new Irish restaurant in Paris struck Philippe as equally bizarre; so obviously we had to go there, all piling into the car of Marianne Lecomte.

And oh my gosh, was it good. The assiette de fruits de mer, piled with smoked and raw oysters, smoked and cooked salmon, Dublin Bay prawns. The beef and pepper stew...

There seems to be a lot about food in this column, even unto the newly-minted Fleurs du Mal (which was quite unintentional, I assure you). And even so I've left out the Savoy-style restaurant, and my trip under my own steam to a vast crowded low-cost eating hall walled with many large mirrors (not forgetting the enormous painting of a stone stairway in a chateau garden with implausibly big roses or perhaps camellias) where the waiters out of Toulouse-Lautrec did all the correct things like scribbling the bill on the paper tablecloth, and where a beautiful young Englishman out of Brideshead Revisited at the next table was trying to talk his older French amie into putting up the finance for an erotic movie. The place was wine-stained, crumb-scattered and elbow-jostling, but the truite aux amandes was almost as good as anywhere else. But I promise that I'm not, this time round, auditioning to be a cook. It's just that SF events in France automatically become gastronomic events too; and there's quite a difference between this and staggering out of a British con hotel for a gut-blaster Vindaloo.

Bon appetit! La vie est bonne...

But how is life, in harsh economic reality, for French science fiction writers?

Well, there are problems.

The first problem of course is that the world SF market is dominated by books written in English; and if we in Britain are frequently and generally the poor relations of American science fiction - economically speaking - the French are the poor relations of all us Anglo-Saxons. Where can their books be sold? Belgium, Luxemburg, a bit of Switzerland, Quebec. How can they get translated? It isn't easy. There are a handful of exceptions, but on the whole British publishers can't afford to pay a translator for a French SF book, and US publishers haven't got anyone who can read French - should they even care. Patrice Duvic sold a story to Omni a few years back, but by writing it in English; and there's a whole world of sweat between writing a short story in English, and writing a whole novel, if indeed anyone could contemplate such a mad project.

(I've recently become the European editor of the SFWA Bulletin, with George Zebrowski and Pamela Sargent as US editors, and one point of this is to get as many European names as possible into the pages of the Bulletin, which is the public face of SFWA, and which editors do read in the States; thus the names of European writers might percolate more into the editorial consciousness.)

A propos this, a lot of flak gets tossed at SFWA - not least in the pages of BSFA publications - because of its US frog-pond chauvinism. Admittedly, admittedly. But be it noted, it isn't even necessary to belong to SFWA to be published

in the Bulletin. Nor, since Norman Spinrad's reign, is it even necessary to have been published in the USA, or even in the English language, in order to become a member of SFWA. A Parisian author can join, on the basis of an SF novel published in French; a Budapest author, on the basis of a novel printed in Hungarian - just so long as the author can furnish some evidence that it is indeed an SF novel, not a book on bee-keeping, say! There's no chauvinism in the membership requirements. SFWA even has a French Overseas Director, Pierre Barbet, to spread the word; and the membership voted enthusiastically to have a foreign Director on a par with the US regional directors even though the foreign membership is very much smaller than in any US region.)

Add on to the problem of the dominance of English language SF, other problems which crop up in Anglo-Saxonia too. First of all, rubbish sells a lot better in France than good stuff. Conan books go like a bomb, as do space operas from Fleuve Noir - many of these hacked out by good French SF writers in between doing more serious books.

Then, the good French SF writers are not very popular or well-known in their country, they say...

I digress. Actually, the print runs of the French equivalent of hardbacks (expensive trade paperbacks) are quite a lot bigger than equivalent UK printruns and the numbers generally sold would gladden the heart of a British publisher; but even so. I have a theory about this, which brings us back to cookery. Several times I've heard British publishers complain that we Brits will not fork out the price of a hardback book when we would be quite willing to pay the same sum for a meal in a good restaurant. But perhaps we Brits at heart are just gluttons, not gourmets - how else to explain the popularity of Berni Inns? Whereas in France a meal is also an intellectual event, and a good meal is seen as of equivalent importance to a good book (at least among readers); this, due to a unification of sensibility between belly and brain, a recognition that the mouth which eats also utters intellectual discourse. To translate the British publishers' complaint into Newspeak: 'Britreaders unbellyfeel Ingbooks'.

Anyway - end of digression - the best French SF authors don't feel that they're all that popular in their native land; and while it was slightly gratifying (of course) it was also rather horrifying to be told that I'm rather better known in France than they are.

But then, in our own fair land, are not Messrs Watson and (oh well, I'd better not add any more names, out of respect for my colleagues' feelings), Messrs Watson and other less well known than... about 50 American SF writers?

Which, in this study of hierarchies, leads on to the interesting question: in America, which outsider, which alien, is better known as an SF writer than American SF writers?

Maybe Borges could come to our aid here by inventing (as in his tale "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius") the works of an imaginary major SF seer - who would obviously not be Kilgore Trout - who would gradually supplant all the native authors, thrusting them into second place in public esteem...

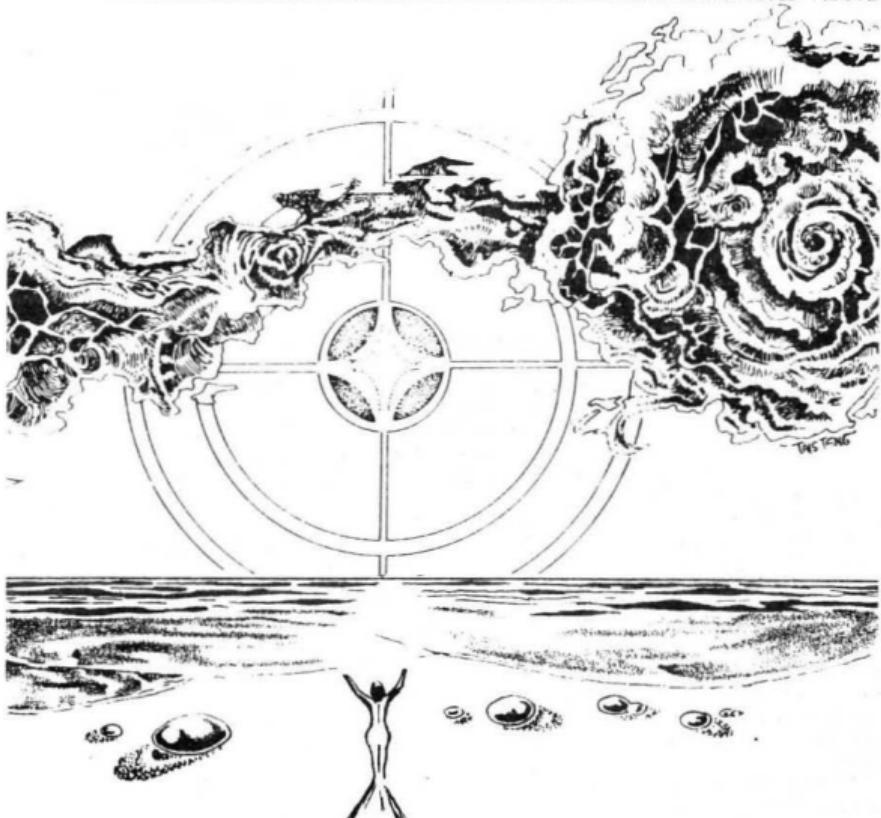
Or perhaps here we have an analogical proof of the existence of God; a rebuttal - in the SF dimension - of Gödel's disproof of self-validation within any enclosed system. For there seems to exist, in the SF world, a category of supreme beings, greater than whom are no others. The hill of skiffy has an actual, non-infinite summit. Olympus, USA.

But hark, I have just thought of one candidate.

Arthur Clarke. Oh dear, I did not intend in this column to prove by remorseless logic that Arthur Clarke is God...

What's special about Arthur Clarke, incidentally? Well, he doesn't have a nationality in any narrow sense of the word. He has transcended himself. He's unidentifiable (like certain phenomena in his Mysterious World). He's a world-citizen. (Please stop reading this, Arthur, if you are. This is no good for your moral character, modesty etc.) He's, um, a man of the world. As it were.

Whereas the French are imprisoned by their language and nationality, and so are we Brits on the whole (though I myself tried to mutate into a Japanese for 44.



several years). Whilst the Americans, on the other hand, know for certain that their own country is the world. Which is just as trapping for them, even though it equips one with the illusion of Super Powers: general cultural cultural edge-of-the-future perceptiveness and whatnot.

And maybe, just maybe, science fiction has run slam-bang into a cul-de-sac not merely because of malign commercial forces encouraging unoriginality and drivel, but because in absolute objective terms (economically and global-cultural) American SF is the zenith, but in America SF discourse has begun to recycle itself in a closed circuit - by contrast with the brave initiatives not so long ago, of Delany, Zelazny, Le Guin etc - precisely because there is nowhere else mentally to go. Meanwhile, too - and let's not underestimate the effect on consciousness - history is repeating itself malignly, with a second Cold War, a second Depression, a second mini-Vietnam in Central America, a second-rate actor in the White House.

We're all looking out eagerly for the book that is truly other. (We even keep on trying to write it, too!) Unfortunately, what seems to be other often turns out five minutes later to be more of the same. (I mean, is Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* entirely an enormous breakthrough in discourse... or is it a sword and sorcery novel without a plot written by someone supremely literate?)

If SF is to break out of its current mental logjam, somehow we've got to become other, autre; and I don't just mean migrate into the mainstream. We've got to become somebody else; and in my next column here in six months time I hope to explore a bit further the notion of becoming somebody else.

Dangerous Divisions

MARY GENTLE,
Flat 1,
11 Alumhurst Rd,
Westbourne,
Bournemouth,
Dorset.

By some synchronicity I read Chris Priest's article at very much the same time as I listened to the Radio 4 adaptation of 'When the Wind Blows', and watched Pilger's 'The Truth Game', and finally read The Fate of the Earth. I shall be interested to see in the next Vector what kind of a reaction you got; and I'm willing to bet it's in three categories - the ones that say rubbish, it'll never

happen, and if it does happen it won't be very bad (most common among the older people who think you can hide from nuclear bombs in shelters and tube stations); those who say yes, we know, but there's sod all anyone can do about it; and the answer that comes up time after time in these discussions (and still puzzles me), that people who talk or write about nuclear war want it to happen. Maybe they're the most scared, their only defence is to think that someone who can look at the facts is crazy. Regarding the first group, I sometimes think it's more possible to appreciate what nuclear war must mean if you don't have any 'war experience'. If 'war' means the Blitz, or the trenches, depending on your generation; then how can you see past that to global extermination? It's a trick of vocabulary: if 'nuclear suicide' were used instead of 'nuclear war', people might get the message quicker. And who's to say whether it's a deliberate or an unconscious verbal trick?

"Crouching in Cheadle" disturbs me, if only because (as he says) nothing in it is new; and it reminds me of what I already know. And it reminds me that I do nothing about it. I think it's a disservice to downgrade CND, though I have no axe to grind on their behalf; unilateral disarmament is a step closer to sanity, if not a very big step. I should like to know how and why we let ourselves get into this position: it's ludicrous to think that nobody wants it and yet nobody can stop it. Well, maybe it is interest and ignorance; though I noticed that nobody except the government seemed surprised when the BMA got up and admitted that even one comparatively small nuclear bomb would overload medical facilities. How do people hear that and not believe it, or hear it and not care about it? I notice you live two miles away from a military airport, and that "the unthinkable is too damn close". So far as I'm concerned, anywhere on this planet has to be considered as too damn close. (((A point, of course, I totally agree with... I'm afraid that I'm going to have to disappoint you Mary, as the response to Chris Priest article was slight. I can only put it down to the fact that people have become blasé with the subject.)))

I thought Chris Priests' article "Crouching in Cheadle" a well designed and original piece of thinking. It didn't take sides or chant easy meaningless slogans e.g. "Ban the Bomb" etc. Like Chris Priest I was shocked to discover from personal research that the chances of surviving a nuclear attack are nil. But nowadays I don't spend time worrying about the situation because I know that there is absolutely nothing I or

PHILIP COLLINS
7 Colchester Road,
Leyton,
London. E10 6HA

anybody else can hope to do about it. Disarmament will never ever happen no matter who calls for it and if Reagan or Andropov have a sudden mental Brainstorm and push the button then that's it. All I can do is hope I won't be alive when the bomb is dropped, because I definitely won't be afterwards.

On a lighter note I must disagree with Mary Gentle's review of Danse Macabre by Stephen King. Danse Macabre is a rough guide of the horror genre, as King himself states, it is not meant to be a book of detailed analysis. Yet Mary Gentle attacks the book exactly for not being one of deep analysis. Rather than reviewing the present book Mary Gentle appears to be reviewing/criticising a book which does not in fact exist. (((I don't think that is quite right Philip. Mary was simply making the point that Danse Macabre is a mis-match. King did not seem to know where to place the book, and it is thus full of contradictions. Besides which, where is the dividing line between non-detailed analysis and detailed analysis? A matter of opinion surely.)))

R NICHOLSON-MORTON,
235 West Street,
Fareham, Hants,
PO16 0HZ

I think Vector 112 is an issue filled with hope for science fiction. And whilst hope lives anything is possible. Where's the hope? With your plea for BSFA banner-waving taken up, with John Sladek's marvellous interview and talk, with Chris Priest throwing down

the gauntlet to writers to tell it like it is about the nuclear impasse, plus an excellent paean of praise for Dick's last novel and a glowing report on Gray's first, Lanark.

I particularly liked Sladek's supermarket-writers analogy - some writers are rarely treated as merchandise, but sell, steadily and well.

For further reading on the red 6 of spades etc, I can recommend R.E. Ornstein's The Psychology of Consciousness (Penguin) which attempts to bridge the gap between experimental and intuitive psychology. (His sources include W.I.B. Beveridge, The Art of Scientific Investigation (Random House)). If I may quote from Ornstein's book;

"Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different - William James, 1890".

This is the milieu of Philip K. Dick.

Reference to Bishop Berkley drew me to Steven Rose's The Conscious Brain (Penguin) where, following on from a lengthy quotation from Berkley (summarised by Sladek), Rose included, an illustration;

"There once was a man who said "God must find it exceedingly odd if he finds that this tree continues to be when there's no one about the Quad"

which will doubtless be familiar to many, by Ronald Knox; there was an amusing anonymous answer;

"Dear Sir, your astonishment's odd: I am always about in the Quad.
And that's why the tree will continue to be, since observed by,
yours faithfully, God."

Rose's conclusion, endorsed by Sladek, is that "in some sense we are all solipsists; the external world is seen and reinterpreted through our mind's eye, and our vision of it is the one that matters when dealing with it." (My emphasis). Sladek's "Perhaps, like God, we need company in the universe" is interesting. And yet in the deepest sense we are all alone. Ayn Rand said it better: "In the temple of his spirit, each man is alone." If mankind yearns to go to the stars, perhaps it is no more than a millenia-old tug back to being star-stuff... and is similar

to the actions of selfish genes, and has nothing to do with loneliness...

The Uncle Josh "biography" was very funny. Let's hope the owner of the mahogany chest doesn't send it to the breaker's yard; fancy all the heady debate about nuclear armaments brought to an early close because somebody got tired of his furniture....!

Which introduces:

Chris Priest's "Into the Arena" article will doubtless receive a mixed response; surely nobody should seriously contend that "Crouching in Cheadle" did not belong in Vector. (((Want to bet?))) After all, the source-books cited are important to SF readers and SF writers. For too long SF writers have perpetuated the myth that mankind will survive a nuclear holocaust (damn the wildlife, though). Perhaps in the early 50's survival was probable: no longer does this seem the case. But even if some did - beyond the bureaucrats in shelters - what would they inherit? Roshwald wrote in Level 7: "Can people who helped destroy become creative? We (the survivors in shelter Level 7) are to form the elite which will perpetuate the human race? If human beings who had known life under the sky could degenerate into creatures crawling about underground, what hope have people who never saw day and night, who never smelled a flower?" I shudder to think. Writers - write! Not strident unilateralist slogans. But reasoned, worried scenarios.. Let us stop turning away. (The other day specialists were reported to be disagreeing about the number of casualties in a nuclear conflict. It is time that they stopped reducing people to numbers!) Yes, the Fate of the Earth is in the balance, and only long and bold pressure for multilateral disarmament offers a glimmer of any return to sanity. But, as I've said, it is not hopeless. That is important. So is the future. Let's be sure there is a future.

There are two comments I'd like to make concerning Paul Kincaid's Guest Editorial in Vector 112, whose sentiments I wholly agree with.

Firstly, the question of the observed and the observed. Paul laments the dire state of SF in 1982 and recalls the days when he found it much more exciting. I'd suggest that the change may not be so much in SF as in Paul Kincaid who, I'd suspect, has come to expect more and more of his reading material over the years as his appreciation of the quality of fiction have sharpened. Certainly that's the way I feel on that score. No matter how badly written the first novel or short story you encountered dealing with any of the standard SF motifs, whether it be time travel, alternate universes, generation ships or whatever, it must have greater imaginative impact than the umpteenth equally badly written version you encounter. Like almost everything else the sense of wonder is surely subject to diminishing returns. I can quite clearly remember being taken with novels by Heinlein, Asimov and Clarke, that unholy trinity, which I'd not think anything of were I to find and read them for the first time today. (((I don't think that I would say that. Some stories by all three are undoubtedly classics of the genre, whenever one reads them.)))

Similarly, referring to Kincaid's belief that contemporary SF is characterized by the familiar, the repetitions and the never ending bloated series, whether by authors new or old I'd suggest twas ever thus. The SF balloon, so to speak, has been blown up as the cinema has brought the trappings of the genre into the public domain but what's painted on the balloon remains the same. Whilst today multi-volume series are hyped at W.H. Smith and bought up by the public, in days gone by was it not the case that the SF magazines ran long running series which were consumed by the smaller market of the day, for example Asimov's Foundation series? Nigh on 30 years ago Robert Bloch was lambasting SF for being staid, unadventurous and far too conservative. As long as the way in which fiction is published and marketed remains as it is I'd say SF will continue to be highly repetitious and conservative, with only a few notable exceptions.

Secondly, Paul Kincaid appears to lament the fact that the best SF he read in

IAN McKEER,
53 Radford Park Rd,
Plymstock,
Plymouth, Devon
PL9 9DN

1982 was published outside the narrow limits of the genre. What's wrong with that? If, despite the veritable storm of perceptive criticism in the pages of BSFA journals in the past few years, the SF being produced remains as bad as ever for the same old reasons (and, as you've discussed before, critics aren't likely to make a great impact on the mass market) why not turn the tables and rather than look for the qualities of literature in SF, look for SF in literature? The interface between SF and the mainstream looks to me the most likely place to find something to tickle the palate of the jaded SF reader. You can even hark back to the 30's and say the same thing, notably about Brave New World.

So it seems to me, sad though it is for anyone who sees so much potential in SF to say it, that given the nature and categorisation complexes of publishing and the way that readers tastes are determined by that system, that time has stood still for the likes of Paul Kincaid for many decades. Deafeatist though it sounds, maybe we should be grateful for what few gems there are and if we're not, forget SF altogether. His editorial could have as easily been written about 1932 or 1952 as 1982. Plus ca change.....

CY CHAUVIN,
T4248 Wilfred,
Detroit, Michigan,
48213, USA

Paul Kincaid's "State of the Art" flounders somewhat by mixing up the average with the exceptions. If the average SF novel is so much worse that it has ever been (a case which may be true, I tend, I'm afraid, to simply ignore the average novel - which is sad because what about the good new writers?), it does no good to point to exceptions like The White Hotel or Graham Swift's story in the Firebird anthology in the 'mainstream' publishing world - since these works are exceptions there, too. Personally, I think it is only natural that we (those who have read SF for a long time and critically) should have become tired of the general run of novels and stories. That's why childhood memories of stories are so suspect.

Why - is Little, Big Science Fiction and Lanark not? That is what immediately comes to mind from Paul Kincaid's article. I haven't read Lanark, but judging from Bill Carlin's review it's nearer to a certain kind of SF than Little, Big. Do we only recognise SF when it's written by an accredited practitioner of the art? Or is SF a cast of mind, a way of looking at the world and literary images which isn't necessarily confined to being published by Ace books? I always thought Paul Kincaid veered to the latter view, and while I tend to agree that many of the genre writers are repeating themselves ad nauseam, I find, with Paul, that there's a lot going on outside the recognised confines. I don't think it matters that something isn't actually called SF, or meant to be SF. It matters more that the genre is stagnating... but could it be that the invigoration of SF that most of us have lived through was a temporary phenomenon? Could it even be that we need a stereotyped baseline of undistinguished hackwork to form a background for those rare works of excellence?

It's pleasing that you've got in on the BMC scheme; that's the kind of activity which people are always saying the BSFA should get involved with but which rarely comes up.

NIGEL RICHARDSON,
9 Windsor Green,
East Garforth,
Leeds.
LS25 2LG

Judging by your observations in your editorial (Vector 113) and the lists of forthcoming books in Matrix and SFPIB things look pretty grim regarding the quality of what we can expect on the SF racks this year. I know that this is a perennial moan, but looking through the lists I could not see a single book that appealed to me.

Indeed, unless I can get to a specialist bookshop I can't see myself buying any SF

ANDY SAWYER,
45 Greenbank Rd,
Birkenhead,
Merseyside.
L42 7JT

for a long time.

But what can be done? There are books I want to read, like the novels of Rudy Rucker and books by Jack Dann, Avram Davidson and others, books that aren't being published in this country. Why? Because nobody has heard of them. And why not? Because they haven't been published in this country. But if they had books published then maybe people would read them? No they wouldn't. Why? Because the majority of people will only buy a book if they're read something else by that author.

Go into your nearest book shop and look at the SF rack. Plenty of books by Larry Niven, right? So what happens next month (May '83)? Orbit books reissue fourteen more. It makes sense, but at the same time it makes my head hurt. It's like some kind of perpetual motion machine: the more books you put out by an author the more people want to read them and the more people want to read them, the more you have to put out. Which means that any writer with less than a dozen books doesn't stand a chance. Indeed, looking in W.H. Smith's it seemed that each writer represented in the SF section had a shelf all to himself. So all you budding authors out there don't think trilogies think triple trilogies!

Turning to the Blade Runner/Electric Sheep debate: the general conclusion seems to be that the title and packaging of the book doesn't really matter just so long as people start reading Philip K. Dick. But where are his novels on the shelves? In one of Leeds' largest bookstores it is only a single copy of Blade Runner that keeps the Edmund Cooper novels from the Gordon Dickson. Has anyone seen a copy of The Man in the High Tower since 1977? Or Martian Time-Slip? The disappearance of all his books from the stores is pretty spooky - like something out of one of his header novels. Or maybe it isn't the books that have disappeared from the real world... maybe it's us.

No. That's too crazy... isn't it? Tell me somebody.....

Recent letters in BSFA publications concerning the quality of SF books today has prompted me to write and air my views. But first, though, I have two rather serious confessions to make: my favourite authors are Heinlein, Pournelle, Niven, Anderson (Poul), Saberhagen etc. and I am not a Unilateralist.

I realise that to many people at/in the BSFA (to judge from letters, reviews and 'off the cuff comments') I have declared myself openly as an un-educated idiot, not fit to clean dirt off the floor of the Current Affairs (social conscience section) office of The Guardian!

Having so publicly debased myself the only thing I really have to say is to ask how one can judge the 'quality' of a book? It goes without saying (I hope) that only an objective review is at all worthwhile, but how can one be objective unless a clearly defined (and generally accepted) criteria has first been established? For example, one would be unlikely to offer say, Wolfe's Books of the New Sun as suitable books to relax with or Peak's Gormenghast trilogy to while away time on a train journey. And yet, if judged on this criteria, the books are 'bad'.

I suspect that what is really being criticised when a book is judged 'poor quality' is the lack of any 'deeply moving, thought provoking message'. Or the inclusion of one with which the reviewer/letter writer disagrees! I wonder is it not possible for reviewers to give a brief out of the general plot, (such as "powerful family in a feudal galactic empire is outlawed unfairly and forced to start again at a barren planet. Through a highly detailed account of the society and aspects of life on the planet, the author describes the rise to power of the family with the slow realisation that the planet isn't as arid and useless as first sights indicate. The main purpose of the novel is to chart the growth to manhood (and beyond!) of the young Paul Atreides".) and maybe a personal view of the intended value of the book and how successful the author has been to show it. I should also be interested in a brief comment as to how well the book is written re plot-structure, character portrayals etc. (((That, for the majority of books, is a sensible and basic way

MICHAEL J. KING,
6A Newland Rd,
Bentley Heath,
Solihull.
B93 8AU

of looking at a book. But, if you were to review The Book of the New Sun, your suggested pattern does not have much relevance. For a start, the plot does not particularly have much significance. So, without going into detail, the review has to reflect the concerns of the book. To categorise the book into little sub-headings within a review, is throwing constraints around the novel being reviewed, and the review itself. You might as well just give the book a rating out of ten for plot line, characters, originality etc...)))

I hope it is not asking too much (even today) for books to be enjoyed for what they are, whether it be escapist entertainment (Brooks' Shannara novels) amusing space opera (Asimov's Foundation series) or thought-provoking novels about politics (Le Guin's The Dispossessed). Even if we cannot enjoy books like The Riverworld sagas (admittedly rubbish, other than in the enjoyment they give) then we should remember were it not for the money Granada make from Farmer the company might not be able to afford to put out work by, say, Le Guin.

I suppose what I am really saying is that one can enjoy, Suzy McKee Charnas' work without agreeing with her politics and say, Katherine Kurtz's without claiming it to be as well written or 'meaningful' as T.H. White's Once and Future King, or indeed the poems of T.S. Eliot.

Finally, you may wonder why I should bother to write and air my views - well, it's because I am currently unemployed and have nothing better to do; other than read entertaining, well written books! (((I do hope that Vector reflects all opinions expressed by the BSFA members. If any trend does appear in the reviews/letters, it is purely a reflection of the opinion within the BSFA. I might add, that I have yet to see any consensus of opinion about what is 'good' SF within the BSFA. And thankfully so, the width of opinion within the BSFA is its strength, and the strength of SF is its broad range of subject.)))

JEREMY CRAMPTON,
34 Percy Road,
Handbridge,
Chester.
CH4 7EZ

I was interested in Sue Thomason's article on different media in SF, and which 'is best'. She says that "SF is a visual and a verbal artform" and we should start "concentrating on exploiting their unique strengths, recognising their differences". I would agree with this, but would suggest that this would be easier if media

could produce something more worthwhile, something that could withstand more than just a cursory glance. SF media that is, I have nothing against media as such; certainly British film-making has never been better - Chariots of Fire, Gandhi, Educating Rita etc. The trouble is that most SF media are gutless panoramas of special effects, whose 'unique strengths' we cannot concentrate on, because they simply don't have any. Sue says "the only thing that nearly everybody agrees on is that of these two media, visual and print, one of them must be vastly superior in every way to the other". If this is true then I am one of the few who don't think so, it's just that although I can imagine an 'SF Gandhi', looking around I don't see any, so that although media can be good, in SF at the moment the written word has the edge on quality. (((None of David Pringle's top 30 are as good as Gandhi?)))

((Which brings us to the end of the letter column. My thanks to all of you that have written. A few letters that arrived recently will be published in the next issue. WAHF; Martyn Taylor, Harry Andruschak, David Barrett, F.R. James, Simon Gosden, Jonathan Colecloough and Dorothy Davies.)))

GOLLANZ

Just Published

Michael Coney

CAT KARINA

£7.95

M.John Harrison

**THE ICE MONKEY
AND OTHER STORIES**

£8.95

Coming Shortly

ISAAC ASIMOV PRESENTS THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE 19th CENTURY

£9.95

