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Pornography according to all the dictionaries I tried, is writing about whores. This clearly is a root definition of the word, but is at the same time too wide and too narrow for modern usage. So to make it clear what I'm talking about, let's agree that whereas erotica is what turns you or me, (normal people) on and smut may turn other people on but does not offend us, pornography is the nasty stuff that only perverts like. As a working definition, this is even looser but emphasizes the subjective nature of the beast.

Several things have recently conspired to set my mind on the trail of pornography:

I watched a television profile on Andrea Dworkin, a very sincere passionate American campaigner against pornography, who asserts that pornography damages the lives of the people involved in producing it, and the minds of the people who consume it. She appears to be campaigning not for censorship, but for compensation for those individuals whose lives have been damaged. The pornography under consideration by Ms Dworkin appeared on the whole to be filmed material, often involving the filming of acts that were in themselves illegal.

I watched the television reconstruction of the OZ trials; attractive, intelligent, witty young men defending their right to publish; the issue under consideration was, of course, produced by (but not necessarily for) schoolchildren. The material they were called upon to defend included sexually explicit drawings and language in the text of the magazine.

I read for review The third Book of David Wingrove's Chung Kuo series. When I say that this was without doubt the most pornographic book I have ever read you will probably think me an innocent flower; however it is not the explicit sexual nature of the scenes in the book (many of which in fact do involve whores) to which I object; it is the unpleasantly sadistic nature of most of them, and the dismissive attitude to women displayed throughout the book. Possibly, like Science Fiction, pornography is most easily defined by the "Look and Say" method. If I go back to my working definition, I would probably refine it now to say that what makes it nasty is the fact that it is degrading to the participants.

It is not so very long ago that you could hardly find a sexual scene in an SF book. I certainly am not advocating a return to that state. Is it a sign of the genre growing up that it now includes pornographic material? Andrea Dworkin believes that consuming pornographic material is damaging to the mind. I certainly did not feel like reading much for a week or so after finishing Mr Wingrove's book. Richard Neville and his colleagues argued persuasively that they should have the freedom to publish whatever they wished, elsewhere in this issue Kim Cowie does likewise. The problem with freedom is always defining where one person's freedom infringes upon another's.

The rule of law under which we live is in fact bounded by a series of compromises, designed to impose consensus morality on our actions. However, we pride ourselves that we may be free with our thoughts. The role of censorship with published material, therefore, is where it is believed that that material may cause individuals measurable hurt, whether physical, emotional, or of the "deprave and corrupt" variety. Whereas most people would accept the first case, many would say that adults should be capable of taking what comes with the other two. I, for one, am thoroughly confused.

Should books likely to damage our mental health carry government health warnings?

Should printed material be certificated in the same way as films?

Should we be fighting for the right to publish material which we ourselves find offensive?

I'm looking to you to put me straight!
RIP Yearbook
From David Garnett

In his review of Gardner Dozois’ Year’s Best SF (Vector 163), I was pleased to see Martin Walter recommend this year’s David Garnett Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook sight unseen’ - but, alas, that is how this year’s volume must remain: unseen.

After publishing three volumes, the series has been cancelled by Orbit/ Futura. With the death of Donald Wollheim, there is no longer an annual “best” from Daw Books in the USA. This means there is now only one such English-language volume covering the “year’s best SF” - the one edited by Gardner Dozois. But there are three such volumes of horror stories!

I’ve spent a great deal of time and effort attempting to find a publisher willing to continue the Yearbook series. I’ve approached every likely publisher, and many unlikely ones. Everyone agrees this is a worthwhile series, that it ought to continue - but no one is willing to make the necessary commitment to publish it.

And no, I won’t make any comment on the kind of books that publishers believe are really worthwhile bestowing upon the great British reading public. . . .

It was fun while it lasted, but now I’ve more time to devote to New Worlds!

David Garnett
Ferring

Infantile Drivel
From Joseph Nicholas

I read Ken Lake’s ‘Palaeontology and the Pattern of Hollywood Kicks’ in Vector 163 with mounting indignation - indignation at both his bowdlerisation of quotes from Stephen Jay Gould’s Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History to support his case, and at the fact that the editors of Vector had seen fit to squander three pages on such arrant nonsense. You may not be palaeontologists, but was it completely beyond your wit to check Gould’s text against the use Lake makes of it?

Lake’s suggestion that Gould espouses the cause of a “divine tape player” who oversteps all history, and his reinterpretation of Gould’s rhetorical references to a “Burgess architect” and a “Great Token-Stringer” to claim that Gould is promoting God as the motive force of evolution, is absolute nonsense, and a complete inversion of what the book actually says. The simple theme of Wonderful Life is that evolution has no pre-ordained path, and that the tape of history was unwound back to the start, there is no guarantee that, when set in motion once again, evolution would eventually give rise to the human species or indeed to any intelligent species at all. Gould’s consistent argument about intelligence (Lake presumably couldn’t be bothered to read any of his other books) is that it is an accidental by-product of evolution, not its inevitable end result, and that it confers no identifiable biological advantages. Thus, when Gould attacks traditional concepts of progress and predictability, he is not, as Lake claims, attacking fellow palaeontologists but seeking to disprove the human species’ arrogant opinion of itself as the natural pinnacle of what it likes to think of as “the evolutionary process” - as indeed Lake himself grudgingly admits a few lines after claiming otherwise. Lake is clearly so offended by what he calls Gould’s “anti-human-centric” stance that he is unable to recognise his own contradiction - or to do other than pretend the book says something completely different to what it actually does, even to the extent of describing Gould as anti-evolutionist; an astounding insult to one of biology’s most accomplished contemporary exponents.

Yes, there are problems with the Burgess Shale creatures, both in their manner of preservation and their interpretation. The record is indeed incomplete - but then so is the entire fossil record. Further work will be required to resolve what Gould identifies as “the Two Great Problems” of the Burgess Shale, and will take considerable time. Lake, by contrast, prefers to leap ahead to an explanation that would be cut down by nothing more exotic than Occam’s Razor: that they were brought here by an alien spaceship whose operators built the Earth and its inhabitants for their own amusement.

This is so laughable as to be beyond contempt. Lake is presumable happy to think of himself as an alien plaything, and to believe that now he has seen through the sham he will be sent back to be rescued by the Vincents which will carry him off to Planet Zott in the Galaxy of Xppl where he will become immortal and ascend to a higher sphere of being; but that’s no reason for the editors of Vector to inflict such infantile drivel on the rest of us.

Joseph Nicholas
London

Burgess Response
From Sue Thomason

I haven’t read Gould’s book and know very little about the Burgess Shale apart from what Ken’s article says. I like the idea of fossils from outside, but Ken asks for alternative explanations for various anomalies; here are some, which may well be obviously untenable because I don’t know all the facts (or even most of them).

1. no tracks, no burrows, no organisms eating each other

Suppose the shale (which would be mud beds when the creatures now fossilised in it first encountered it) was not where the Burgess creatures lived? Suppose they were all free-swimming, living in a thick algae ‘soup’, or clambering around on strands of soft free-floating plant material near the water’s surface? The mud bottom of their environment would then simply be a graveyard; where the bodies or body-parts that didn’t get eaten by other life-forms ended up when they died. If an appreciable proportion of the Burgess remains are actually half-eaten, that may explain why some of them look incomplete.

2. soft tissues preserved as silicates of aluminium/calcium, not carbon

Suppose the Burgess creatures didn’t have soft tissues like ours. Suppose they don’t fit in very well with the currently accepted evolutionary model because they’re not part of it. They represent an unsuccessful independent development of life, or a very early-branching (and again unsuccessful) evolutionary line that failed. A kind of failed marine Australia, where a lot of divergent lifeforms developed but didn’t have a very long species-lifespan. I can think of two situations in which a “marine Australia” might develop and eventually fail:

a) a landlocked sea which eventually dried up due to climatic change or upthrusting of land or both. If it lasted for a (geologically) reasonably long time before drying up, its water might get very heavily mineralised which might encourage the evolution of strange-to-us lifeforms.

b) I understand that there are present-day “marine-life islands” on the deep ocean floor, around the seafloor magma vents that occur at plate boundaries. (Another mystery: the present-day vents are quite shortlived, tens of years only, and when they close up the life around them dies. Nobody is quite sure how life gets to newly opened vents. I postulate a hardly, maybe viable, stage of life which either simply drifts around in the water until it...
encounters favourable conditions, or has a heat-trap. Here the barrier to communication
with other lifeforms is temperature gradient, not the land-water barrier. I wouldn’t find it
surprising if, in an environment with pressure
and temperature and again possibly mineralisation very different from the
conditions we think of as ‘normal’, some pretty
strange-to-us lifeforms developed.

The snag with this idea is obviously the short life of the hosts. I don’t think what
gerological conditions might create a long-liv ed
hosted. My understanding is that Terra was not
introdromic, activist in the Cambrian (which is the Burgess era, isn’t it?), which
would suggest more instability, not less, wouldn’t it? Or maybe magma flows were
commoner then, and the Burgess shale deposits
are from somewhere where there was enough heat
for long enough to promote these weird lifeforms.

Or let’s modify one of Ken’s ideas slightly,
and postulate a marine ‘natural nuclear reactor’
like the one found somewhere in Africa. This
ought to show up pretty clearly in the geological
record, though.

A sideline thou ght: I know the “deep ocean
hosted” lifeforms are supposed to be pretty
weird. I also know that the deep ocean
environment has provided a couple of “living
fossils” like coelacanths. Has anybody thought
of comparing contemporary deep ocean hotspot
deposits to the Burgess shale deposits, to see if
there are any interesting similarities?

The article also seems to be saying that a
hall of a lot of the “reconstruction of the
Burgess lifeforms is pure guesswork and
extrapolation. Suppose it’s wrong?

Sue Thomason
Whitby

Bully For Him
From Pete Darby

In my time-honoured tradition of letter
writing, I’ll deal first with the letters, then
ramble insansely (More Bull indeed)

Further to Maureen Speller’s comments and
Martin Brice’s letter, I think it should be
stressed that for many fans, and myself in
particular, the BSFA magazines provide
virtually my only point of contact with fandom.
Having only been to two, and fringe, at that,
conventions, and being a very infrequent
member of the local SF group, writing to and for
the BSFA publications is a lifeline to the
organisation and fandom as a whole. This is
especially true since my fanzine reading and
collection has waned without trace. Yet, to
look at recent BSFA publications, you may well
imagine me part of this “clique” of regulars.
This is simply through my love of letter
writing, communication, and lack of funds for
congregating, insane-buying, etc.

As for Mark Powellson’s challenge for
spoiling book covers - how about the new
covers to the Dune books? Spoilers all over the
place. Bastards.

But what about spoilers in blurb? The worst
must be on Mary gentle’s Golden
Witchbreed, which manages to spoil half the
plot in one paragraph. In the other direction,
there’s the blurb on the back of the
Iliumnsvari novels - little or no relationship
to the plot, and quite rightly so! But now it’s
been done once, I suppose we can’t do it so well
again...

As for Herche Hauck’s complaints, I can only
refer him to:

Mr Cooper’s Law:
If you do not understand a particular word in a
piece of technical writing, ignore it. The piece
will make perfect sense without it.

& Bogovich’s corollary:
If the piece makes no sense without the
word, it will make no sense with it.

Enough said?

Helen Bland reiterates Sturgeon’s law (90% of
everything is crud), then goes on to cite
examples. I’m just curious as to whether any
writer has produced a believable alien
religion. Huh, challenge time.

Why the Burgess Shale article? Well it just
so happens that in one of my courses, we’re
treating Darwinism as a pseudo-science, in
the same stream as astrophysics and
neurophysiology. The problem with Darwinism is that no evidence
could possibly be given to disprove it: this
makes it very Bad Science, as it cannot be
tested for falsehood. Thus the Burgess Shale
and the Peterborough Pits could only force a
mild modification of the theory, while allowing the
principles of natural selection to continue.

As far as A N Green’s final piece... as far as I
can see, the purpose of futuristic fiction is to
reflect modern society, as a continuation of the
Utopian/ dystopian tradition. All our tomorrows,
from Verne to Gibson, have been based on our
todays. Just as, I suppose, all our histories have
been written with the background of today’s
news.

Pete Darby
Colchester

Are things as they them?
From Stephen Baynes

Imagine the setting: The scattered parts of a
collapsing civilization are kept alive by the
last few remaining starships, these ply
between the surviving outposts on an erratic
schedule dictated by their own aging
unreliability and the uncertain shifting of the
patterns of space. These vast starships are
each other’s communities, market towns packed
and bustling with traders buying and selling
all sorts of goods from the mundane to the
exotic.

I am sure you can think of several stories
which use one or more of these elements,
perhaps even some that have dared to use them
all, the funny thing is that it is not fiction.
I have just described an article from November’s
National Geographic! OK, I admit I used
the “space” instead of “Zaire river” and “starship”
instead of “Riverboat and barges”. Thinking
about it I am not sure why I even needed to
make that much change. I need only to have
said that the river was on some other planet,
the author someone like Jack Vance and
everyone still would have said “Yes, I have
read that one”.

To the question and the point of the letter,
how many of SF’s well worn themes are nothing
but a transposition of something terrestrial to a
new setting.

Stephen Baynes
Romsey

100%, I would have thought. Where
else is the author to start from? Surely
it is what the author does with her
theme that makes good SF? See also
Pete Darby’s comments and Ken Lake’s
letter below CC

Artwork by Claire Willoughby
Female Deities
From Helen Bland

Oh dear, how did you resist telling Hervé Hanot to go back to le Dandy? The thing M. Hauck misses is that Vector readers aren't just interested in the books they have already read, but in a wide range of aspects of SF. Steve Baxter was basically talking about Raft in his interview, he was talking about himself and writing Raft. I for one, enjoyed the interview.

But I'm really writing in response to Pete Darby. Pete wonders why synthetic religion is still male-dominated. There are two factors, one is that everything bar childbirth is male-dominated (and even there men are the top gynaecologists etc. usually), the other is more interesting. I suspect that many women who have looked beyond conventional religions have re-discovered the various female deities, from Ishtar to Bride; the Mother Goddess is coming back into popular focus and these women may well turn to her, men, perhaps for the same reasons that they eventually overthrew the matriarchal cultures, are reluctant to follow this path. Hence the male trend towards synthetic religions?

I'd recommend Pete to read Rosalind Miles' The Women's History of the World, and SF readers everywhere to try Ellen Galford's The Fires of Bride.

Pete also describes the SF community as predominantly Agnostic. I'm not sure, but I do know that a great number of SF authors have a religious background, names like Asimov, Silverberg and Ellison have a Jewish heritage (as the latter demonstrated in 'I'm looking for Kadath'), C J Cherryh grew up in the bible belt, O'S Card is a Mormon, there are anthologies of Jewish and Catholic SF, I could go on... but I'm sure Pete gets my point.

Helen Bland
Edinburgh

He might, but I'm not at all sure that I do... upbringing and actual belief are surely two different things? CC

Money Making Suggestion!
From Ken Lake

The October 7th issue of the Daily Telegraph contains an excellent summary of the 150-year process for terraforming Mars, with considerable useful detail. This is based on a recent eight-page article in Nature, according to the writer.

For those who missed the account, perhaps I can briefly summarise the summary:

Stage 1 (2015-2030): First expedition arrives, conducts primitive agricultural experiments under domes. Temperature -60C.

Stage 2 (2030-2050): Warning begins - orbiting solar mirrors of Mylar warm icecaps which are also sprayed with soot to decrease reflectivity. Carbon dioxide, oxygen, nitrogen and water vapour are released from crust; CPC gases start greenhouse effect, temperature rises to -40C.

Stage 3 (2050-2075): Hardly genetically engineered plants introduced to break down carbon dioxide; clouds appear, sky starts to turn blue; temp. -25C.

Stage 4 (2075-2100): Lakes and rivers from melted icecaps, small areas containing plankton to absorb more carbon dioxide; evergreen forests formed; temperature now freezing.

Stage 5 (2100-2170): Towns multiply, farming and hi-tech industry, air completely breathable, temp. now +10C.

The authors stress this uses no technology not currently available. I'm not sure why they need 15 years for a 1 year stage 1 visit, but doubtless there's more in Nature. Apparently colonists would live mostly on green vegetables and cereals plus occasional timbers from Earth.

OK, you say, so what? Well, two points strike me. First, this is no longer SF but science-become-fact, and heaven knows we've waited long enough for it.

Secondly and more importantly: what a wonderful framework for the first really reliable science-based novel of Martian Settlement. The author could build in a "no children until you reach 30" scheme and so have exactly 5 generations over 150 years, though not exactly stage by stage, and each generation would be facing new problems both within the family and in relation to Mars, while different characters would come and go as antagonists and local colour for each generation.

Of course, I would expect any SF writer worth his salt to introduce some changes - probably speeding up the process with imaginative new concepts, but then slowing it down with major disasters - but it seems to me that there is scope for something that, by reprinting the Nature paper as a fore- or afterword, could make someone an awful lot of money by appealing to a non-SF readership.

It's a pity I'm not a fiction writer; I could do with the money! But in a spirit of disinterested fannishness, I present the idea to anyone prepared to take it up. Here we go, into the future!

Also, a comment on Brian Stableford's article in Vector 163: In telling us that most modern SF is dystopian Brian overlooks the fact that it's fiction, and as Joe Haldeman tells us in Matrix 96, "Violence isn't necessary to fiction, but you can make a good argument that conflict is... I think that most stories written without conflict are sous de force - pun intentional - or workshop demonstrations." In a Utopia one does not, by definition, have conflict, hence no "plot"... and so on. This can cut in two ways, the first being that the characterisation is at the expense of the "action," which can be an awful lot of money by appealing to a non-SF readership.

It's a pity I'm not a fiction writer; I could do with the money! But in a spirit of disinterested fannishness, I present the idea to anyone prepared to take it up. Here we go, into the future!

Fantasy Readers
From Catherine Steel

Just a brief note in response to Brian Stableford's generally excellent article about H G Wells and the future. While I accept that Brian does not intend any slur on women or on medievalist fantasy by his suggestion that they make up a large part of the audience for this kind of book, and I can also see that this assertion fits in neatly with the rest of his argument, I would like to question its validity.

In my experience as a librarian, the majority readership for these books is in fact young men. Women do not appear to read them in any greater proportion than they do any other form of "speculative fiction". I seem to recall that the recent BSFA poll, published in Matrix, bears this out.

Catherine Steel
London
I was interested in Ken Lake’s piece on the Burgess Shale. I believe he’s wrong in some respects, but his ideas are pretty sharp, and I think his distrust of Gould’s rather misleading book is justified.

Let me explain. I’ll start by dealing with Ken’s possible explanations of the Burgess Shale fauna:

1) There is no chance that the Burgess Shale animals are the result of some combination of radiation or other mutation. Massive radiation induced mutation does not work like that - it doesn’t produce sophisticated and visible “monsters”, but simply creates deficient, deformed, or sterile versions of the parent. (See DeWitte for a good explanation of this.) The Burgess Shale fauna cannot be derived from conventional forms by any conceivable random mutation, and anyway many of them were obviously fertile, because we have multiple fossils of the same animal.

2) There is very, very, very little chance that the Burgess Shale fauna are an alien zoo. To be discovered at all after 600 million years these animals must have been widespread. In all the time people have been looking at fossils, less than one square kilometre of the Precambrian rock has been studied. So if a spaceship had landed on the Earth that far back, the probability of us digging it up would be one in tens of millions.

3) Is just silly.

Ken is right when he points out that some of the strange forms may be fragmentary or misinterpreted. Several examples of this have come up in the last few years: the most notable is Hallucigenia. This was originally described as a long-caterpillar-like animal walking on seven slit-like pairs of spiracles, with a single, vertically-pointing, row of seven short tentacles on its back. In fact the fossil was just carelessly examined - the row of tentacles is double and the fossil reconstruction was upside-down, so the tentacles are just ordinary paired legs, while the sharp spines pointed upward for protection. Hallucigenia is very similar to a modern group of animals, the “velvet worms”, and is very likely their ancestor.

Despite this, there is no real doubt that there was some sort of explosion in animal forms 600 million years ago. After a long, long period during which living things were all single-celled, many different sorts of multicellular species arose quite suddenly. These have been dug up in many places, not just the Burgess Shale. Only a few of these multicellular body plans seem to have left modern descendants.

The real questions are:

1) Why did multicellular animals not arise earlier?
2) Why have few new body plans arisen since?
3) Why did most of the Precambrian forms die out?

Gould tries to give some answers to these in his book, coming down on the side of “just history”. I suspect that Ken is correct in detecting the smell of bullshit here. I will try to give the answers. I believe we are the most probable. I will start by dealing with the first and second questions, and then go on to the third, which is the tab of Gould’s argument.

Why did multicellular forms not arise earlier? There is a fairly obvious reason for this; there wasn’t enough oxygen. (See Scientific American, October ‘81). Large animals have problems getting oxygen to their insides. 600 million years ago, photosynthesis really got under way and the proportion of oxygen in the air (and the water) started to rise toward modern levels. Before that time, there was very little, and anything larger than an amoeba probably would have suffocated. It’s worth noting that this is a consideration of physics. Gould persistently ignores such constraints on animal design a reflection of his specialization in paleontology, no doubt.

Why have few new body plans arisen since? Again, I think there is a fairly strong consensus; they did, but they got eaten. When multicellular life was just getting going, there were plenty of chances to dawdle about experimenting without becoming someone’s dinner. Once fast predators like Anomalocaris were swimming around, that was the end of the window of opportunity.

And finally, why did some of the Precambrian forms persist and give rise to many descendants, while others became extinct? It’s worth rephrasing just in what ways evolution is, and is not deterministic. Look at an example in a human population. In the region of Africa where the ancestors of all black Americans came from, the proportion of the sickle cell gene is about 8%. This is because, though the sickle cell gene weakens its carrier (and kills if it is homozygous), it confers on its bearer an immunity to malaria. Black Americans have about 70% African ancestry, but among them today the proportion of the sickle cell gene is not the 5-6% you might expect, but less than 2%. This is because there is less malaria in Asia; the gene on average confers much less of an advantage, in fact a disadvantage. This change was not “just history” - it was inevitable. Once they moved out of an area where malaria was common it was certain that the frequency of sickle cell gene would decrease. The “experiment” could have been repeated a thousand times over, and it would have given the same result every time.

Or to take another example, this time one of competition between different species rather than changes in gene frequency within a single species. Grey squirrels, recent invaders, have displaced red squirrels over most of the UK, except in a few upland coniferous areas. Again, though we don’t understand exactly how this happens, we know it is not “just history”, because it is repeated anew in every new region the grey invades.

Note that I have chosen two very extreme examples here. The advantages or disadvantages that most genotypes have are much smaller than this. But evolution is at least partly deterministic, in the sense that at least some genes will spread, and some species will displace others, in a repeatable way, in any given environment. It’s important not to be misled because we may not be able to predict this: that’s just because we don’t know enough, not because the process is intrinsically unpredictable and random. We may not have been able to predict beforehand that cane toads would take over Australia, but it was a dead cert that they would, whether or not we knew it.

The Burgess Shale

By Andy Robertson
However, what is not deterministic is the variation that gives rise to new genes or new species in the first place. This is completely random, even to the extent of not even predict which mutations will arise. Because it is random, it is impossible to predict even in theory what new species will evolve, even in the short term. And there's more to it than this: the environment of any living thing is largely made up of other living things, and so the evolution of even a single species, very small changes with random causes might be amplified by feedback to make very large differences over very long term. In this sense Gould is completely right.

But in other senses, Gould is completely wrong. An animal is a machine adapted to carry out certain tasks. For any given task, like for instance running, or swimming, some sorts of animals, some body plans, are completely, unambiguously and objectively superior to others. This is not a humanocentric view: it's a matter of basic physics, something in which (as I said above) Gould is a bit weak. I will give a few examples of this as well.

The first example concerns fish and squids. About 300 million years ago, squids were dominant in the few fish that were large. After that time fish became steadily more numerous, until today they make up 95% of all fish. This is probably (certainly) because fish can swim much faster and more efficiently than squids. The reason for this is that squids swim by means of a syphon, which squirts a small stream of water very fast, while fish swim by using their tails, which propel a large mass of water quite slowly. The energy required to move the water is proportional to mass times velocity squared, while the thrust obtained is proportional to mass times velocity, so a fish gets more bang per buck. Fish really are superior to squids: at least, at swimming fast. Or rather, tail-swimming is really superior to syphon swimming. It's not just a matter of environment, and it's not a matter of chance - it would be equally true for beasts that swim in liquid nitrogen, plasma or lava.

The second example concerns the methods animals use to walk. Lizards, crocodiles, and amphibians have a body which is slung between pairs of legs which point out sideways. If they have a watery environment, this movement on land, they have to support their bodies clear of the ground, which requires considerable effort, and thus a consequent loss of energy. Because of the square-cube rule (too long to explain here, but again a matter of basic physics) this cost is proportional to mass times velocity, so a fish gets more bang per buck. Fish really are superior to squids: at least, at swimming fast. Or rather, tail-swimming is really superior to syphon swimming. It's not just a matter of environment, and it's not a matter of chance - it would be equally true for beasts that swim in liquid nitrogen, plasma or lava.

1) In any given environment, some genotypes will outcompete others. This is a not a random process: it is observed to be consistent and repeatable, though it may be too complicated to reliably predict.

2) But, the mutations that give rise to new genotypes are completely random, and the mutual interaction between different species may amplify this randomness over long periods. Therefore, even in theory, be predicted over any long period.

3) However, the forms that living things can evolve into are constrained, not only by their history, but by basic physics, chemistry, and mechanics. For a given life style, some forms really are better than others, and these will tend to become the most numerous in the long run.

Let me give an analogy to describe this: think of a rockslide, starting in a mountain valley somewhere: One rock slips, sets off others, and finally the whole valley side falls. Is this predictable, or is it totally random? You can't say when it will happen, you can't say in which order the rocks will fall, and you can't say which ones will end up on top: and a very small variation in the place where the first rock slips might make a big difference to the final configuration. In this sense the rockfall is a totally random thing. But on the other hand, it is constrained by physics and mechanics, so you can make limited predictions about some things. You know the rocks will on average end up lower down the mountain: you have some idea of how the size of the individual rocks will influence their final position in the heap of rocks that is the result of the slide: and you know approximately the angle the final body of rocks will lie at, and you know that, even though collisions may send some rocks bouncing upwards for a short time, most rocks will spend most of their time moving downward. You don't have to be able to make a detailed prediction of the path of every rock to have a good idea of the outcome.

Is the evolution of life like this? We have only got one life-system to study, so we can't tell, but I think that, to some extent, it is. I believe there are some pointers, at least in the evolution of large mobile animals (ie bigger than a centimetre).

1) Simplicity of gross body plan - Large animals have one or two of each major organ - for instance, one mouth, one anus, and one head. Most large sea creatures are shaped like tadpoles, following a simple streamline. Large land vertebrates have only four limbs, the minimum number practicable.

2) Increasing mass of nervous tissue - This doesn't mean that animals with small brains die out - they remain the overwhelming majority, and most of them are very successful - but large brained animals tend to become more numerous through time. This is a pattern that has been followed independently by at least two different species on Earth, molluscs (squids/octupi) and vertebrates.

3) Increasing speed - Fish swim faster than birds fly faster than insects: and wolves run faster than lizards (but maybe not much faster than some of the dinosaurs, at least for short bursts). Again, there are plenty of slow animals around, but the fastest animals do seem to be getting faster and more numerous as time goes by.

4) Linear organisation - Animals usually have a front end and a back end. This isn't universally true - the starfish, for instance - but it is the most usual plan. It is much the best organisation if you intend to move about.

I wouldn't be happy making any more predictions than that: but I think it is fairly certain that being straight, streamlined, fast and smart, are objective superiorities, and I think that the fossil record bears this out.

So how should we regard Gould's book? Well this is where I am going to resort to politically-motivated abuse. Gould is a noted left-winger. He has, for instance, been a leader in the (and largely successful, but completely untruthful) campaign to publicly discredit IQ testing. His bizarre position is that intelligence is not inheritable (given the evidence, no-one can believe this) but that intelligence is a "cultural specialisation" rather than a measurement of "real human worth", whatever that means.

Gould is a lefty: and as such he is deeply ill at ease with notions of objective, intrinsic, inherited, superiority or inferiority, even where these deal with the differences between species rather than the differences between individuals. Hence Wonderful Life - an attempt to give the impression that it's all random, that the dominant position held by some groups of animals today is just luck, not predetermined, and to undermine the popular idea that evolution represents a triumph of the genetically superior over the genetically inferior. Well, as we saw earlier, even if we can't predict the details of evolution over long periods, some animals (and some genes) do reliably outcompete others. The popular idea is partly correct, at least in the short term. And even if the details of evolution cannot be predicted over long periods, the final forms are constrained, to a degree, by the absolute considerations of physics: evolution is not "just history".

This doesn't mean that when we get to other planets we will be greeted by erect harmless bipeds. There is a great deal of truth in Gould's book. But it is not a celebration of evolution, which thinks of humanity as the predetermined final form is right out, but I'd be willing to bet that when they come from space they will be straight, streamlined, fast and smart, and it won't be any sort of coincidence.
Dear science fiction fans, have you ever lived in a country where the authorities burn books? Not because they are interested, not because they have been judged in an open court of law to be unacceptable to the people, not because they have woundingly labelled some individual — but because the police don’t like them? where there is a police censorship of books?

Do I mean Fahrenheit 451? Some dystopic world of the future? Or the repressive epochs of our past? Or do I refer to that great Satan, the Soviet Union? I am speaking of the British police force in Moscow recently I saw with my own eyes. Russian naughty books on the bookstalls. A police officer pretending on this occasion to the Muslim fanatics.

They do it here. The more asinine or cynical of you will have guessed I was leading up to this. For the rest of you, a little history....

In 1989, David Britton completed a novel, Lord Horror, a savage, fantastical work, devised to confront the beastliness of Fascism and Jew-hating by satirising it, by throwing its beastliness back in its teeth. He sent it to all the major publishers in Britain, and, probably little to his surprise, rejected it, being utterly beyond the pale. After collecting about twenty rejections, Britton and his co-director of the comic, Michael Moorcock, decided to publish Lord Horror themselves, under the imprint of their own Manchester publishing house. The comic also brought out a darkly brilliant series of comics, or graphic magazines, under the Lord Horror name, and an equally offensive if rather less brilliant offshoot, the comic series Meng & Ecker.

By this time Savoy had been for years a thorn in the side of the Manchester police, those self-appointed guardians of the moral order, led by James ‘God’s Cop’ Anderton. On many occasions they had been raided by the police, and stock seized was not returned. In 1982 David Britton was sent to prison for one month, for selling Charles Paltz’s Le Guin and Samuel Delany’s Tides Of Lust, both widely available outside Manchester.

One of the characters in Lord Horror is a Manchester police chief called ‘Appleton’. Britton admits to satirising the Manchester chief police stationing ‘as a token of Anderton’s rantings about “gays”.’ Are we surprised then, when on 26 Sept 1989 the police raided Savoy, seizing all the remaining stock of the Lord Horror novel and the Horror and Meng & Ecker comics.

The raids were authorised by Manchester stoppage magistrate Derrick Fairclough. On 28 Aug 1989 a court hearing was held at which the same magistrate (what a coincidence) decreed that the seized matter was obscene and was to be destroyed. The public, you will note, was not involved; just the police and one magistrate. Savoy are currently appealing against the destruction order; a process, as those of you who know anything about British law will appreciate, is likely to be fairly costly.

And why should we care about this? Why should we care about an unpleasant book from a little-known author and publisher?

Because Lord Horror is in its way a great book; probably the most concentratened and savagely surreal work of the imagination published in our generation. Michael Moorcock said of it “A novel of literary merit...Lord Horror is one of the most authoritative indictments of the holocaust and our moral responsibility for it.”

Colin Wilson wrote “Brilliantly funny... compares with some of the best work that came out of France and Germany between the wars.”

In Britton’s book, Hitler survives the war, but is afflicted by an unruly seven-foot long spitting penis, “Old Shatterhand”, with a fondness for eating shrimp. Lord Horror is a William Joyce-like figure who kills Jews with his twin razors. And there is a steam-powered airship crewed by “nigger androids.”

It is hard to imagine anybody taking any of this literally, or, despite the rather unpleasant contents, to believe anybody is likely to be deprived or corrupted by it. Britton, of Jewish descent, says that he wrote it to do an anti-semitic character, you have to do it to the one-hundredth degree. There is no point in pretending that there is no such sort of people.

But Britton also says that the novel carries on the spirit of such New Worlds stories as Bug Jack Barron, which had questions asked about it in Parliament. It is speculative — Auschwitz as a ‘role model’ for the future. He adds that it is also “a homage to the pulp swords & sorcery of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Robert E. Howard”.

If Lord Horror is obscene, the law allows that it be prosecuted by the Director of Public Prosecutions, with a jury trial, under the Obscene Publications Act of 1959. In fact British judges have been singularly reluctant to bring in guilty verdicts for obscenity, and such prosecutions have been virtually abandoned. If Lord Horror is obscene, then what is Anderton thinks he has been libelled he can sue. If Lord Horror is racist, then action can be brought under the Race Relations Act. All the laws have been passed by a democratically elected parliament. I have little quarrel with them. What I do object to is Section Three of the Act being used by the police to seize and destroy anything they don’t like, without a trial.

I don’t want to get into the pro/anti pornography argument here, for Lord Horror is not pornography; its intentions (and its market) are quite different. There is a telling sequence in one of the comics where (after the speech bubbles have fallen whitely mute and following a plain text of compressed surrealism) we see what are all too clearly authentic photographs of people done to death by the Nazis; the real obscenity.

I would merely urge a sense of proportion.

And how does this relate to you? The police in Manchester and London increasingly see themselves in the role of moral guardians and they have broadened their interpretation of acts like the Obscene Publications Act to include just about anything and anyone they disagree with, and done their bit to promote a climate of moral hysteria. Freedoms won in the 60’s and 70’s have been undone. The 80’s is run by a reactionary Government which blames the country’s ills on “permissiveness”.

Recently the Metropolitan Police, under Michael Hames, the new head of Scotland Yard’s Obscene Publications Squad, using Section Three raided Island Records and seized the entire pressing (25,000 copies) of a record by NWA (Niggers with Attitude) an American rap group. The police lost the appeal. They seized copies of “Lovers Guide”, an explicit sex education video. They raided a comics shop and took away copies of Viz. Knockout Comics has been raided. A bookshop was prosecuted, unsuccessfully, for selling the Research Book Modern Primitives (about nippie & genital piercing). Drug-related literature has been seized, a possibility that Parliament never envisaged. Lesbians and male gays have been jailed for appearing in private videos of bizzare acts which are not in themselves illegal. How long before the police start an interest in those quantity-limited Horror fanzines and start seizing them? Recently W H Smith have forced the publishers of a horror anthology and a horror magazine to withdraw or modify their publications. Smiths clearly felt that seizure of their stock was something they definitely didn’t need.

Spare a thought for the dilemma of writers who, when faced with the whole of human experience and imagination, want to draw on all of it and not just the parts that won’t offend anyone, as raw materials for their fiction.

Savoy are appealing against Fairclough’s decision — probably in the New Year — but there will still be no jury. If it loses, the books and magazines will be destroyed.

Savoy have recently announced that since mounting an appeal for help, their case has been taken up by Geoffrey Robertson QC. That this expert on free speech, and successful defender of the NWA case has decided to become involved, is a sign of how seriously this further threat to liberty is regarded by the liberal establishment. Robertson was not hired; Savoy cannot afford his kind of fees; he offered his services for expenses only. Vigorous support for Savoy is now coming from Article 19, the powerful freedom group who are the mainstay of the international support for Salman Rushdie. Savoy have also had Legal Aid for the forthcoming appeal, but they have not closed their appeal for funds as legal bills from earlier hearings in this affair are still unpaid.

Send all donations to the “Savoy Freedom to Publish Fund”, c/o Livingstone & Co solicitors, Bridge St, Manchester.

This is your territory. This is your fight. Fight it.

Arrow Books, who this year bravely re-issued De Sade’s novels, had better watch out.
When you're an American writer visiting Britain, you generally end up in London somehow or another, that's because your publishers make you, but it seems that most of the real action in British SF takes place in Brighton and Oxford and even unlikelier places like Leeds and Reading and Telford and possibly Winchester. So I plan to avoid London this time.

It took me quite a while to figure out that nobody really lives in London except editors and publishers and the Victorians undated. The laudanum-soaked spirit of Wilkie Collins is loose in London right now ready to strangle me for rudely disturbing his literary grave with my word processor.

So, to hell with London, let's move right on to our big hotdog topic of the day which is "The Wonderful Power of Storytelling". I had two choices of topic for my big Day Guest of Honour speech. (This is my big deal Guest of Honour speech, in case you were wondering). My choice was between "The Image of the Future" and "The Art and Science of Storytelling". I like to choose unlikely possibilities, so instead of trying to dazzle you with a lot of high-tech Yankee cyberpunk balderdash I plan to write an extremely literary today. At the back of my notes somewhere, when I was contemplating this speech, digging through my filing cabinet in Texas, I found this really snappy speech by my friend Orson Scott Card of North Carolina. Scott's speech was all about how we're bare-knuckled Sci-Fi American popular writers are going to show sassy high-brow left-wing wings like Gabriel Garcia Marquez how to write novels. I also had some swell reference material cribbed from an Ursula LeGuin article... It was all about how elves and dragons can really impress and terrify the oppressive patriarchal war-mongering powerstructure.

But, you may have heard speeches about science fiction's wonderful power of storytelling before and you probably swallowed this line to some extent because otherwise you wouldn't be here listening to some author talking. You'd probably be off watching videos like a sensible late 20th century consumer or maybe you'd be playing computer games or reading comics. I happen to be quite a fan of computer games and comics myself. I think the real roots of popular science fiction; the pulp tradition of the 20s and 30s with its blood and fighting and adventure is much more alive in computer games and comics today than it is in written SF. I think if Henry Kuttner or Robert E Howard were alive today they'd probably be writing for comics.

There's a certain amount of swashbuckling blood and killing and pulp action-adventure that's written SF nowadays, but it seems to me that it's become very lifeless, very pro-forma very much yesteryear. I can scarcely understand why anyone would read a standard fantasy trilogy or share-cropping book in 1991, when they could be renting great special effects videos for a third of the price. I myself don't read these books; I doubt I'd read them even if I were a teenager today. I mean why the heck should you read another paint-by-numbers quest trilogy when you can play a terrific computer game like Wing Commander by Origin Systems? A simple punch and dice role-playing game delivers a tremendous adolescent power fantasy kick and with a halfway decent Dungeon Master a role-playing game is far more stimulating to the imagination than a bad fantasy trilogy. I think this should be openly confessed. And you'd get to hang out with your friends to boot, and probably develop some useful social skills.

It's very much an open question why written science fiction actually exists at all in 1991. I think a lot of the reason is simple habit, you can see that one of science fiction's most props is the fantastic adventure yarn has migrated into different media with very considerable success. And another of science fiction's main props is also under severe attack - this is science fiction's traditional role as the booster for technology and the popular handmaid of scientific culture.

Today NASA is rotting on the launchpad and for good reason. If manned space exploration is a boost to the economy and a super charger for technological development as was often said, and if space exploration feeds the spirit of national adventure and national enterprise as was even said then the story is that great pioneer of manned space flight, the Soviet Union, in such awful shape in 1991? And I must also add that the other major space power, the USA, is now the world's greatest debtor nation.

Science fiction played up space exploration for all it was worth, and then some, for 50-60 years. This romance of titan engineering projects, is the sort of thing 20th century science fiction truly excelled at; you never saw much science fiction written about seizure trade advantages through dogged, small-scale improvements in traditional industries. Though, that's what Japan actually did with the later 20th century. Japan in 1991 looks a hell of a lot better than Japan did in 1946, which was the heyday of Robert Heinlein. Maybe the Japanese weren't reading enough traditional American and Russian science fiction or at least to notice that Japanese science fiction comics, computer games and videos are going great guns in 1991, however.

So I think if you look at written SF objectively today, you can see that it has had quite a bit of the stuffing kicked out of it. Most of the stuff marketed on the science fiction racks is in fact Fantasy; medieval fantasy, sword and sorcery, faunus comedies full of puns and in-jokes and sword and planet adventures. People are openly afraid to contemplate the future today. It's very hard to work up any kind of honest enthusiasm for technical SF boosterism today. It certainly does not fit the zeitgeist of the 1950s. It sounds very bogus today, when you talk about better living through chemistry, or better living through engineering, or better living through physics, or better living through biotechnology. It sounds like you're a paid spokesman for Exxon.

The zeitgeist of the 90s is not kind to science fiction. The secret heart of the 90s is partial to horror, horror is 90s and splatterpunk is very 90s. There may not be a whole hell of a lot in writing splatterpunk, and horror as a genre seems far more dark and narrow than science fiction, but it does fit the tenor of the times. There's not a whole hell of a lot of future in the 1990s either. There's no vision; there's no vision thing in the 90s, no sense of a better society beckoning, no sense of a brighter future for the next generation. Just more of the same, kinder and gentler, louder and stupider.

So what kind of wonderful power is really left to the storytellers of SF? What wonder? What power? Why bother? Well, I'm here today to try to be not staggeringly side of being somewhat Bothering rather more intensely than ever before. SF in the 90s has to find a cultural role far different from SF in the 30s, or the 60s, or even the 80s. As different as these decades themselves are different. Written SF as the disposable fantasy machine; what Damon Knight once referred to as the "reader's garbage" is going, gone. That role really belongs by right to the new media, just as SF pulp magazines and SF paperbacks books were theretofore new media once; cheap, irresistible, popular media in their own glory days.

The balance factory may go entirely and it may take all of written SF with it, if written SF can't find another viable role. But SF's role of techno-booster and glamourizer is history. What
honesty there was in this role is gone. No literature can survive which is intellectually dishonest. At this point in the ongoing technological revolution we can do without more empty agit-prop and real estate promotion. It is not that there is no promise in new technologies; there is great promise in them, but mere promises should not be trusted. We SF people have been around the block a few times with these modern miracles of science. In 1991, we shouldn't gawk and gee-whiz like a bunch of rubes.

Written SF today needs to have a lot more spine and brain, written SF needs to take on the role of a genuine literature. It needs to criticize and inspire and inform, written SF needs to keep the imagination alive. SF must fight for the righteous cause in the ongoing war against popular literacy and popular intelligence. But SF needs to do more than defend old ground, SF needs to carry the war to the enemy. It needs to set a thousand brushfires in the most far-fetched and apparently pathetic corners of our society. SF needs to invent alternatives and publicise alternatives and keep alive in people's minds the possibility of real alternatives.

We certainly entered a new world after what our friends in eastern Europe like to call "the events of 1989". Communism is dead, the 19th century left is no longer an alternative. Centrally controlled economies are no longer an alternative, the dictatorship of the proletariat is no longer an alternative, the Market has won. And we now need to understand what the Market can do for us, what the Market can do to us.

We have entered an age of global post-modern Capitalism. There's no need to get all dark and gloomy and terrified about this prospect. There's no need to panic, and invent loopy conspiracy theories, and despair, and curse God, and die. But the Market has won and the Market is global, and not local and the Market is post-modern and not merely modern and the Market is not merely efficient but very technologically advanced and getting more so. When the Market had a competition in the Eastern Bloc, the Free World was very highly politicalised; human rights and democratic values were strongly emphasised, sometimes, even when it meant giving up some money.

A truly global Market will be quite different from the partially global Market of the Cold War era free world. A lot has changed since the Cold War started in 1945. Thanks to technological advancement, vast new sections of the human body and human psyche and human culture have become commodities; creatures of the Market, things that are offered for sale. Information, cultural images, even thought can now be reduced to dollars, yen, deutschmarks and euros. The entities we call governments are not global. The rules we call civil rights are not global. Human individuals are not global. The Market is global; the Market is far larger than any government. There are multinational corporations flourishing today that are larger and more powerful than many nations with seats in the United Nations. But even these great enterprises do not control the Market. Nobody controls the Market. Nobody has any real idea how to control the Market. Those who try to control the Market have not done well against those who are willing to let the Market have its own way.

The Market is run by what Adam Smith called "the Invisible Hand". The Invisible Hand is only a metaphor and perhaps should not be taken too seriously, but it must be recognised first and foremost that the Invisible Hand is not human. The Invisible Hand is not intelligent, it has no compassion. To expect compassion from the Invisible Hand is like expecting compassion from a coral reef.

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When a woman in Pakistan today, draws as an artist for that video camera to show us a large and well-healed incision where her left kidney was to be, that kidney was drawn from her body by the Invisible Hand. It is very well for us to say that a doctor did it and should be blamed for it, but that doctor, or that medical entrepreneur as perhaps we should call him in more justice to actual doctors, took that kidney because there is a global Market for healthy organs, today. A desperately ill millionaire in Abu Dhabi, or Brazil can make a phone call, and a villager in Pakistan can be presented with three years' income and an annual income, respectively, to place on a few national borders in almost total anonymity. The oppressed, so-called, and the so-called oppressor never see one another's faces.

We are approaching a time of Commodity Totalitarianism. This is very different from political totalitarianism, political and cultural activities will not be directly restricted by state police; they will just be swept aside, bought, underpinned and recycled, just as is done to the Market business at hand. Commodity totalitarianism essentially means that enough money can buy almost anything, including a great many things that used to be considered of little, such as national cultures and politics. The Market will supply a wealthy person -- a wealthy financial entity let's say, it need not be any human person, with anything that can be denominated in money. Drugs, human organs, skin and hair, foetal tissue, human hormones, political power, newspapers, magazines, publishers, chain book stores, videos, video distributors, computer games, computer publishers too; for sale.

Sex can be bought of course, nothing new about that. Except for the scale of it. Thailand has become a huge jet-age brothel today. Children are available through money, human fertility treatments will see to that. Day care for your children; you can rent a commercial successor for parental care. You may want to pay someone else to bring up your children, more likely, you will be forced to do this by so-called economic realities. You can buy a dumping ground for toxic chemicals if you need one. Respectability is for sale. Abolition for one's sins, whatever those were. Today, you can buy a satellite hotline to the holy gospel, and help make christian evangelism one of the most bale and repulsive of post-modern commercial enterprises. You can buy justice, and buy injustice. Money will bring means of legal and extra-legal harassment for one's enemies. It can buy information, including unsuppressed private and personal information. It buys arms, including nuclear arms and nerve gases. Certain global banks it seems, will even supply you with black bag private espionage units. This is an astounding development to see outside the pages of a William Gibson novel.

It is the nature of the Market to endeavour to meet the need. Most of the time the Market will meet the need, but in all, as it is and the Markets would-be regulators are merely national, as they are, then the Market will succeed much more often than ever before. Putting over a million of its own citizens in prisons, as the United States has done, has not stopped the multinational drug Market. It has given the United States, (land of the free and home of the brave), the largest gulf in the present day world, but it has not stopped the drug Market. Entities that share the Market's multinational aspects will see to that. Nations that respect nationhood or feel loyalty to regions or nationalities will tend to suffer.

Here are some things that the Market can not buy for us: A pound of stratospheric ozone; a quart of seawater without heavy metals and pesticides; an extinct species; genuine community feeling; a sense of tradition and place; respect for human rights or any other form of political conviction. The Market can buy politicians, but the Market is not inherently political in its true sense, because the Market is simply not human. The Market has no morality; it cannot answer the political questions posed by Socrates or Lincoln or Gandhi. A Market has all the moral depth of a buffalo stampede.

Human beings are not particularly well designed as cogswhells for Market operations. If the purpose of human life is to fulfill economic imperatives to survive economically in the harsh world of global competition, as some of our leaders would have it, then we humans are very ill-designed for that purpose. The Market will therefore offer us huge financial incentives to redesign ourselves. It used to be physically impossible for us to redesign ourselves, but now it is entirely possible. Hollywood actors and actresses, whose face and form are their fortunes, have been redesigning themselves for years now in surgery clinics. Our former president is said to have had two facelifts; his wife is rumoured to have had four. Hollywood people are not afraid of the knife.

A Pakistani farmer can function quite adequately with only one kidney, he can have instead one kidney, a scar and an account at the Bank of Credit and Commerce International. If you are in Britain, you can walk about with a stranger's kidney inside you and a large account at the very same Bank of Credit and Commerce International. The bank may crash, it may be taken from top to bottom, but that's considered one of the vagaries of the global Market. Something farmers and sick people simply have to put up with.

The human race needs to soberly decide what it is willing to do to "survive economically". As individual citizens in the modern world, we ourselves are already commodities to a very great extent. We will go where money tells us and do what money requires of us. We spend most of our lives at work, male and female, and the number of hours we spend working is no longer declining, as it did in the 40s and 50s, but has lately been going up steadily. Electronic communicators, such as fax machines, cellular telephones and home computers, now tie us ever closer to the workplace. It is much harder to simply get away from it all.

Bad credit can now follow us across the planet. Bad acts will be tallied and faultlessly remembered as long as we live. We may live in anonymous bedsits and rental houses and highrises, we may lack all sense of taking part in a living human community, but we will certainly not be anonymous. The Market knows our worth to the last penny, and will follow us wherever we may go with magazine subscription offers and credit card deals. Money hungry machines will call us on the telephone and badger us for sales. It is easy to imagine a

Artwork: By Claire Willoughby
“Written SF as the disposable fantasy machine is going, going, gone. That role belongs by right to the new media, just as SF pulp magazines were themselves new media once: cheap, irrepressible popular media in their own glory days.”

Perfectly competitive economy made up entirely of these phone machines, constantly exchanging money by reciting tapes at one another, and indulging in electronic funds transfer without human interference or intelligence of any kind.

The human race needs to decide where and how it will resist being made into plastic. It is not that one should be against plastic, there are great advantages to being made plastic, I myself have a ceramic tooth and silicon lenses, and I swear by them. The human condition has never been a splendid thing that we should cherish, we are mediocre beings. A gift of a birth to a child was a deep and primal event; for the parents, the child and the community. Women can now rent their wombs. They can use a womb of their own child, this is not a genetic relative. There are definite advantages to this practice. Some people want this service, and a lot of money will be paid for it. That is why it happens. It is denied in one country by legal action, the Market will meet the demand elsewhere.

Renting childbirth erases many of our ancient definitions of what it means to be a human being and a citizen. The logical next step, commercially speaking is to remove the unskilled labour and simply manufacture wombs commercially. Aldous Huxley foresaw this many years ago, what he did not see was that it could be done simply for money. Huxley imagined that a repressive government would be required to inflict this horrible indignity on us. He didn’t foresee that it might be done simply because it pays.

Science fiction as a literature can resist commodity totalitarianism. This may sound absurd, why should we claim any such virtue? Science fiction is a powerless literature and the province of an eccentric minority. But SF is not yet entirely afraid to extrapolate; it is not entirely afraid to see what is coming and talk frankly about it. Some SF writers, unlike most other writers are intelligent enough and ruthless enough to understand how weird this world is actually becoming. And SF also has a very powerful tradition of non-commerciality, SF doesn’t sell very well and its best writers have an ancient and laudable tradition of starvation.

If SF’s best writers were truly making pots of gold, we’d probably have a real problem. We’d have to worry seriously about being co-opted. Not just by half-sized billionaire churches like Scientology, but by serious commercial entities like British Petroleum or General Dynamics Corporation. But before SF writers can go to Hollywood and TV, they don’t have to worry about the few cents for a few cens a word. And fandom is not a normal phenomenon, fandom is a global phenomenon, but fandom is a very special case. It is fanal incorporated. It strongly resists co-option. SF is not about money, SF has never been about money. Anyone who enters the SF field in search of money is seriously misguided and probably too stupid to form a real threat to our best traditions. SF is about imagination. As imagination is crushed out of the rest of society by so-called economic realities, then SF’s candle in the darkness will grow brighter and brighter.

In the struggle against Commodity Totalitarianism, we in the West have a great deal to learn from artists in the Eastern Bloc. We have a great deal to learn from people like Václav Havel, the first thing we need to learn is that we’re reforming a gigantic inhuman system bent on its own senseless aggrandisement. It’s not something that one does with lapel buttons and bumperstickers over a three day weekend. It is a genuine lifelong commitment, it is serious and earnest, it is hard work and it is dangerous.

The second thing that we can learn is that dark as it may seem, the struggle is definitely not hopeless. Resistance at any particular moment may seem muted or absent, but people are not happy being treated as pawns. People are not happy without their dignity, without control over their own lives. They resent being worked to death and having their family lives destroyed by forces they scarcely comprehend. They resent seeing their cities crumble and rot and seeing their streets fill up with derricks, and their skies with acid rain. They resent being told that the answer to these problems is to work harder and obey the rules better. In East Germany, we had the amazing example of a very highly organised and thoroughly oppressive system that simply gave itself up in a matter of months and dissolved out of sheer self-disgust. Scarcely a shot was fired, no bombs were thrown, no hostages were taken, no assassinations carried out. Forty years of mind-numbing propaganda proved useless. It all just went, it’s history now.

The third thing we can learn is that winning the struggle does not end history. The triumph of unrestrained market forces is a serious problem for us right now, but it is not the only problem. It just happens to be an important problem at this historical juncture. Victories are pleasing, but victories are not permanent, neither are defeats. Václav Havel may be president of Czechoslovakia now, and that is wonderful, but the future of Czechoslovakia and the happiness of the Czechoslovak peoples and the very existence of Czechoslovakia as a political entity are all very much in doubt.

Problems are not dangerous per se, problems are simply politics. Problems unrecongnised, problems unconfamment hidden from view, these are dangerous, those are the source of crisis. We should give up easy answers and utopian solutions, that rhetoric belongs to a dying century. Science fiction in particular is a very guilty of the crime of utopianism. We should wash our hands of that crime and confess our failings with a contrite heart and honestly try to do better now. We should be honest now, we should be honest even when it hurts, we should be honest especially when it hurts.

Science fiction will never run the world. Our ambitions and rhetoric may be insane in their scope, but our real world abilities are quite limited. We won’t run the world and we shouldn’t run the world, because we’re no damn good at practical things. But there are things we can do, and things we ought to do. We need to do a lot more than provide empty fantasies for people who are so hurt by our moronic system that they have a hard time maintaining their quotidian daily lives.
There's nothing much wrong with providing colourful fantasy. But, if you're a science fiction writer today, and you're doing that, you're very likely in the wrong business. Go into the new media, go for it, go for entertainment and colour and soundtracks and rocket-blasts, and entertain the hell out of people. You have my blessing. No hard feelings, really. I'll be among your major fans.

But as a science fiction writer, I want to use the great advantage of the written medium, which is that it can make people actually think. I want to create work for people who want to think. I realize that this is an annoying activity, but I feel that if it is carried out on a modest scale, in the palpably declining written medium I may perhaps be excused. And furthermore I want to write for people who have been made to suffer for their imagination. When I say suffer for imagination, I don't mean anything particularly dramatic or draconian, but I doubt I have to explain what I mean to anyone in this room. We all know very well what this means. If you've never suffered because of your imagination, then I bear you no ill will, but you really ought to get the hell away from real science fiction people before one of them accidentally damages you.

In the world of Commodity Domination, it's a very common slur for artists to attack other artists as greenheads and sellouts. Artists are very aware of the illnesses that have attacked our society and are hypersensitive about it. If you, as an artist, somehow earn a lot of money, the true believers will write you off. But if your message begins to make any kind of real dent, the Market will definitely see to it that you are given a lot of money. It's a Catch 22 and one that has done a lot of damage to morale.

Well, if you're a writer, or an artist, or just an imaginative person, and you're worried about your integrity and the State of your Soul and the Empire of Mammon, then, I have an answer for you; do something for free. Write something for nothing, give your art away. Try writing something without a copyright on it. Write for fanzines, write electronic mail, write letters, write criticism, (that doesn't pay worth a damn and will earn you a world of interesting trouble). Write political rants, coin slogans, do T-shirts, bumper stickers and lapel buttons, if you have to. Even that beats the hell out of sitting on your hands, watching your life tick away while the world goes to hell in a handbasket. Do things for free, do things for the love of it, light a candle and curse the darkness. Do gratuitous things. Try to create a world full of random kindness and senseless acts of beauty. Exercise your right to imagine, act as if your life were worth living, act as if you were a real person and your life actually mattered. Support individuals like yourself. Support small publishers, odd magazines, off-beat bookstores. Learn to value commitment more than goss and public relations scams and seek out those others who do likewise, they're there. Stop being afraid. That bears repeating I think. If the worst happens, just the worst. The worst may happen no matter what we attempt to do, we should do what we can, stop being afraid. We're going to win this one, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Historical Note

This speech was recorded on the weekend before the failed coup against Gorbachev in the Soviet Union.
A formula called the Flesch Test is designed to indicate the readability of a text. It can be used to show whether a style is appropriate to a genre - you'd expect a textbook to be more difficult to read than a novel, but you might not know whether your textbook was written in a difficult way. And, the test can be used to discover the origin of a text, by relating the figures to other books written by the same author. It may be because of this that it has been one of the tools that have been used in analyses of alleged confessions, etc., that have been brought back to the Court of Appeal recently, as it indicates something of an author's individual style. I've come across references to it in several places, and been driven to try it out on a number of SF classics and not-so-classics.

Flesch calculated Ease of Reading with this formula:

$$RE = 206.839 \times (\text{SYLL} \times 0.846) - (\text{SL} \times 1.015)$$

SYLL is the number of syllables per 100 words in the text, and SL is the average sentence length, calculated as the number of words in the text (147) divided by the number of full stops.

This gives a number on the scale from 1 to 100, with anything less than 30 being considered difficult, and anything over 90 very easy.

In his 1987 book Diagnosis and Detection (Associated University Press), Pasquale Accardo gives an analysis of all the Sherlock Holmes stories and novels, and of the Holmes pastiches. He produces results like these:

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<th>SL</th>
<th>SYLL</th>
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<tr>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>137.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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He also gives the averages for the five collections: the Memoirs, the second volume, is lowest:

17.1 137.3 70.8
and the last collection, the Casebook, is highest:

12.2 134.4 78.1

but the range overall is quite tight. Comparing the figures with those for other authors who have taken over the character is one indication of how close they were able to come in adopting the character and the style. If we look at four of the books, written with SF associations, we can get an idea of their versimilitude:

<table>
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<th>SL</th>
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<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>133.3</td>
<td>83.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>146.3</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>151.1</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>155.1</td>
<td>54.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The novels obviously fall into four groups, which I can't really explain. You can understand the classic professionalism hitting the two top slots (and the short story, too). The Heinlein might be considered a juvenile and so aimed at a market demanding easier reading, and Blish would have been used to writing for a wide public at the end of the pulp era, but why the bottom of the list should be occupied by three or four dystopias is not so clear. Although dystopias are traditionally more demanding (though Aldous Huxley managed to avoid that - perhaps because he is writing satire), and all the four authors are usually regarded as intelligent, they are never written about as if they are hard or obscure. There is little to distinguish between the sexes, and not a lot between periods of writing (unless you suppose that things started difficult with Wells, grew better up to the fifties and then fell away in a sort of bell curve, except that people like Huxley and Van Vogt should be the other way round to really prove that).

A couple of things may challenge the idea that the Flesch test is objective: firstly, that the books cover such a wide range, and they don't seem that separate on reading them and, secondly, the list came out not as I expected before I began the calculations. Discounting a syllable or two would not account for the extent of the differences.

What I have not done is attempt to measure a number of books by one author as Accardo did for Conan Doyle but, as the examples from his analyses show, the attempted scientific examination of these texts can provide some thought-provoking results. And, it provides a way of emulating the writing style of an author you like. To have written more like Dr Watson, Philip Jose Farmer should have written longer sentences and more monosyllables.
Dream-Weavers

Andy Sawyer Talks to Mark & Julia Smith About "Jonathan Wylie"

Jonathan Wylie is actually two gamekeepers turned poacher. Mark and Julia Smith now live in remote North Norfolk and write full-time but in their former incarnation were an editorial team at Transworld Books, working separately and together on their fantasy line....

This wasn't quite meant at first, they explain, but their interest in fantasy snowballed until they were working together as a team. Mark had joined Transworld seventeen years ago; Julia some time after that and both ended up with editorial posts. Their responsibilities eventually included David Eddings, Terry Pratchett and Mary Gentle: a formidable stable which might daunt anyone with ambitions to go off and write books themselves.

The Smiths were undaunted. They had been writing for six years anyway. While with Corgi, they had written two fantasy trilogies, Servants of Ark and The Unbalanced Earth which "had done quite well and been translated into several languages. We got a larger advance for Dream-Weaver (their most ambitious story to date) and took the chance to fulfil our dream: to move out of London and write full-time". So now comes Dream-Weaver: described as Jonathan Wylie's "break-out" book and one which it is hoped will be the first of many "independent" works.

But first, what is it like, living on the other side of the publishing scene? "Great! We're not exhausted any more. Our previous novels had been written at weekends and evenings while working all day, and now we can organise our lives around our writing rather than our jobs." And the gamekeeper turned poacher idea? "It's been a great help having been a gamekeeper. It actually helps in both directions. Being writers anyway helped us deal with the writer's point of view, and having been editors helped us to organise our writing in the way editors expect. Julia (Mark explains) is fanatical about presenting a 'clean' manuscript: making sure every word is correctly spelt."

Their writing is a collective act: a bit like the way that they react to an interview, where ideas are picked up and tossed back and forth between the pair. Some collaborators have a clearly marked line of demarcation: one does the characters, another the plotting; one writes first draft, the other polish. This isn't the case with Jonathan Wylie.

It all goes through several stages. First is going through ideas, often disconnected ones. Julia's ideas, for instance, will often come from vivid dreams. Next comes putting the shape together, with lots of ideas being discarded as the story comes through.

Then it's a matter of talking to each other and tossing ideas about, then going through the storyline, characters, chapter by chapter descriptions, getting down to the hard work of writing and eventually editing and polishing.

Does one half of the writing team stick to one task? "No, there's no hard and fast rule about who does what." It's a true collaboration rather than a division of labour.

Dream-Weaver is a big novel, containing the usual fantasy fare of magic, swordfights and romantic heroines, but with a central idea so simple yet brilliantly effective that it's tempting to think that it was put in to subvert the entire genre of fantasies in which the characters are acting out a combat long prophesied. Apparently this isn't directly so (although long-term Jonathan Wylie fans will note that the Smiths don't seem averse to standing a few notions on their heads for dramatic effect). I'm not going to give away what this notion is - though you might care to guess - but Mark says "It wasn't a conscious idea to subvert the genre but to build up a sense of tension - and then to try to find a way out."

What is Jonathan Wylie's role in the fantasy market? "Not necessarily as a specific sub-genre of fantasy, but we like to produce good storytelling in the heroic fantasy field. Like many writers, we write what we like to read. There's a readership for Jonathan Wylie as proved by the sales of our previous books, and fantasy seems well-established still, although hit by the recession as everything else is."

We do want to get away from writing trilogies into writing one-off novels. Our first novel developed quite naturally into a trilogy, and we wanted to break out of that then, but we were persuaded to continue with another. Dream-Weaver is a one-off. Our next, Shadow Knife is another, not connected to Dream-Weaver and not as long.

What's next? "We're taking a break from writing trilogies, into writing one-off novels. Our first novel developed quite naturally into a trilogy, and we wanted to break out of that then, but we were persuaded to continue with another. Dream-Weaver is a one-off. Our next, Shadow Knife is another, not connected to Dream-Weaver and not as long."

What's next? "We're taking a break for a more relaxed lifestyle! Jonathan Wylie is staying with heroic fantasy. "It's what we like to do."

Shadow Knife is completed and being submitted to their publisher: with luck, it should be out next year. At the moment, it's more tossing of ideas back and forth for the new novel. "We'd like to do a children's/young adult fantasy eventually, but at the moment it's probably another adult novel." The poachers are at work setting more snares for their unwary readers....
The Architecture of Desire
Mary Gentle

There's a particular kind of chocolate dessert which lurches in the small print of menus, wasting your time on the menu in order to avoid it. "The Architecture of Desire" is a literary equivalent of one of these culinary time bombs. Everything about it is calculated to pull the reader into a false sense of security. Familiar characters, Valentine and Casubon, in what might seem a familiar setting, except that this isn't quite the seventeenth century, or a conventional parallel, and it certainly isn't the world of "Rats and Gargoyles". This is a fanzine, but people's motives are muddled, and likable people do appalling things, and nothing turns out the way it's supposed to.

The writing, however, is so skillful, the characterization so deft, that the full implications of what you've just read only strike you after you've finished the book. Probably at four in the morning, after some very peculiar dreams...

In short, this is a "tour de force". Real literature posing as swashbuckling escapism. If you only buy one novel this year, make sure it's "The Architecture of Desire".

Alex Stewart

The Legend Book of Science Fiction
Gardner Dozois, Ed.
Legend, 1991, 672pp, £8.99

With any enterprise such as this there are bound to be niggles. Why, for instance, those Cordwainer Smith's "Mother Hitton's Little Kittens" as opposed to, say, "The Ballad of Lost O'Meal"? Why Edgar Pangborn's "The Golden Horn" and not "Angel's Egg"? What ranks Ursula K. LeGuin's "The Barrow" above "The Day Before the Revolution"? And so on.

There are other questions of selection also: why include L. Sprague De Camp, Jack Dann, John Kessel and Michael Swanwick but exclude Philip K. Dick, J. G. Ballard, Orson Scott Card and Kim Stanley Robinson?

And there is most certainly one story which has never been included: "The Way that Flies" is Brian Aldiss at his most unutterably pretentious; practically anything else Aldiss has written would have been preferable. Yet this is balanced by the inclusion of one story which could not have been missed: "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" by Gene Wolfe, a quite possibly the most}/ memorable achievement we have so far seen in science fiction.

The point is, "The Legend Book of Science Fiction"--like every other major retrospective anthology--lays itself open to niggles and questions. Everyone is going to have their different theories about which stories from the last 30 years or so should be included if the collection is to be representative. It would be cause for endless fruitless debate around the campfires as we man the barricades late into the night. However, you slice it, any anthology, even one as massive as this, which attempts to present a cross section of the genre over the last 30 years is bound to raise howls of dissent.

So Gardner Dozois makes grand claims; this is a demonstrably personal selection, stories which have touched him, moved him, stood out in his memory. It is perhaps some definition of his skills as an editor that an amazing number of the 26 stories have had a similar effect on me. It may be a reflection of one man's personal taste, but it feels like this is what science fiction has been doing since the end of the 1950's. The end result, the mighty tone which we hold with block and tackle before us, is as good as you could wish for and a damn sight better than a lesser editor could have achieved or a jaded critic might have anticipated.

Yes, you can quarrel with it over the fine detail, but the broad sweep does science fiction a tremendous service. It must be congratulated, for it's full of surprises. Richard McKenna from the undeserved oblivion in which he has too long languished. It must be welcomed, for in the main, the chosen stories which are not the usual anthrology fodder, yet which represent the era and their author a well as many others. 'This moment of the Storm' may not be quite equal 'A Rose for Ecclesiastes' yet it is still a fine example of Roger Zelazny at his mid-70's best.

Dozois's introductions to each story are models of their kind--a succinct summing-up of a career, a swift statement of context, and enough pointers to other works to make this an ideal starting point for an absolute beginner in the genre. In fact, if you are new to science fiction this is perhaps the best history lesson you could hope to find. But even if you reckon yourself well read in the genre there are probably enough surprises, and enough new stories here to make you see science fiction anew. There are can be no higher praise.

Paul Kincaid

The Alpha Box
Annie Dalton
Methuen, 1991, 192pp, £8.95

A Kind of Thief
Vivien Alcock
Methuen, 1991, 177pp, £8.95

These are both children's books aimed at young teenagers, with young teenagers as protagonists. Both books have protagonists with family crises which become the pivots to turn them in new directions and which are the main points of interest for both stories. Both books are well written, with convincing characterization, though the Alcock is stronger than the Dalton. I did have doubts about the speed of changes of character in the Dalton.

Only one of the two is fantasy. The Alcock Book is a fantasy in which the Alpha Book of the title comes to Asha in exchange "for everything she has", just as a blue guitar comes to Joe, dragging all their dreams, visions and a path they must take to save the world. I am unsure whether my reservations would be those of a young teenager reading it. I found the forces of good and evil too vague, too weak and less than fully convincing. The lack of suspense disappointed me too, because the ending was fairly predictable from half way through. However, for a twelve year old reaction see below. Both these books are well written, literate and tell a good story, which is saying a great deal in their favour.

Helen McNabb

Fear
L Ron Hubbard
Bridge, 1991, 188pp, £16.95

In, it seems, a desperate attempt to prove that their mentor could actually churn out half decent novels, New Era publications (did you mention Scientology? I didn't) have re-issued this 1940 thriller. While adding various pieces to the text to a) bump up the page count, and b) allow renewal of copy right, they have left what amounts to a 175 page (large print) novella, which, surprisingly, isn't all that bad.

At first, the story of super-rationalist J.L. Lowry plods in its heavy handed way for a chapter or so. However, once he goes in search of a lost hat and four hours, and appears, fully clothed, into a fantasy/horror alternative world, things start to pick up significantly. Yes, once he gets detached from reality, old Lafayette isn't all that bad (oh, what a giveaway...). The ending, while guessable from the introduction, is in no way foreshadowed in the text, a point I find annoying. Also, the new illustrations live up to the, ah, subtlety of the writing style. But, all in all, deserves a look for non-Scientology readers who are non-fans as well, or even the fanatics who want to see how the author's other works compare.

And, lastly, the alternate world is far different from the exotic childhood of a navy child, to becoming the author of the SF "satiety" Mission Earth without mentioning Dianetics once.

Pete Darby

Edited By
Chris Amies

The Alpha Box

I thought this book was quite good, but most people my age group like funny books, whereas this book appears to be rather dismal. I enjoyed it after the first few chapters but most people would get fed up by then. It has suspense and mystery which I like in a book, but mostly I prefer funny books. It is not a book I would pick up off the shelf, but I quite enjoyed it.

Kate McNabb (age 12)
Dream Finder
Roger Taylor
Headline, 1991, 436pp, £14.95

A journey of adventure through a wild land beset by ruthless barbarian invaders; long and bloody battles as ferocious as any conflict between Cudi and a shrew who fears both usurpers and invisible menace; a sightseer who can see clearer than the far-sighted: all the typical ingredients of high fantasy, are present. What made this book different for me is, its first half where I learned about Antyr. He is a Dream Finder, one of a Guild of gifted and specially trained persons of all ages, who can enter other people's dreams and find out what is disturbing them. Both Dreamer and Dream Finder are brought together from which can cause the Finder great harm. Protecting the Finder during this critical state, is the duty of the Companion and Earth Holder. This is an animal-familiar who, while remaining on guard in this world, is also able to project his imagination into the Finder's Dreamworld. The Finder, physically holding only a Companionship in his Dream, is thus able to return to this world at the end of the Dream. Awake too, Companion and Finder are in companionship. Antyr's Companion is also able to read the thoughts of people they meet. He thus acts as the Finder's conscience and mentor, throwing into his mind such advice as "Stand up straight!" and "The Prince is superstitious. Say something quickly. He knows he's been fear, and I'll be见识-saying this next if it is not careful."

Antyr's Companion is a wolf called Tarrian, but Companions come in all shapes of animal. One is a bear, another is a dragon, etc. If in fact gets on well with Tarrian because they both hate cats. What exasperates Tarrian most though, is to be alone for any length of time. He has handed the insinuated so often that he is almost resigned to it. And besides, he can get his own back by telepathically making sarcastic comments in Antyr's mind.

The cover is an impressive view of the city of Seredon standing above the river-kettles like a medievally-turreted Changkik above the Yangtze; only when one realises that the tiny doorway in the wall is in fact a massive portal, can the true size of the city be appreciated.

Martin Brice

Great Mambo Chicken and the Transhuman Condition
Ed Regis

One of the oldest truisms in the futurology's game is that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. It's less commonly said, but no less true, that any sufficiently brilliant new concept is initially almost indistinguishable from madness. Great Mambo Chicken is a book concerned with both categories... and the uncomfortable: twigs are done... by them over.

In the last few years, the Doomsday Clock has moved ahead, the world has seemed to be tipping over. In the last few days of the second millennium, the oldest dreams of humanity are threatening new intellectual soil. Goals which in former days appeared insane are now mundane. It's therefore no surprise to find that many of the dreams that were once seen as implausible, are now receiving practical attention. This is a book about such dreams and the people who seek them by means of the eyes of science and the hands of technology.

The dividing line between lunacy and genius is a thin one. All of the protagonists of this whirl-wind tour of the futurology underworld are brilliant, but indeterminate number are also as mad as a fruitcake. Regis starts with a look at the space merchants, the men (they are mostly men) who intend to do it all together and are spending a (surprisingly small) fortune of private money building what may someday get there. Next, he looks at cryonics—which some people contend amounts to murder, and others equate with intelligent life, because the chapters deal with nanotechnology, personality uploading, space colonies, and hints for the better members of the colony. And the one thing they all have in common is that they hold some water.

To his credit, Regis makes no attempt to pass judgement. At this stage in the game it would be foolhardy to venture what lies just around the corner. Great Mambo Chicken provides an entertaining introduction to the biggest new ideas now in circulation, and a vital briefing to anyone who would be hard-pressed elsewhere. Invaluable.

Charles Stross

The Ring of Charon
Roger MacBride Allen
Orbit, 1991, 500pp, £14.95

Publishers' blurbs are dubious guides. Here the author is compared for "breadth of vision" to "the best of Kim Stanley Robinson. I'm not labelling this inventive novel pastiche—there is something Clarkian about its form (diversely orientated, and the book's titles are: 'Charon', 'The Eye in the Stone'), and its ingenuity in locating alien consciousness is quite Stalkean as it serves a book that hijacks the basic premises of the human species, a dissolution of planets, an alien recorder deep within the Moon; and its aliens as Stapledon's Martians are made functional rather than idealistic, and also make use of radiotelegraphic signals. But Clark's best works are at heart mystical; Stapledon's visionary; while The Ring Charon is a more movably planetary adventure which, rather than manifesting 'breadth of vision', explores as many different alien intelligences and speculations as possible in the hard science equivalent of a Mucha-chaste tall tale.

The reader should be prepared for this by the novelist's epigraph (the White Queen's boast to Alice): "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." Among its required beliefs are: that a percentage of asteroids and comets are aliens in pupal form; that planets, probes and even radio waves can change spaces via wormholes; that a "grazer" will do in terms of gravity what a laser does in terms of light. Get these under your belt before breakfast and the rest is no problem.

Charon, satellite of Pluto, is girdled by a particle accelerator. It is possible for high energy gravitational research to be carried out from a laboratory located on Pluto. The station is about to be shut down, years of specialist work having produced no results, when young genius Chao arrives. Defying orders of the station's geriatric boss, he clandestinely achieves the hitherto unachievable, fociusing a beam of artificial gravity on each of the other planets. When it reaches the Moon this beam has hidden alien monito r into believing that it has received orders from its controlling Dyson Sphere, situated on the far side of a black hole, to start channelling command which activates aliens disguised as asteroids and bring in others through a wormhole. These organic/organic aliens are "Worldbeaters" operating as Von Neumann machines. The wormhole-facilitated abduction of Earth, the oncoming, though eventually halted disembemberment of the remaining planets, and the reasons for the apocalyptic frenzy fill the rest of the book, which ends abruptly but hopelessly project to rescue the home planet—for the novel's inevitable subtitle is The First Book of the Four Stages of Conquest.

Such a condensed account will necessarily exaggerate chlosedness (though over-familiar, even trite, situations are there, as are such phrases as "Ice Age Earth Near Ears"). Nevertheless, the shifting viewpoints, alien and otherwise, and the many necessary references to other series, sustain while unflagging action carries you enjoyably along. A great cosmic vision it is not, but it leaves you feeling as Alice did after falling down the rabbit hole (an image and allusion significantly featured) that "so many out-of-the-ordinary things had happened (she) had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible."

KV Bailey

Chung Kuo Book 3:
The White Mountain
David Wingrove

Cards on the table: I dislike gratuitous violence, I don't care for series and I loathe soap opera. Bear this in mind.

This book is an amalgam of Gilbert and Sullivan Chineseness, Mafia thriller, "Sci-Fi" B Movie and high-camp US soap opera. Its heart is in the filmed rather than the literary medium. The plot strands are unbelievable; buffed by coincidence and auctorial dictum rather than internal necessity, lurching from one artificial crisis to another. The worlds of Chung Kuo are as dimensional, the history hobbled together like Frankenstein's monster—although Wingrove 'explains' that it's all lies anyway.

Wingrove describes the core of the book, its peoples and their monsters, as being rather evil acts simply because they are evil. The salacious descriptions of degraded sexual acts and wanton violence are truly revolting, and all the more so because we are given little reason to sympathise with any of the victims. Most of the victims are women and children. Women are treated in a very curious fashion, most of them are prostitutes and their daughters; seen only through their relationships with men. Although it is several times admitted that they might be quite intelligent, they are in fact treated as things and possessions throughout.

The style of the book is appalling. Wingrove never uses one sentence where he can stretch it out to three. Characters converse about nothing in order to fill space. We wait while characters wobble endlessly over decisions, and wince as they take another couple of sentences to justify them.

The White Mountain appears to be quite well researched and some of these faults could be overlooked if it was a book of ideas. However, Wingrove apparently has nothing to say, the turgid prose of mish-mash is presented as entertainment. I'd rather watch a road accident; it would be cleaner and it wouldn't last as long.

Calle Cary

Xenocide
Orson Scott Card

First there was Ender's Game, when little Ender Wiggin destroyed the Buggers and their world, then Speaker for the Dead, when Ender, the repentant xenocide (and Christ-figure), learns to understand the alien Piggies, decides to help them, and then the last Bigger and assists at the birth of yet another alien race, that of the Asls. If you missed them, then you missed two Hugo winners and some of the most hauntingly brilliant genre writing of the decade. Many find some of Card's discussions rather repugnant, many find him manipulative; but he comes up with some compellingly readable science fiction.

Xenocide faithfully completes the trilogy; more likely it is a continuation of the series. A battle fleet sets out to destroy the Piggies' world, before their virus is let loose on other human settlements. None of the human survivors, not Jane, Ender's AI, becomes known and her existence too is
threatened: meanwhile, the Fuggers begin to breed. . . . the Deus ex machina (or machina ex deo?) which brings the events to a temporary conclusion is as implausible as only Card can make it. The action is there; the suspense is there; "it is haunting, compulsive, urgently readable" (Culte again). But it is more of the same: there is no new concept, like the world of the Piggins, to capture the imagination and the curiosity. There is a new world, the Chinese world of the young, green Gollancz, in Card's words, is littered with young geniuses; another strangely tortured world, like that of the Piggins (tortured, that is, by Card himself, yet one that distracts from as much as adds to the plot. The problems which are resolved in the book are basically those which were set up in Spings so well, and good. Either way isn't world (which in much more of a sequel than the earlier book was). Of Eader's Game.

If you have not read the earlier books, don't bother with this. But anyone who has read them is going to be drawn into Xenocide regard-}
Darklands
Nicholas Royle (Ed.)
Egerton Press, 1991, 316pp, £2.95 pb

Darklands is not presented as a collection of horror fiction, though that is the category you would expect from the authors involved (including Stephen Gallagher and Mark Morris). Ramsey Campbell’s introduction speaks of “tales of the macabre which are not easily categorised”: the cover hints only at “new fiction”. For here, though, horror stories are, they often lie beyond the end of the story, glimpsed past the final line, the reader projected into a shifted mindset where the implication, not any catalogue of grim and spatter, is horrific. This, if you like, is where the ghost story is now hanging up its cloak and hat, though there aren’t exactly ghosts, either, not in most of the stories. Surreal fantasy, dark fantasy, weird tales.

The grudge-bearing narrator in Julie Akhurst’s “Small Pieces of Alice” never actually does anything about cutting Alice into small pieces, but the feeling is strange and familiar enough. Brian Howells’ “The Vanishing Point” is a mannered and erudite little story involving the Dutch masters. “The Ferilizer Man” by Mark Morris is sort of SF, and if he tells me he’s never read The Bristol Trianes I shouldn’t (allotments? Aliens in business suits?) believe him. “Sweet Nothing” by Derek Marlow is a stylistically perfect story of shattered illusion. “The Visitor’s Book” by Stephen Gallagher works out his concept of horror fiction as “the need to work up solid metaphors for unformed anxieties.” The dark lands are really inside ourselves, working on our imaginations, the bit that sees the lord of the flowers nailed to the floor when we go down to collect the mail.

The stories I’ve named are the most memorable but there isn’t a weak ‘un here. Like Nick Royle says don’t read it with the lights out, you won’t see anything.

Chris Amies

Twilight
Peter James

Twilight consists of two lives brought together by a third person’s death. Harvey Swire was knocked off his bicycle when at public school and was so close to death that the ghost of his mother had to be very firm about his going back. Harvey grew up to be a successful man and was able to live out the wishes of his patients so that he could experiment with their near-death experiences.

The book begins with the exhumation of one of Dr Swire’s patients, and journalist Kate Hemingsway’s increasing suspicion that there has been a cover-up of a premature burial. Later, Kate herself is involved in an accident, and is able to rise above her body and watch Swire, by chance on duty in casualty at the time, as he swipes medicines and injects her with something nasty. As an unconscious extra-corporeal, however, does not make a convincing witness in other ways, and plucky Kate nails the villain and scoops the story.

Twilight is an ingenuous mainstream thriller, with little horror attached to it (although I haven’t mentioned the worst thing about the premature burial). However, Peter James has very slickly hidden in his story - Swire has his near-death experience, reaches the entrance to heaven, and returns to earth to become a psychopath. His experience, solves the murder mystery and saves a bit of the world. Swire’s medical experiences sharpen our expectations - why should a glimpse of heaven have the opposite effect?

Leslie J Hurst

Foundation’s Friends
Martin H Greenberg (Ed.)

Foundation’s Friends is a collection of seventeen stories in honour of Asimov’s fifty years of contribution to science fiction. Each of the stories is located within the universe of the Foundation epic.

This is an ingenious idea, rather like a second generation of scientists working on extending the theories of the previous one: a notion imaginative to the genre. It is also a challenging task for the writers. They must work with the characters and locations of the original and more importantly, with the laws and logic of the universe. Kate, perhaps, is in her constraint which has left the stories seeming dated in their philosophies. It is disappointing, fifty years on, to rediscover such unwarranted attitudes to gender, science and technology when so much writing since has revolutionised our attitudes to all three.

However, this collection is a tribute to Asimov, and dedicated fans will no doubt enjoy the time-trip back to revisit favourite places, characters and events such as Trantor, Dr Susan Calvin, Dr Urrh, Hari Seldon and the vexed laws of robotics. Undedicated fans might find the hand of Asimov a lead weight on the imaginations of contemporary writers. This is a collection for Asimov fans.

Lyane Fox

Riverrun
S P Somtow

The horror genre is a broad church, everything from the gothic to Greene’s frighteningly well-researched to the blood-gore of the splatterpunk. What the works have in common is that moment when the hair rises on the back of your neck. If that is the criterion, all of these books are horror stories. In the case of Riverrun this is due in a way of absence of anything resembling an original idea. Whereas The School is simply too slutty written and then blows whatever credibility it retained by having the heroine rescued from her fate. C’mon guys, in a modern horror story people just gotta die!

The School is a middle aged couple buy an old school building for their new home (Why your guess is as good as mine). The school may have a horrific past about which no-one is talking (mais naturellement) and it may lie on a psychic faultline. Ghosts appear and the Hacklocks eventually escape when the “earthquake” hits. Mc? I didn’t give a damn and I don’t like novels which read like film scripts, especially the ones of bad films.

Riverrun sees a contemporary American family (picture “The Wonder Years”) only Dad is an alcoholic minor poet and Mom is dying horrifyingly) translated into another continuum where the plot of King Lear is being acted out with the fate of creation at stake. Little Theo Eichison is a “true believer” and can remake the passage of the eponymous river which connects all said creation. Variously aiding and hindering him are a vampire, a druid, their wimp brother and a cop who is really a Navajo shaman who is really ... Blood, guts, death and poetry there is plenty - everything you can’t read at least once - but I was never involved in their fates. In a genre which relies upon the almost vengeful reaction of the reader to the plight of the characters this is a most signal failing.

This could have been a good book, though, if it didn’t lack the necessary creativity to breathe life into the clay. In a genre given to the overlong, this book is just too short by half.

I didn’t have to be negative in my conclusion, but I cannot honestly recommend either of these books.

Martin Taylor

Needful Things
Stephen King

For the last time we return to Castle Rock, the fictitious town based on Bangor, Maine, and scene of several King books and short stories. The King fans will remember some of the Rock’s residents: Ace Merrill whose uncle, “Pop” Merrill, we met in the “Sun Downer” - Sheriff - everyman, who died in the jaws of Cujo. Ted Beaumont, the writer with a dark half.

Knowing that there are to be no more Castle Rock novels suggests that King is going to destroy the town. On reading it, fans of the master of the macabre may be disappointed. The story builds with King’s usual confidence. The reader of the Rock welcomes us back as though we were long time friends and warns us, “You’ve been there before; it’s going to change. I know it. I feel it. There’s a storm on the way.”

The title refers to a shop which sells everything, and is run by a new-comer to the Rock, Leland Gaunt. But for everything, there is a price. The only problem is nobody realises how steep the true price of their particular want is. For deputy Norris Ridgeway, it’s an expensive fishing rod; for young Brian Rusk, it’s a 1956 baseball card.

The story slowly builds to what, sadly becomes an anti-climax. To this reader’s disappointment, the story raised more laughs than any real sense of horror, and one has to ask, is King parodying himself? The work is too long and too drawn out. More could have been made of Sherrill Pangburn’s final confrontation with the villain, Gaunt.

One can only hope that the pen that brought that chilling masterpiece, The Shining, will be back on form with his next book. Delores Clairborne, next summer.

Martin Webb
The Keys To Paradise
Robert E Vardeman

Take an ageing, world-weary ex-sergeant, Giles Grimsmate, who wins a Golden Key to the Gate of Paradise in a game of chance.

Take a womanising, selfish man, Keja Tchurak, who has stolen the second Golden Key to the Gate of Paradise.

Take Petia, a beautiful Trans (evidently short for "Trans-Species") whose feline characteristics make her a skillful cat-burglar, and whose ambition is to relieve Keja Tchurak of his treasure.

Send them off in search of the Flame Key watched over by a cave-dwelling fire sorceress - the Key of the Dead which is guarded by a demon-drawn sword - and the Key of Ice and Steel, fast-locked in an underwater cave. Send them off protected by a frenzy of fire and ice creatures. They may have extraordinary gifts, but most of the time they are ordinary people who get tired, tatter and go on - just perhaps to get the next key and then they'll give up ... or only until they've got out of this particular difficulty - and then they'll give up.

The story starts well and promises to equal its predecessors. In part two, recollections from Reborn, we only learn one new piece of information which could have been told in just a few paragraphs and slotted into the narrative of part one.

As in Reborn, Wilson kills most of the key characters and there is no happy ending of good defeating evil, the good guy embracing the heroine. The ending is left open presupposing there will be a fourth book. It will be a shame if Wilson continues to ride this dying horse, which should have been laid to rest after The Keep and turns it into the literary equivalent of movie sequels et al. Martin Webb

The Ghost from the Grand Banks
Arthur C Clarke
Orbit, 1991, 253pp, £7.99pb

Clarke's words have always walked a tightrope between mystical transcendence and nuts-and-bolts hard SF. In The Ghost from the Grand Banks, a relatively minor piece, the emphasis is on the engineering. 2012 will be the centennial of the sinking of the Titanic, and Clarke supposes two rival rescue teams bidding to raise the great liner from the ocean floor.

To be good on the mechanics, as both teams devise different and equally ingenious ways of lifting the ship. He is less good at evoking the awful ocean depths, despite the spectacular, promising "undersea environment" the machinery. Clarke has written a good story and some delightful scenes. The ship is a place of invention, and Clarke is in his element. The story is told in an easy to read manner. There are a few places where the plot flags and it encouraged me to turn the pages, even though the ending is obvious (good guys don't lose in this type of novel) as is the method of winning.

This is not a book to analyse but to read. It is written to entertain and why not, I wish more books where. Tolkien this isn't and nor is it meant to be, and whilst it isn't likely to become a classic I did enjoy it.

Tom A Jones

Blue Moon Rising
Simon Green
Gollancz, 1991, 448pp, £7.99pb

The blurb tells me this is about a kind, princes, princesses, a dragon, the Darkwood, demons, a High Warlock, Quests, a unicorn and magic weapons (which turn out to be swords). On my last book I thought up a kind of story where the key event is the key event and so on...

"...only until they've got out of this..." - yet there is something about this book which makes it different from other quest novels. I think it is the characters. They may have extraordinary gifts, but most of the time they are ordinary people who get tired, tatter and go on - yet they do go on;
Bury My Heart at WH Smith's -

Voyage to the Red Planet -

The Fall of the Sky Lords -

War of the Maelstrom -

Nemesis/Inferno/Infanta/Nocturne -
Louise Cooper [Grafton, 1991, 246/241/318/291 pp, each £3.99 pb]. The first four volumes of the Indigo saga; there are now a fifth and a sixth volume (not seen); the cover carries a quote from Locus describing the series as 'a powerful epic'.

Purpose of Evasion -

The Other Sinbad -
Craig Shaw Gardner [Headline, 1991, 375 pp, £4.50 pb]. Reviewed by Barbara Davies in V162. Like she said, 'faintly amusing pastiche of the Arabian Nights'.

The Hemingway Hoax -

Bill, the Galactic Hero on the Planet of 10,000 Bars -
Harry Harrison and David Bischoff. [Avon, 1991, 214 pp, £3.99 pb] "Can Bill survive an entire planet of blondes, booze, and bathtub champagne?" Can the reader survive any more of this derivative tripe without recourse to at least one of the above? Please Harry, a joke's a joke...

The Frighteners -
Stephen Laws [NEL, 1991, 461 pp, £4.99 pb]. Reviewed by Alex Stewart in V158. Small-time con goes after the gang boss who put him in jail and then tried to have him killed. And he has help from something very unpleasant...

One Rainy Night -

To Speak for the Dead -

The Power -

The Revenge of the Rose -
Michael Moorcock [Grafton, 1991, 233 pp, £7.99 pb]. Reviewed by Andy Sawyer in V162. Yes, another Eric novel! But this is the Moorcock of the '90s, not of the '70s.

The Covenant of the Flame -

Kiss of Death -
Daniel Rhodes [NEL, 1991, 261 pp, £4.50 pb]. "Succubi, incubi, lemuris, impis, demonic psychic vampires, they cluster in the dark places of the mind and feed on human pain and fear."

Orbitsville Departure -

Summer of Night -
Dan Simmons [Headline, 1991, 634 pp, £4.99 pb]. Reviewed by Jim Englan in V162. The versatile Simmons ([Song of Kali, Hyperion, Phases of Gravity, etc.] ignores genre boundaries and gives us the haunted-schoolhouse riff. But will it play in Peoria?

Soul/Mate -
Rosamund Smith [NEL, 1991, 281 pp, £3.99 pb]. Contemporary crime novel (the charming young man who is not what he seems...), but the style is reminiscent of Jane Austen...

Moon Dance -
SP Somtow [Gollancz, 1991, 564 pp, £4.99 pb]. Reviewed by John Newsinger in V162. Somtow's werewolf novel brings in the opening up of the American West and the strange events at its edge... werewolf wars?

The Stephen King Quiz Book -

The Warlock's Night Out -

Otherside -

Survivalist No. 20 - Firestorm -
Jerry Ahern [NEL, 1991, 192 pp, £3.50 pb]. It seems people buy enough of this stuff for there to be twenty books of it.

Felimid's Homecoming -
Keith Taylor [Headline, 1991, 280 pp, £3.99 pb]. The fifth in the Bard series sees the bard return to Ireland, and it might as well - the author tells us - be an Irish historical novel, as be a fantasy.

Otherworld -
Margaret Wander Bonanno [St Martin's Press, 1991, 317 pp, $19.95]. Sequel to The Others, a story of alien civilisation with a scientific rationale, but there is still a fantasy feel to it, and mags.

The Fies of Memory -
Ian Watson [Gollancz, 1991, 220 pp, £3.99 pb]. Reviewed by Ken Lake in V159. The aliens have come to Earth to remember it. Communication, as you might expect, is near impossible. As Ken said, "A real novel that just happens to be SF."

The Unwilling Warlord -
Lawrence Watt-Evans [Grafton, 1991, 349 pp, £3.99 pb]. The epigraph is from Tolkien, so are we to compare one with the other? Both share a fascination with invented languages, at least.

Forbidden Magic -
Angus Wells [Orbit, 1991, 586 pp, £4.99 pb]. Volume One of The Godwars. "It cannot get worse" says one character towards the end; another replies, "you forget the dragons - we're promised larger specimens." So they're for volume 2.

Heathens -
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