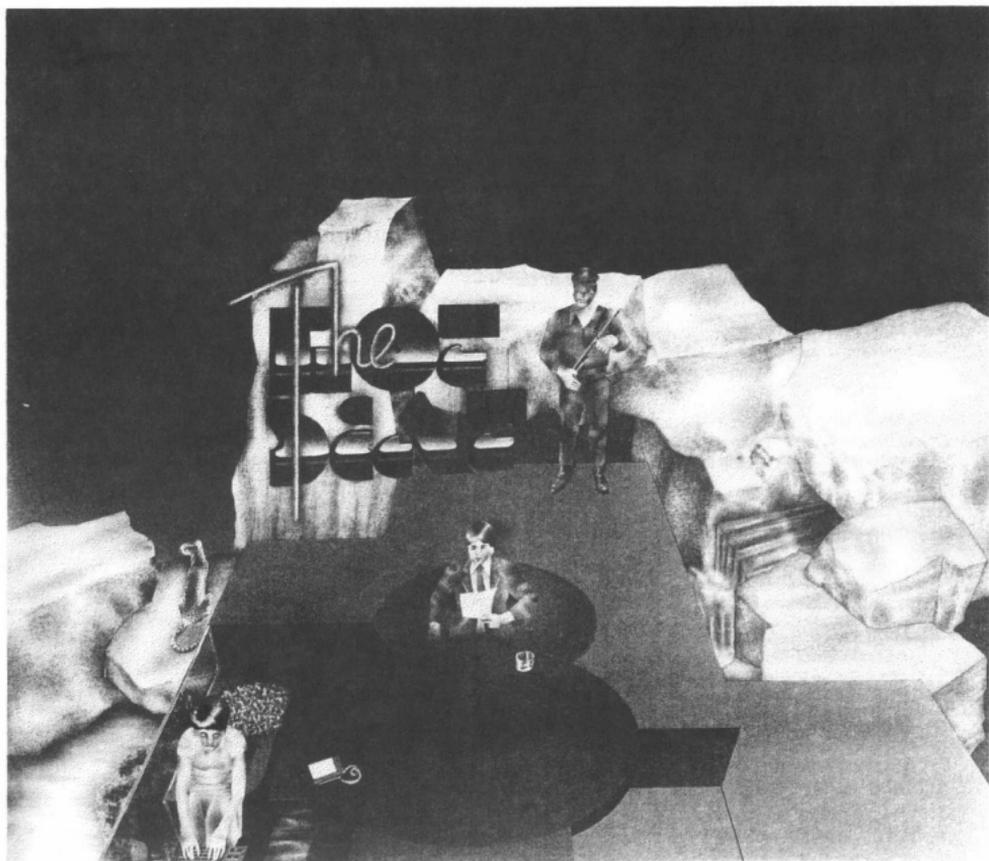


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Vector 171

The Critical Journal of the BSFA



Front Line Dispatches (Readers' letters)

Reviews

From Valerie Housden Bromley, Kent:

There is an unfortunate misprint in my review of John Whitbourn's *A Dangerous Energy* in **Vector 170**.

The final sentence of the first paragraph of the review should read:

From there he rises to become one of the most powerful men in the Church in England.

Given the subject matter of the book and my specific criticisms, many of which were edited out, the difference between the Church of England and the Church in England is important.

From Ed Griffiths, Gt Missenden, Bucks:

These days we must welcome any shred of originality in a fantasy novel — certainly any novel which does not have a number of cute vertically-challenged furry creatures battling a Dark Lord and features neither the ubiquitous Sidhe, the Wild Hunt nor the Celtic Otherworld (etc, etc).

John Whitbourn's *A Dangerous Energy* reviewed in **Vector 170** has none of these tired clichés and by virtue of its original plot and ideas was certainly a worthy winner of the BBC Bookshelf/ Gollancz first fantasy novel competition.

Yet Valerie Housden's review seems more concerned with berating its author for not writing a novel about an idealised Catholic Church than giving credit for originality or recognising the achievement of a first time author.

Not only that, but her chief criticism seems ill-founded: the church in the novel has resolved the "conflict between Catholic orthodoxy and real pagan magic". A major

theme of the book is the way the church cannot suffer magicians to exist in rivalry to itself and thus must absorb them, put them under its control, whether it has a real role for them or not.

Part of the tragedy of the novel's 'hero', Tobias Oakley, is that while taking him in to control his wild talent, circumstances dictate that the church cannot supply the spiritual guidance he needs and by involving him in its temporal affairs, its worldly side, contributes to his spiritual downfall.

Valerie makes great play of all the aspects of the church not mentioned — but surely the author intends the readers to supply the standard background of the Catholic Church for themselves? he concentrates on the differences to the standard and historical. After all the book is about one man — not a church.

I wonder also whether every Catholic parish in every age has been of the "vivacity and colour" Housden expects? The industrial town of Rugby, the hero's parish in *A Dangerous Energy* reminds me for example of the rather bleak circumstances described by Gerard Manley Hopkins, similarly a priest amidst industrial squalor...

I found particularly obnoxious the accusation of "lack of research into religion" since John Whitbourn has in fact produced a book which deals very largely with spiritual and moral questions and, in this scoffing and secular age, has had the courage to give it an expressly Christian and Catholic conclusion.

PS I notice I make a great thing of the book's originality — but hey? how many other alternate world novels have explained 400 years of alternate history by means of an Oxford University History Exam paper?

From Brian Griffin, Barrow-In-Furness:

Cherith Baldry's review of David Wingrove's *The White Mountain* (Chung Kuo III.) in **Vector 170** reads honestly enough. She seems to have read the publicity pamphlet, and decided that the book doesn't live up to its author's ambitions. But she shows no sign of having read the other two volumes, which means that she misses all kinds of little touches — like the concluding paragraphs, which look right back in vivid detail to the very beginning of Volume One.

Simple, but very effective when you're working (or reading) on such a vast scale. At this moment, the character of Chen — which, agreed, has up till then been drawn in primary colours, suddenly achieves a whole new fourth-dimensional reality. It's this kind of fourth-dimensional reality that Wingrove is really interested in; and it's on this level that he is really interesting.

It's not unusual for me to start a Wingrove chapter with a repressed yawn, but by the time I've finished it he almost invariably rouses the sense of something four-dimensional going on. This is what keeps me reading. I want to see what's happening at *that* level. Now, if a writer is working at that kind of level, certain things must be sacrificed. I think Wingrove is perfectly aware of the soap element in what he is doing. I also think he's occasionally — just occasionally — almost overwhelmed by it. What he has *not* done, so far, is to show any sign of failure or falling-off in any ultimate sense. Really, some of Wingrove's critics sound like Leavis on Milton ("a man who uses language this way could not even begin to justify the ways of God to men", etc). I'm not trying to insult anyone: Leavis's *The Living Principle* is a fascinating book. But, well, these misunderstandings occur.

Yes, of course I'm an interested party: look my name up in the acknowledgements section at the end of *The White Mountain*. I'm a kind of face-worker on the early drafts of these novels, getting rid of the really crude stuff, and occasionally bouncing a few ideas back up the minishaft. When you've done this over a period of time, a kind of semi-identification with



the books sets in. On the other hand, I don't feel I'm fighting for my livelihood in defending them. Perhaps, therefore, my comments will be of some objective value.

About the sex and violence in **Chung Kuo**: for me, the only real shocker comes in that chapter of **The Middle Kingdom** called 'The Saddle'. What can I say? I can remember what I said to David after reading the early draft: "I'm very glad to say that I did not enjoy this. And Heaven help anyone who does".

From Susan Oudot, London:

As NEL's publicist for David Wingrove's **Chung Kuo** series (and you may be aware that I am also his wife) I am writing in response to Cherith Baldry's review of **The White Mountain** in issue 170 of **Vector**, not so much to argue with the reviewer's criticisms (although I do), but with the way they are made.

Apart from the introductory paragraph which gives a brief glimpse into the world of **Chung Kuo** — which could have easily been gleaned from any of the series' jacket blurbs or various publicity leaflets — Baldry never once takes us into the novel to give us a feel of what it is about, never gives an example from the text to back up her criticisms. What are Wingrove's so-called 'failings' on "sentence structure and choice of vocabulary"? Show us how he has "a problem of style". And if the book "has no structure, merely a sequence of events", at least let us know what the events are — at this point in the review we still don't have a clue about what's in the book.

So my criticism is not of a reviewer not liking a book, but of one not doing a proper job in conveying exactly what she/he feels is wrong and backing it up with examples. Unfortunately this happens all too often; in fact it has been the case on three separate occasions when Wingrove's books have been reviewed in **Vector**: Bearing in mind that the majority of people contributing to the magazine are amateurs, surely it would be helpful to give reviewers such as Cherith Baldry basic guidelines on how to produce a cohesive, informative review that is satisfying for the reader?

And I can't end this letter without passing comment on Baldry's last paragraph, "I grieve over **The White Mountain**. I grieve over the eight good Science Fiction novels whose place on the publisher's list **Chung Kuo** is occupying..." This, I'm afraid, is a myth, but one which would-be writers and pompous reviewers are only too happy to perpetuate. Clinging to this ridiculous belief no doubt brings comfort to frustrated writers when their own novels are bounced, enabling them to blame something other than their own failings; and it also allows reviewers to blow the trumpet of some other 'favourite' or to make us believe there are hundreds of Philip K Dicks out there just waiting to be discovered. There ain't Or at least if there are, publishers haven't heard from them yet — and until they do they're just going to have to make do with

extraordinarily ambitious, extremely well-written, successful series like **Chung Kuo**!



From Freda Warrington, Swadlincote, Derbyshire:

I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to Gareth Rees for his marvellous glittering review of my vampire novel, **A Taste of Blood Wine** (**Vector** 170). C'mon Gareth! No more Mr Nice Guy! You must have found something wrong with it! The insight, sympathy and intelligence with which you approached the book are astounding, especially considering your difficulty in even understanding the title. Yet, differently advantaged, you forged on. That's the spirit. Fight it, man, fight it.

If **A Taste of Blood Wine** is as great as you say, surely **Vector**'s millions of readers will rush out and buy it. And to think it only took me two days, lying on my chaise-longue, to dictate! Please Gareth, let me return the favour. Send me your latest novel, and I promise to review it with the same sublime objectivity, and not as if I've just skimmed through it in half-an-hour in a foul mood with a raging hangover.

From Susan Bentley, Duston, Northampton:

I'm writing in response to Gareth Rees' review of **A Taste of Blood Wine** by Freda Warrington. I read the book recently and I disagree with Gareth on all counts. In fact I began to wonder if he was talking about the same novel.

I found the novel multi-layered, the characters well-drawn and the rationale behind the existence of vampires clever and convincing. There is a strong element of religious parody in the novel, but Gareth wonders why the King of the Vampires is called Kristian. Come On! Of course the book fails as a horror novel. It isn't one! What it is, for those who have eyes to see, is darkly

erotic in the tradition of Anne Rice and Tanith Lee.

As to the title, which Gareth could make no sense of — Vampires drink Blood Wine, don't they?

Finally, I think it is unfair for any reviewer to say that a writer has made no effort. He might like to know that Freda put blood, sweat and tears into the book. She says that, "writing it was like a love affair". I'm convinced. Take another look Gareth.

From K.L. Woods, Grantham, Lincs:

After reading Gareth Rees' review of Freda Warrington's **A Taste of Blood Wine** in a friend's copy of **Vector**, I can only assume that he and I have been reading different novels! Rees' quarrel with this book seems to be that it is not an oh-so-dated Hammer-horror bloodfest. But it does not even pretend to be (the cover is perhaps regrettable, but Pan have quite clearly labelled the spine *fantasy* for the genre-challenged). It is instead a novel of quite astonishing technical, emotional and not least literary maturity (considering that Warrington made her name with more or less conventional — though superior — quest fantasy). Warrington's postulation of the vampire as material manifestation of the collective unconsciousness is a fascinating premise, as well as being rather more convincing than Anne Rice's 'child of ancient gods' scenario. Moreover, Warrington is not afraid to look at the vampires objectively, and to question the rather speciesist notion that any creature which preys on humankind is implicitly 'evil'. Rees sneers at Karl for being a 'good' vampire, but had he read this book with one tenth of his brain, he would have seen that both Karl and his creator are aware of this hypocrisy and address it.

In her setting (1920s Cambridge), **Vector**'s Warrington has not only avoided both the clichéd and the garish, but has also achieved a piece of period evocation that a 'straight' historical novelist would be proud of. Moreover, she has also pulled off a double-whammy here, because the development of Charlotte from self-denigrating, emotionally oppressed daughter and wife to amoral and independent vampire is a sharp-etched metaphor for the way women of this period were indeed liberating themselves from Victorian repressive stereotypes and establishing their own intellectual, financial and sexual identities. And Rees thought this was just a vampire book! Whew!

I personally feel that had this novel been published outside of the genre-ghetto, it would currently be taking the 'literary' scene by storm, with possibly a Booker nomination in the offing. Certainly, it would not be being reviewed by the culturally-disadvantaged such as Gareth Rees.

PS I see in the latest **Starburst** Brian Stableford — who presumably knows his vampire literature — describes **A Taste of Blood Wine** as "... one of the best fantasy novels ever..." and "... a cert for the World Fantasy Award...". Any comments, Mr Rees?

I also heard from Mike Llewellyn who made many similar points about Gareth Rees' review in rather less temperate language. I am pleased to see so much impassioned interest in the reviews published in Vector. Each review of course reflects the subjective impressions of an individual reviewer. Readers are aware of this, and rarely make buying decisions on the strength of one review, whether good or bad. For the record, I personally find both *A Dangerous Energy* and *A Taste of Blood Wine* to be impressive well-written fantasies, but strongly defend the right of all our reviewers to their own opinions — Catie.

Vector 169

From Peter Tennant, *Thetford, Norfolk*:

Many thanks for the new style Vector. Put me down as impressed, but with reservations.

Kev McVeigh said that Vector would gain 12 pages to compensate for *Paperback Inferno's* lost 16. But Vector 169 had only ten pages devoted to paperback reviews and when you get down to the number of books considered the gulf between old and new is even wider. *Shock of the New* had fifteen reviews this issue as opposed to twenty in the previous Vector and *Paperback Graffiti* had only thirty one compared to fifty eight in the last issue of *PI*. Now I realise that there are other factors to be taken into account, including some I don't know about, but for all that it seems to me there are going to be quite a few books we don't get to hear about, at least through Vector.

My own feeling is that the *BSFA* should have stuck with three magazines: Vector for critical writing, Matrix for news, fandom etc. and a third publication embracing all reviews (paperbacks, hardbacks, magazines, media etc). Certain factors, not least economic, might preclude us from taking that route at the current time, but I'm still not happy at the loss of book coverage.

What are the alternatives then? Avoidance of duplication, but this doesn't happen too often and it's interesting to get different views of the same book. The use of a smaller typeface and the elimination of white space/illustrations to make more room, but who wants to pore over Vector with a magnifying glass? Ruthless editing to remove everything extraneous from the reviews, but often it's these personal touches that make them interesting. Personally I'd like to see greater use of capsule reviews to take up the slack in coverage, with a star rating for quick reference along the lines of Ben Jeapes' 'Cardography'. Think about it.

Having spent a page passing criticism, hopefully constructive, let me now offer you my compliments for an excellent magazine.

Vector 169 was the best magazine I've seen from the *BSFA* as regards

presentation. The layout was fine and the use of illustrations broke up all those blocks of type, making the magazine a lot easier on the eye.

The contents were very good too. As someone who shares Maureen Speller's love of the short story I welcome her magazine review column. The interview with Lisa Tuttle was excellent; far more informal and chatty than these things usually are. Ben Jeapes did a fine appreciation of one of my favourite writers and I agreed with his ratings for the books (except I'd rate *A Planet Called Treason* higher and *Folk of the Fringe* much lower).

Horns & a Curly Tail

From Norman Beswick, *Church Stretton, Shropshire*

The Arthur C Clarke birthday tribute was a splendid idea and I had a nice time arguing my way through the contributions. David V Barrett's boyhood vicarage must have contained some interesting artwork to make him respond quite so vividly to the description of Karellan in *Childhood's End*; as one brought up in an imageless Quaker household I've often wondered just how universal the horns-and-spiked-tail image really is, outside some strands of the Judaic/Christian religions and within a fairly restricted span of time. Maybe some Vector reader will know.

Kev McVeigh's comments on 'Star bright' were perceptive and well-judged. This is an interesting example of an SF story that can actually spark off theological argument. To the narrator's anguished final question, one response might be that God's purposes cannot be as we perceive them (in which case what precisely do we mean by calling Him good?). Or one could suppose that the star's destruction might have had another, extra-terrestrial purpose and the response of the Magi was a mistaken and accidental bonus: to which a fundamentalist Christian could in turn retort that this isn't what the New Testament suggests; and a modern theologian would reply - well, I won't go on, we'd be here all night, but you'll get my drift.

But it would be interesting to know if anyone has examples of priests/vicars/ministers/RE teachers using or commenting on SF stories in their work? SF carries a wide range of theological speculations in its pages, some of it rudimentary but plenty of it usefully thought-provoking. Maybe they should be told.

Two-Edged Sword

From Philip Muldowney, *Plymouth*:

Vector is looking successful, although there is a two-edged sword here. Including the letters column, there are only twelve pages out of forty, that are not reviews of one kind or

another. With only two articles, this issue is almost completely a reviewzine. Is this the way that you want Vector to go? It seems that with everybody else supplying copy, you have left very little room for you yourself to insert much. The reviews themselves have improved a good deal from just a few issues ago, indeed the vast majority are very competent. Yet... not one of them has that real spark of writing talent to make them a must-read. Reviewzines usually succeed by featuring the work of a very talented writer who carries all before him, and who is a compulsive read. You do not have that in Vector, the voices are all too similar.

The Arthur C Clarke tribute is a bit of a back-handed compliment at times. Two of them seem to be operating on the "Wonder Years" policy. "Gee Mr Clarke, I thought that your stuff was terrific when I was nine years old..." is not necessarily the kind of compliment that a mature adult writer is going to file amongst his treasures. Another interesting fact to emerge from the tribute, is that nearly all the titles mentioned came from the fifties and early sixties, concentrating on the mythic aspects. So after he was 45 did Arthur stop inspiring wonderment in his SF writing? 2001 certainly made him one of the most famous SF writers in the world, but at what other price? Would you say that *Rendezvous with Rama* or *Fountains of Paradise* inspire that same mythic quality that seem so significant in his early writing. Did fame destroy something? Or was it just that we changed? There was scope for a much more interesting article here.

I enjoyed the Langford piece. Is it not true that SF is still the prisoner of its own culture? When Men were Men, and the old guard ruled, then you could wipe out millions of "gooks" with the twitch of an eye brow. In today's politically correct times, your hero would probably have to fill in ten thousand forms in triplicate and conduct a special scientific consensus examination, to bop the invading hordes on the nose!

Compass Points or the completely obscure book that you have not a hope of being able to obtain and that is why I am whetting your appetite show. In other words, how much point is there in reviewing a book that few people are ever going to get the chance to read. What chance is there of finding a book that was last printed thirteen years ago??? On the other hand, as an illustration that fantasy is coming more from the historical novel than anywhere else. Because surely Treece was an historical novelist first and foremost. He may well have dwelt in the more mythic areas of Celtic and Greek history, but his tools and style were those of the historical novelist and not the fantasist.

You raise a number of interesting points Philip, unfortunately I don't have space to answer all of them:

1) I was pleased to receive a note from Arthur C Clarke this morning, indicating his enjoyment of his birthday tribute, and

of the differing themes picked up by the writers. It is interesting that you mention Rendezvous with Rama; if space and time had allowed, I would have written about this book which impressed me deeply with the mystery and grandeur of the alien encounter.

2) While not all of the books recommended in Compass Points are or will be obscure, one of the arguments for publishing an obscure book is that it may encourage a re-issue. Personally, I rather enjoy the slow hunt for a special book; the delay adds to the final pleasure. However, you should not think that because a book is out of print, it is impossible to come by. There are a number of mail order specialists who will track down books for you. Most of them advertise regularly in Interzone and other magazines.

3) The percentage of reviews to other material in Vector will vary in line with publishers' schedules. I find this preferable to artificially 'smoothing out' the number of reviews by delaying those from busier times of the year to fill space at quieter times — Catie.

Criticism

From Andrew M Butler, Hull:

With the reorganisation of the magazines produced by the BSFA it is probably time to examine the type of criticism contained within them. Hardly an issue goes by without a claim that SF is getting too academic, that it must be protected from the lumpen intelligentsia or a monstrous regiment of professors. This is not just a recent problem, nor is it confined to the BSFA: such opinions punctuate the history of *Foundation*. Yet criticism survives, and seems likely to continue to do so.

I'm lucky; my job is in effect to study Philip K Dick, in that I am funded to research a thesis on that topic. Obviously I'm not the first, even in Britain — at my own institution, Hull University, Roger Luckhurst has recently completed a PhD on J G Ballard, and someone else has been working on Heinlein. James Kneale at University College London is also working on Dick. Possibly we're all part of the lumpen intelligentsia, but I also consider myself a fan. There is a clash between my fanish and academic side, just as fandom and academia view each other with suspicion. But there must be a common ground.

I suppose that Dick is the writer who has received the most academic attention, rivalled by Le Guin and Gibson. I must have read over two hundred items about him. Much of this is run of the mill, some extraordinarily perceptive and some appears to be about a completely different writer to the one I know. In a three hundred word piece in *The Economist* I counted eight errors or misleading statements. I've lost count of the number of misreadings of **The Man in the High Castle**.

SF in general, and Dick in particular, is

being examined by academics and the media more now than ever before. Fredric Jameson has seen cyberpunk as "the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself". The postmodern thinker Baudrillard is saturated with Dickiana. Attention must be paid to this; to how SF may be (mis)appropriated, or SF might as well return to a ghetto.

Assuming this latter course is rejected, we need to produce valid criticism. Tired old arguments about the origins of SF should be put to one side; it seems to me to be more interesting to see how a given text operates as SF rather than endless generalisations. Within this project can be found hunts for sources,

definitions of SF, scientific analysis as well as questions of style, characterisation and quality, but an article is more than just a series of reviews, and a review is not a plot summary.

I'm far from perfect. The first draft of my latest chapter was awful — full of information but going nowhere. I stepped back, sorted out my argument and re-arranged the material to fit this. By the fourth draft I've got something I can defend, but it's far from my last word on the subject. No article can be the last word; it can't say everything there is to say on a subject. The secret is to find a focus.

I'm new to the BSFA and so perhaps shouldn't yet make criticisms; although in that case I could be accused of being apathetic. I don't know how much material is rejected by *Vector*, or how much is re-written. But I am aware of the debates within the BSFA, and feel that this is a good time to examine the nuts and bolts of SF criticism. *Vector* is an excellent platform from which to talk about SF. Let's keep it that way.

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With eight SF paperbacks under her belt, a Hugo Award for *The Vor Game*, and a Locus and Hugo Award for *Barravay*, Lois McMaster Bujold has now published her first fantasy title, *The Spirit Ring*, which appeared in November from Baen as her first hardcover edition. In the UK, Pan Books issued *Borders of Infinity* in paperback in December; *The Vor Game* and *Barravay* are to follow, and they have promised a C-format version of *The Spirit Ring*.

Lois is currently working on a sequel to *Brothers in Arms*, in which Miles Vorkosigan and his clone Mark are reunited. Another novel, in which Simon Illyan's eidetic memory chip starts to go glitchy, has been put on the back burner. Born in Columbus, Ohio in 1949, Lois has been married for 21 years to John F Bujold, they have two children - Anne (13) and Paul (11). A voracious reader all her life, Lois took up SF when she was nine, thanks to her father, who was a professor at Ohio State University. He used to buy SF magazines and paperbacks to read on the plane on consulting trips. On such casual events are careers built; Lois began writing at the age of 13 - although not for publication - and completed her first novel, *Shards of Honor*, in 1983; her second, *The Warrior's Apprentice*, in 1984; and *Ethan of Athos* in 1985. All three were published in 1986, to be followed by *Falling Free* (1988), *Brothers in Arms* and *Borders of Infinity* (1989), *The Vor Game* (1990) and *Barravay* in 1991.

The chronological sequence of the plots differs from the publishing sequence, anyone wishing to follow the story chronologically should read them in this order: *Falling Free*, *Shards of Honor*, *Barravay*, *The Warrior's Apprentice*, *The Mountains of Mourning*, *The Vor Game*, *Ethan of Athos*, *Labyrinth*, *Borders of Infinity*, *Brothers in Arms*. The three short stories are all in *Borders of Infinity*.

Lois has written short stories for *Twilight Zone* magazine, *Far Frontiers* and *American Fantasy*; television rights to her first short story, "Barter", were sold to *Tales from the Darkside*; her novella "Weatherman" in *Analogue* (February 1990) forms the first part of *The Vor Game*. The Science Fiction Book Club combined her first two titles into a hardcover, *Test of Honor*; they combined *The Vor Game* and *Borders of Infinity* under the title *Vorkosigan's Game*.

In the UK, Headline published paperbacks of her first five novels, which in the USA Easton Press produced signed, leatherbound first editions of *The Vor Game*, *Borders of Infinity* and *Barravay*.

For someone whose first novel appeared only six years ago, Lois McMaster Bujold has already created quite a headache for the completist!

Lois McMaster Bujold

Interviewed by Ken Lake

Without wishing to offend, can I start by saying that, in my eyes, you write like a man? Most of your characters are male, and you seem to treat your few female characters as surrogate males.

I was at a con when a nice male fan came up to me with precisely that comment, prefaced with some earnest assurances that it was meant as a compliment. "Ms Bujold, you write like a man." Of course I should have replied — but didn't think of it till much later (that's why I'm a writer: the pencil waits) — "Oh, really? Which one?" Now I have the chance to use that bit of repartee after all: thank you.

I figure my function as a writer (and you can note the absence of any gender-qualifier before that noun) is to write about all aspects of the human condition that interest me, to the limits of my knowledge and understanding. I don't have to be the thing in order to write of it with imaginative understanding. I've written of, and from the viewpoint of, engineers, soldiers, doctors, scientists, explorers, space pilots, administrators, teachers, fathers, mothers, children, brothers, sisters, the handicapped, prisoners, genetically-altered humans, heroes, cowards and scum — yet I am not, and nobody expects me or any other writer to be, all of those things in real life.

It's not only the writer's right, but the writer's function, to think beyond the self and into the eyes of others — though it's also true that you strip-mine your own life for material. It's a strange dissociation to be standing at your father's funeral, or to be in an auto wreck or some other disaster or delight — childbirth, for example — and be thinking "I'm going to have to remember this. I can use it later. How would I describe this pain in words?"

The pregnancy scene appears in *Barravay*, where Cordelia is sitting pondering on differences in reproductive customs between her home planet, and *Barravay* where she has settled with her husband.

What was the genesis of this scene?

Well, I was shovelling in some plot background to save wasting other scenes, so I compacted the essentials into bits of memory which she recalls. I read this to a writers' group, and the women listening — all like myself experienced mothers — picked up all kinds of emotional resonances from the scene, all of which I fully intended. These were mostly suppressed fear, ominous threat, and great unease; the scene ends with Cordelia going indoors because "the sun was giving her a slight headache". It was not, of course, the sun that was giving her a headache, and there was nothing slight about it — the woman was in a state of real terror.

My male listener caught absolutely nothing of this stuff. He reported perceiving Cordelia sitting around the garden like a big lazy cat, and thought she was really being wimpy about the sun.

What was your reaction to this?

I was floored, till I went back over the scene and looked again. None of the resonances I was counting on was in fact stated in words anywhere in the text — I realised I was expecting certain words to "unfold", to carry hidden baggage which just did not exist for him. I never mentioned haemorrhage anywhere in the text, yet every female listener reported back thinking about haemorrhage at exactly the point I intended them to, not to mention stroke, kidney failure, exhaustion, vulnerability and so on — a world of implication.

So I went back over the scene and made clunkily explicit what had been so elegantly implicit before, taking a whole paragraph to list all the complications of pregnancy and childbirth that women think of every day during the nine months. So now I hope it will work for both morphs of readers. *Sigh*.

It may be that something similar is going on

with your perception of my female characters: I may not be developing them explicitly, counting on my readers to "know", to unfold from their own experience all the hidden and implied complexities they contain. In other words, I don't write like a man, you just read like one. It sounds like "blame the victim", alas.

Men and Women

So you accept that men and women draw different things from a book. And it can't be denied that most of your books deal in a male way with male characters doing male things.

Every reader draws something different from a book. It's true that the bulk of my books so far have been from male viewpoints. **The Vor Game** was deliberately and intensely male-military; I wanted to challenge myself, to see if I could handle realistic (well, sort of) military situations and tactics head-on. In my earlier military book **The Warrior's Apprentice** I handled the climactic space battle by having my only point of view character pass out from a bleeding ulcer just before the fighting, and wake up three days later; I considered this cheating. Successful cheating, but cheating nevertheless.

The exceptions for female viewpoint are of course my first novel **Shards of Honor**, and the parts of **Falling Free** — my only multiple viewpoint book yet — that were from the viewpoints of the female quaddies Claire and Silver, and now my latest published book, **Barrayar**, where Cordelia is firmly in the centre of everything as an egalitarian woman in an intensely masculinist society. If thematically **Falling Free** was in part about being a father, then **Barrayar** is in part about being a mother. It's been great fun, getting to pull out all the stops on my accumulated female life experience that must of necessity be left out of, say, Miles' personality because as a 17 to 26 year old male he just doesn't know about it. Could it be that a male viewpoint is less than a female one?

But Miles is a special case — and I have to say that it could be argued that he has some feminine characteristics.

Dare I suggest that he might be a female in disguise? Look at his qualities: he is small, fragile, at serious disadvantage even in a fist fight; he gets most of his power by the clever manipulation of others, must win by intelligence and self-control, and as he lives in the "wrong", mutant, deformed body he is socially disadvantaged as well. I could do a whole essay on the way women in our society are made to feel deformed!

Do you notice how he pays close attention, as part of his survival mechanism, to the thoughts and feelings and reactions of others. What he's saying is often wildly different from what he's really thinking....

At last, a female prepared to admit how female minds work!

Yes, but I've put it into what I think is a convincing male body and spirit.

Miles is also immensely attractive to women.

I actually had one otherwise bright male reader who couldn't understand that at all — he thought the dwarfish body would repel them. I should have said to him, "If your body doesn't repel women, why should his?", but I finally decided that the problem was not that he didn't understand Miles: he just didn't understand women.

I know I mentioned it first, but this interview does seem to be hovering all around the male-female interface, doesn't it?

Yes, you did, and in a very attention-arresting way. I think this is something particularly British. For at least some of the new young American women SF writers, the traditional male-female division of writing labour — that men should write about men, and women about women — is something we have never heard of. A gender, not a gender gap: is Britain trailing the US in this social evolution? Certainly there are differences between us, but I would like a male reader to tell me how he reacts to a book by another woman writer, Claire Bell: **People of the Sky** is incredibly female-erotic; do males find female-keyed eroticism as repulsive as many women find male-keyed eroticism?

I'll throw that one open to Vector readers. But since Barrayar is written from the female viewpoint, was there any reason why — coming as it does third in your sequence chronologically — you didn't write it years ago?

Because I couldn't have written it eight years ago, right after **Shards of Honor**. I needed the six books in between to grow in power and control as a writer before I could do justice to the themes and events I wanted to handle in this book. I needed the extra years of living to gain the perspectives, and I suspect you may find more female themes and characters in my books as I grow older: to "do women right" as I hope I've done men right, may require of me more distance and self-understanding which can only come with time. I must say, growing up in the 1960s, many of the role models presented to me for my coming life-as-a-female were not exactly inviting, and I still have to come to terms with all that.

Everything All At Once

Do you have any single attitude towards writing?

I have a motto, akin to Miles' Forward Momentum, which is "Everything, all at once, all the time". I don't think that the fact that one is writing a science-fiction (or, worse, a space opera) action-adventure-series-sequel is any damned excuse for making it any less than a fully-underpinned, theme-driven, all-out novel. A series, or genre, or any other box is only a

box if you put yourself in it: I mean to evade boxes. Free the prisoners. That's why I wrote **The Spirit Ring**, a fantasy novel — just to keep them guessing.

But you're going back now to the Vor series, and more military adventures.

Yes, I suppose military history is a rather unfeminine interest — like SF. In my youth, I went in for swimming, canoeing, riding, fencing and judo — only swimming remains on the list — and later photography, in imitation of my father and brothers (my mother never got to lay hands on the equipment). When I walked into the Central Ohio SF Club for the first time in 1968, there were 21 guys and me. Today, that would make me grin, but at the age of 18 I just didn't know how to handle it — more's the pity! Between the ages of 10 and 20, I gobbled up the entire SF and fantasy shelves of four libraries. I collected paperbacks, and I kept up a subscription to **Analog**.

After I reached 21, I stopped reading SF rather abruptly — I got hold of something pretty poisonous — and spent the next decade reading up every other subject. So what did I choose to write 13 years later, at age 33?

Gothic Romance

What brought you back to SF?

I believe that many writers, if not all, start out as readers and choose to try to write books like those that gave us the most joy as readers. We try to recreate, for ourselves and for others, the best and most perfect versions of that story-experience that we can. When I sat down to write, it came out as action-adventure-SF-plus, like the books that gave me joy when I first read them.

Which authors did you enjoy most?

Poul Anderson, James H. Schmitz, Cordwainer Smith, Anne McCaffrey, Roger Zelazny, the humour of Robert Sheckley, De Camp and Pratt; mystery like Dorothy Sayers and Conan Doyle, and romance like Georgette Heyer.

When I sat down to write **Shards of Honor**, I thought I was writing a Gothic romance in SF drag — genre miscegenation if ever there was; its later — and career-beneficial — classification as military-SF still bemuses me. Romance seems to be a dirty word these days. Then there's Kipling, H Rider Haggard — I read stacks of British boys' adventure stories without ever noticing they were not addressed to me. And of course as a role model in more ways than one: CS Forrester. My cut-and-splice arrangement for my Miles series is modelled exactly on Forrester's Hornblower series, which came out in God-knows-what order, but fitted into an over-arching pattern of the character's life. From a writer's viewpoint, it's great — all the advantages of a series and few of the disadvantages: each book stands alone, so I can walk away at any time. It's also good for you-the-reader, because it means you'll always get the best Miles book I can think of,

not just the *next* Miles book I can think of.

Do you have an underlying, possibly subversive subtext to your novels? Are you selling us something we may not recognise?

Of course. To affect anyone's mind on any subject, including men's on militarism or egalitarianism, you must first get past their guard. No feminist, writing a feminist tract, is going to change any man's, or any woman's, fixed mind. But that same obnoxious fellow may read a book packaged as militarist SF, and never notice the alien ideas flowing into his mind along with the events of the story.

Ideally my subversion should remain subliminal. My own masculinist/feminist balance is still under construction, after all — I have a son *and* a daughter, and I want both to get the most they can out of life. I think I'd like to chuck out the whole dichotomy and call myself a human beingst — you can't use the term "humanist" as it already has at least three other emotion-charged meanings already. There is a time for separation, to find one's own centre, but after that should come a new synthesis.

Ms Average Reader

Do you visualise your readers as men or women?

Ah, you've uncovered another subtle female-centring here: I am female, and most of my first readers are female; I often think of my audience as "Ms Average-Reader" when untangling my syntax for maximum clarity. Male characters and male lives interest female readers. We do women's lives all day long in our realities; not only do we want a change, a refreshment and a release, we welcome an object for a little mild romantic fantasy too. Male characters generally work better for this than female ones; a feminine heroine who gets Our Hero on stage has to be very carefully developed indeed, not to evoke progressive hostility from the female reader. Many women like to read about men; stranger still, many women actually like men, or would like to like them if they could find a decent one. Amazing, but true.

I feel I ought not to make any comment at this point, so I'll just ask you to sum up this male/female thing for us.

I write because I like it. I reserve the absolute right to write from any point of worldview I please — male, female, alien or other. I really want to do a Betan hermaphrodite one of these days.

I reserve the right to be interested in any topic at all, or to pass over a topic. I'll probably do more "femalstuff" as I grow as a writer; it requires deeper and more original thought to handle than "malestuff", a stronger grasp of theme, and truly I have fewer attractive role models to work from, though happily this drought is changing. I intend to make it change some more, and try to create

some of that new synthesis.

And, of course, I hope eventually to gain the ultimate writerly accolade: that Bujold writes like Bujold, and like no-one else.

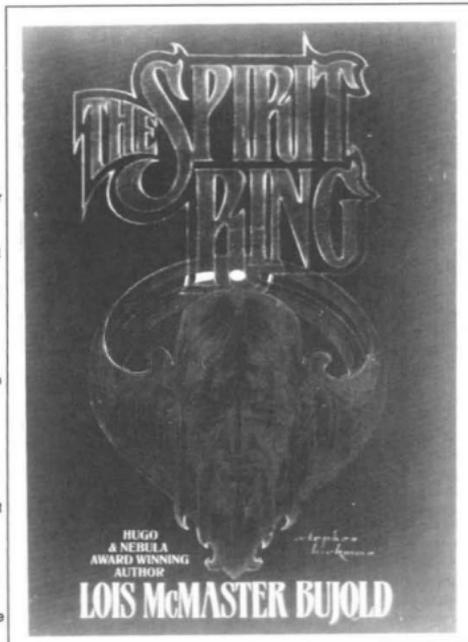
When, as you say, you started the gender debate in this interview, with your opening comment that in your perception I "write like a man", this made me feel rather like the hobbits in the opening chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, subjected to Bilbo's speech: "This was unexpected and rather difficult. There was some scattered clapping, but most of them were trying to work it out and see if it came to a compliment."

Everything I've written is by definition through female eyes, processed by a female brain, glossed by a female sense of humour — including my perception of how males think. I've lived with males all my life: my father, my two brothers, my husband and my son. I've read thousands of books by male writers, had male teachers, friends, supervisors, neighbours — males are all over the place. I'd have to be really brain-dead not to at least partially have figured them out after 43 years of observation. It makes me very impatient with men who say "I don't understand women". Aren't they paying attention? There's no lack of data.

You claim that women are manipulative where men are not, that women have depths of perception lacking in men, that there are whole areas of female life that men fail to empathise with. I think you ask, and expect, too much. You admit that, where women grasp the implicit, men expect things to be made explicit. Unless someone tells us, how can we be expected to "understand women"?

Then we should talk more to each other. Tell each other stories. Compare notes, talk about what has hurt us. Every man and woman is walking around carrying a load of undischarged rage and pain as a result of trying to come to grips with their sexuality and sexual role. Our society, in the form of our parents and other figures and sources, doesn't do a very good job of helping us in this task.

Since the men don't talk to the women, or the women to the men, it comes as a late surprise to a lot of people that the other



morph is also in a state of woe and misery — separate but equal! But it's amazing how just talking about something, or even just realising it can be talked about, shrinks the terrors.

That's where you, as a writer, can step outside the real world. You create characters and watch them move, speak, act and die according to the characteristics you have given them. Taking that and transferring it to real people isn't easy: we're not in charge like writers are.

You claim that Miles Vorkosigan partakes of femininity in some ways — but he always reacts to stimuli by stressing his "assumed" masculinity. Assumed, that is, in donning his prestressed uniform, his voice, his stance, his mannerisms — specifically masculine behaviour patterns he knows are expected of a leader, which he uses as tools. Are you suggesting that normal men never manipulate women like that? Or other men?

I think we have gotten too deeply involved in the male/female interface here. The essential point about Miles is that he suffers from a bad case of Great Man's Son Syndrome. While Miles is in many ways distinct from me, he gets his live drive straight from my own profoundest levels of being, and many of his traits are mine.

His sense of humour, his desire for success and recognition overlaying deep self-doubt, the sense that he must succeed hugely to be humanly acceptable — all these you will find in me as the daughter of my father. On the other

hand, unlike Miles I am not hyperactive. I do not believe in the military ideal. Miles is better at maths, puzzles and foreign languages than I am — he's also immensely more self-assertive and dominant-aggressive. He wants to be in charge.

If Miles is partly you, what about your other characters, from Cordelia to Bothari?

All my characters partake of some aspect of my own personality — not all of them positive. I need look no further than my own mind for Bruce Van Atta's self-centredness, laziness and desire to avoid responsibility, while Bothari's relationship to my own sexual fears could make a study in their own right. Ethan's conscientiousness has been mine at times. Cordelia is so easy to write, it seems like cheating.

So either I'm some kind of wierd androgyne, or you have too narrow a view of what a woman can possibly be. Or am I straw-manning — misrepresenting your views, and knocking them down by misrepresentation?

I think I must have tapped some particularly deep level of your subconscious to bring forth a response like that. Let's go back to the question we touched on before, of feminism in SF.

Not just in SF, but in life. The real problem is to break the whole accursed chain-letter structure of learned human behaviour. My generation and socio-economic class has a chance to start that process — but we are stuck with what we are; we have to move on from there. We need not to accept the model of parenting we learned, but to analyse it, jettison the mistakes, save the good stuff, and improve it. In practice, I admit, all too often I open my mouth to my children and my mother's or my father's words come popping out. In the past, women's role was unequal and different. However, most men have gotten a raw deal too — I'm all for a humanist, not a feminist, solution to our problems.

Stereotypes

Yet when you plot your novels, most of the time you either show men reacting in stereotyped ways, or you fantasise women taking over male roles — albeit often unwillingly, and with distaste at the results of their own barbarity. Surely you are merely reiterating and reinforcing our expectations of each other in our sexual roles? How can you ask men to empathise when women fantasise, or to understand when women make a cult of secrecy about themselves and their real feelings?

It's true women make a mystery of sexual matters — but men aren't too forthcoming either. More communication and less embarrassment is needed everywhere. Re: the differences, male porn movies don't interact with my sexuality in any way; the serious ones were repulsive, and the funny ones weren't erotic — not for me, anyway; in fact, often they had quite the reverse effect in damping down any release of sexuality. I didn't want to be like *that* icky stuff. I've never seen a

female-keyed porn film, but I have read some female porn — none of it, interestingly, commercially produced. All fan fiction — there's a whole subspecies of female fanatic that features male homosexual relationships, which I'm pretty sure are quite unlike any real homosexual relationships. All the women are eliminated from the frame of reference, and they can spend the whole story watching men make love. Doesn't that sound enticing?

Fantasies

I'll take that as sarcasm, thanks. Why do you think women reject male sexual fantasies, even such simple, logical ones as wearing clothes that emphasise while hiding even secondary sexual characteristics?

There's so often an element of force and coercion. Male-keyed erotica puts women in weak or victim roles: the cunts are all wrong. Women's sexual fantasies may also be more *personal*, making it even harder to get a match. And I've never heard of pregnancy playing a part in male erotica — though it certainly does in female ones. But far too many men, and women, are unaware that they can use fantasy to enhance their sexuality, that it's permissible to do so... as long as they don't get it mixed up with reality.

I think some of our readers may be getting a little uncomfortable by now, not to mention complaining that this has nothing to do with SF. OK, I admit it does — everything in life has to do with SF — but can we perhaps get back to your work? Like, how and where and when do you do it?

Yes, please! I fit my writing around the fixed schedules of the rest of my family. When I began, I wrote during the children's naps and after their bedtime; when they started school, I began to write on schoolday mornings — but only if I have a section "ready to go", that is: well enough thought out in my head to be writable.

My husband is a chef, working long, variable and unpredictable hours, lots of evenings and weekends, so between the children's "napping" infancy and starting school he would often babysit mornings while I went off to the public library with my notebook.

I always have to do the preliminary work before I can set pencil to paper — it's mostly "invisible work", though helped along by chapter and scene outlines in increasing detail as I "close in" on the section. First I have to see it — then I can write it.

The invisible work is the hardest to describe, but the most essential part of the art. It's rarely discussed in writing classes, though I believe some aspects of it can be taught.

What is your actual writing process? You say you use a pencil and notebook — then what?

I write in pencil in a three-ring looseleaf binder. First a couple of layers of outline in

one-chapter packages, then I zoom in on the scene — the basic work unit as well as the basic building block of a story, whether a short or a novel. I often choreograph or rough-script dialogue in advance, as part of the preliminary outlining, and when I finally start on my "first draft" I even rough out paragraphs on a scrap sheet at my left before starting the finished version on the numbered page at my right.

I reckon to write a page of finished text in an hour, on average — the process is slow, but I need very little revision. Next I transcribe this on to my WP. This may bring a few small editorial changes or words or syntax.

That first draft then goes out to "test readers", friends or members of my writers' group, to check out any problems of clarity or understanding, logical flaws or other, more subtle unmet wants. I mark these revisions on my first draft, sometimes adding handwritten pages of extra material, then I add the changes on my disk and print out the final draft.

What about research?

That depends, whether I'm just cruising for ideas, or have a specific plot problem to solve. The best way is to talk to an expert: you can ask specific questions without having to wade through a lot of irrelevant stuff. I talked to an old arctic engineer to research the background for "The Weatherman", and got help from an engineer for the welding and engineering problems in *Falling Free*. Here, he came up with the elegant solution — the ice-die fabrication of a titanium spaceship part — first, and then I tailor-made the problem to fit it!

For the Quaddies, research began — though it didn't end — with a phone conversation with a doctor in NASA's department of operational medicine; he sent me a whole book on current space physiology and medicine. It was a casual comment from this man that led to the whole concept of the Quaddies — he mentioned that in space, astronauts' legs tend to atrophy but their arms get plenty of work, and they complained of fatigued hands and the problems of bracing themselves in freefall to work.

But you read a lot anyway — does this help with your plotting?

Oh yes, a great deal of military reading lies behind every military tale I have written, though the closest I've gotten to the real thing was six weeks in the Junior Civil Air Patrol at high school. And of course I talk to people who've been to war, including my husband who spent four years in the Army.

I also "write what I know" — which isn't just an annoying instruction by teachers, but a tautology: I select a story — in fact the original thought of it comes along — from things I already know. Behind *Ethan of Athos* lies several years of working in a major hospital: after such close acquaintance with real doctors, doing a doctor's point of view was not difficult.

Let's take it for granted, then, that you have science and engineering background, and pass on to training in writing itself.

I'm almost entirely self-taught: you would die of old age waiting for any English

department to teach you what you need to know, mostly because writing — like maths — can only be learned by doing. I began with fragmentary imitations of my favourite writers, script bits for my favourite TV shows — nothing they would have accepted as coursework at junior high school though.

When later I joined the Central Ohio SF Club, Lloyd Kropp ran a writers' workshop while working on his PhD in English at Ohio State U. We used to meet Thursday evenings in his home and try our stuff out on each other, and he would try out his creative writing teaching. I owe my first grasp of "scene" to those sessions.

Although I filled in on my education by reading after I left college, I held off on writing, and here I would like to throw out a question to women writers: are we all subconsciously holding something back until we have had children?

OK, we'll wait for feedback on that one. What got you back to writing?

A friend started, and because it seemed a cost-free way to try to make an income I followed her. I admit I was also, finally, setting out to compete with my father and brothers — it's hell, being a late bloomer in a family of overachievers. The hobby became an obsession; I sent my first novelette to my friend for critique, and she sent it on to Patricia C Wrede, a fantasy writer she had met at a con. Pat — bless her for ever — sent me back a 14-page single-spaced letter of critique, more attention than I'd had from any other human being in years. Since then I have sent her everything I've written. Pat, Lillian and I ran a round-robin writers' workshop by mail for years, exchanging chapters and these two ladies corrected my spelling, spotted my errors, made suggestions, gave me shoulders to gnash my teeth on in the face of three years of rejections, and generally saved my sanity and created my career. Nobody writes in a vacuum.

Popular Image

Has SF on television ever appealed to you?

Oh yes, in my teens, when it was all fresh and new, I adored *Star Trek* and the old *Twilight Zone*. *Star Trek: The New Generation* is OK, but I've passed the age to be sucked in now — or I thought I was till I caught *Blake's Seven*, which made me a fan again for a while, struck down by the mostly female disease of Avonitis. I enjoyed some of Tom Baker's *Dr Who*, but haven't caught many of the others; *Lost in Space* made me gag and still does, though the early episodes of *Battlestar Galactica* were good, though. I thought,

So much for the popular image: how about the real thing? What should we be aiming to do in space in the next ten or hundred years?

In the next decade, Earth-orbit technologies. The Moon and Mars in the next century certainly, but if we can develop something in orbit that solves our energy crisis we can take the Moon and Mars at leisure.



Now we know that there's no-one Out There, we've lost the urgency about exploring the solar system.

No life on other planets?

There must be — life is a direct expression of our biochemistry, which is an expression of our chemistry, which comes from our physics, which is based on the fundamental structure of the universe. Life must exist in a multitude of forms elsewhere, though it may well be rare. Intelligent, spacefaring life? Not likely if the speed of light remains inviolate. I've not yet encountered any convincing UFO stories; in previous centuries, these same people would be reporting close encounters with St Teresa and the Virgin.

So much for space and religion! Let's come back to writing: does the writer have a social responsibility?

I agree with Orson Scott Card that art is basically moral. Certainly the storytelling art is; if a work of art has any human content it has to have a moral position — it cannot have no position and exist, though that position may be unexamined and even unconscious.

Whose task is it to decide what moral stand should be taken — and what stand should we take in your opinion?

Only the writer can ultimately decide, although many people will have had their say on social responsibility, especially as it applies to the writer. Consider the writer's spouse, children and finance company for a start! I can't tell you what any other writer's responsibility may be — I speak only for my own.

I do think "art for art's sake" is gibberish. Art exists for people: it is transactional.

Without an audience there is no art; it doesn't take place. A book is never just a sheaf of paper with writing on it — it is the thoughts, images and reflections that pour through a human mind and it reads that writing. Thought, not ink, is the ultimate medium of the storyteller's art today: readers are supremely important to me.

So what are your responsibilities to those readers?

For a start "to give delight and hurt not". Then I have to deliver a tale that does not make them want to slit their own or their neighbour's wrists after reading it — something life-affirming. I have a basic agenda of simple ideas that crop up in my plots in varied ways, such as: to journey from the self to the other is an improvement. Truth is good to know. People are more important than things — including such things as "principles". People's insides are more important than their outsides. Abstractions such as governments and companies (and principles) are optical illusions which can no more have moral qualities or responsibilities than do volcanoes or holidays. Good and evil are only meaningful as a quality of individuals possessing free will — where they are supremely meaningful. And so on.

May I close by asking you a silly question about the Vor dynasties?

You wouldn't be the first. I was once asked whether I named them Vor because the word means thief in Russian. I said this was not intentional, but if true was very wonderful.

Damn, that was to have been my question. Lois, thank you!

BARBED WIRE Kisses

Edited by
Maureen Speller

Welcome to **Barbed Wire Kisses**, **Vector's** magazine review column. From now on I shall be assuming a more covert editorial role (though you've not seen the last of my reviewing) and allow some new reviewers to take the spotlight. First, please welcome Peter Tennant, reviewing some of the latest small press publications.

Halfway to Crazy

Peter Tennant

Publishing a magazine can be an arduous task, demanding of both time and money. New titles seldom last for more than a few issues yet there seem to be no shortage of people willing to have a go. While some may aspire to starting the next **Interzone** or **New Worlds**, most are simply engaged in a labour of love. Editor Alan Garside confesses a debt of gratitude to the small press and **Orion** is his attempt to repay it. The magazine looks good, with an eye-catching cover and some attractive interior illustrations, print which is easy on the eye, and an appealing layout. Full marks for presentation.

Orion bills itself as a magazine of speculative fiction but it's science fiction that predominates. The best story comes from Mark Haw, an accomplished small press performer who isn't afraid to experiment with different styles and narrative techniques. 'The Exorcist' is a poignant tale about a land where love is regarded as a form of demonic possession. It's beautifully written, evocative of mood and atmosphere, with deft characterisation and, on its own, is worth the price of admission.

Unfortunately, the other stories don't measure up. Too often good writing obscures

a vacuity of plot, as in Robert Frost's 'The Hourglass', a story of drifting sand dunes, amoral scientists and confused mental states, which seemed to be striving for Ballardian effects but which failed to engage my attention. Familiar ideas occur, such as time travellers altering history in Andrew C Ferguson's horrendously titled 'An Introduction to Earth's Western Civilisation Iconology (latter 20th)' or the mysterious advertisement that leads to another world in Enda Scott's 'The Man with Multiple Injuries', but nothing new is delivered and the reader is left wondering why the writer bothered.

Writers are understandably reluctant to offer a new magazine their best material, and **Orion** seems to have suffered from this reticence more than most. Perhaps, now they see that Alan Garside can do the business, he will receive better stories for the next issue.

The first issue of **Strange Attractor** sold out, so editor and publisher Rick Cadger has to be doing something right. However, gremlins have struck issue 2, which comes with an apology for the lack of interior illustrations and the prevalence of typos. Mike O'Driscoll's 'Doing the Duke' is especially plagued with the latter, but otherwise they aren't noticeable and the illustrations aren't missed. All things considered, **Strange Attractor** is well produced, if not quite as clean-cut or sturdy as **Orion**.

Rick Cadger shows a more eclectic editorial style than Alan Garside, publishing horror, fantasy, science fiction and slipstream. There's something for everyone though a reader with less than catholic tastes might be out of sympathy with a good deal of the magazine's contents. For instance, it is doubtful that anyone who dislikes horror will enjoy Paul E Pinn's 'The Darkest Veins', which begins with a woman receiving a

threatening letter from her estranged husband and continues, with all the irresistible momentum of a Greek tragedy, to its chilling climax. Equally, 'The Circle Garden' by P J L Hinder, a love story incorporating science fictional themes and written with a poet's eye for beauty and the rhythms of nature, won't do much for those who swear by Shaun Hutson.

None of the stories is going to be remembered as a classic, but I found something to reward the reading in each of them. There's a sense that the writers are at least trying to do something different with the same old tired themes and ideas. This is perhaps best exemplified by **Strange Attractor's** slipstream offering, 'Odd Man Out', by P G McCormack. Nothing much happens in this story. It's a straightforward account of Imogen's life, which is entirely uneventful except for two moments of horror, and even these don't seem to have touched her more than superficially. Yet the story did move me and I value its strangeness. **Strange Attractor** deserves support as a forum for such work.

R.E.M. seems to be targeted at the same audience as **Interzone**, and there is certainly an overlap of contributors. **R.E.M.'s** premier issue suffered from an acute case of trying to run before one had learned to walk. The publishers experimented with layout, typefaces and computer graphics in an attempt to give the magazine a hi-tech look, but the result was that most of the text pages appeared to have gone down with measles and readers were irritated by the intrusive illustrations. Matthew Dickens's story was needlessly marred by the printing of an illustration over half a column of text.

However, the publishers have learned their lesson and **R.E.M. no.2** is a much healthier-looking product. The illustrations are more varied than previously and this time they complement rather than obscuring the text. The use of computer graphics throughout helps to give the magazine a sense of identity, a hi-tech feel, as opposed to the more traditional production values of **Interzone**. I also liked the use of different typefaces though I can't recommend some to people with impaired vision.

Editor Arthur Straker pays well for stories so, in theory, he should have better fiction than **Strange Attractor** and **Orion**. Certainly, he has the more distinguished contributors, including Eric Brown, Garry Kilworth, Colin Greenland and Simon Ings. Like **Orion**, **R.E.M.** suffered from a dearth of good stories in its first issue, but that too has changed. Though **R.E.M.** claims to publish fantasy, the majority of stories in this issue have a science fictional rationale, with only an horrific one-pager, 'Jump From a Speeding Car' by Julie Travis, creeping across the genre boundaries.

Heading the fiction is Storm Constantine's novella 'Presentation', a fine piece of writing about religious and cultural imperialism that's an object lesson in pacific resistance. However, looking back, the story seemed contrived, as if the community depicted had no other purpose than to enable Constantine

to tell her story. Several of the stories suffered from this artificiality. Simon Ings imagines a future, in 'Witchy Miriam's Book', where human desires are gratified by alien technology but has little to say about the effect on human psychology or the motives of our alien benefactors. Both Andrew J Wilson and David Wingrove send explorers to distant planets but do the nothing of any great interest when they get there. These stories are well written and I enjoyed reading them but they have very little to say.

Perhaps the stories that work best are those presented simply as entertainment, such as Garry Kilworth's excellent 'My Lady Lydia', an alternative world story featuring Poe and Hawthorne; and Andy Darlington's 'Under Two Moons', a wonderful tongue-in-cheek romp that reads like a cross between **Forbidden Planet** and **Portnoy's Complaint**. I was disappointed by **R.E.M.** no. 1 but this issue left me hopeful that **Interzone** might yet have a serious rival, which would be a good thing for us all.

Back Brain Recluse started as a small booklet publishing fiction, similar in look and intent to **Strange Attractor**, but it has grown, over the years, into an A4 magazine that looks as professional as anything to be found on the shelves at W. H. Smith's. Along the way, editor Chris Reed has stuck to his philosophy of encouraging new talent and using the small press as an outlet for work too challenging for mainstream publishers.

There's a fine line between experimental fiction and incomprehensible garbage and he treads it with ease. He has a flair for picking good stories told in a different way, and despite all the editorial proselytising for slipstream work, he doesn't let the party line prevent him from printing more conventional fiction if it has merit. In this issue, there's Eva Hauser, and in the past **BBR** has published Stephen Baxter; you can't get more conventional than that.

'Expect the unexpected' is the rule with **BBR**'s fiction, a tenet best illustrated by the slices of 'Mugollon News' which appear throughout the magazine. Written by Uncle River who looks like a ZZ Top reject, these are delightfully absurd parodies of **Lake Wobegon Days**, reporting on events in a backwater of New Mexico. There's something so wonderfully surreal about finding these pieces in a magazine with 'cutting edge' pretensions and its this quality that makes **BBR** so exciting for the reader.

Truer to form is Roger Thomas' 'Photography is Not Permitted', a story exploring future developments in art, that's as fascinating for the way it's told as for the subject matter. Then there is Conrad Williams' 'Ancient Flowers', a beautifully written horror story which takes in cookery, sex and alien life-forms, or R V Branham's moving juxtaposition of commercialism and America's Vietnam experience in 'This is Your Life Kit'. Chris Reed takes risks, and sometimes things go wrong, as in the case of Tim Nickels's stream-of-consciousness piece,

'Born in the Forest', which I found totally incomprehensible, but more often than not the results are rewarding.

Regular readers of **BBR** will value the magazine just as much for its non-fiction content. **BBR Review**, now supplemented by a Directory of books, magazines and videos, continues Chris Reed's policy of making readers aware of mainstream alternatives, both at home and abroad; **BBR** is anything but parochial. The familiar names and the lack of all but the mildest criticism will provide ammunition for those who regard the small press as a clique, but there's still no denying **BBR**'s value as a source of information. If you want to know what's going on in the small press, this is where to find out. **BBR** is a magazine which has achieved cult status and deservedly so. It won't ever compete with **Interzone**, but it will appeal to those seeking an alternative to that magazine's philosophy and fiction.

Orion:
Alan Garside, 3 Bower Street, Reddish, Stockport, SK5 6NW
£1.75 per issue or £4.50 for a 3 issue subscription

Strange Attractor:
Rick Cudger, 111 Sandon Road, Houghton Regis, Beds, LU5 5NL, £2.00 per issue or £17.75 for a 4 issue subscription (cheques payable to "Strange Attractor")

R.E.M.:
R.E.M. Publications, 19 Sandringham Road, London, NW2 5EP, £2.35 per issue or £7.00 for a 4 issue subscription

BBR:
Chris Reed, PO Box 625, Sheffield, S1 3GY, £3.50 per issue or £11.00 for a 4 issue subscription (cheques payable to "BBR")

Almost Gold

Barbara Davies

Absoriginal, edited by Charles C Ryan, and published by The Second Renaissance Foundation, Inc., has been around since 1986 and has been twice nominated for a Hugo. Formerly a bimonthly, full colour, A4 magazine, it has recently changed to quarterly, black and white, because of the recession. Each issue is now a "special double issue", halving the same amount of fiction but halving the cost of the cover and cutting the postage for subscriptions. Circulation levels are currently around 22,000 copies, massive in UK terms, but too low to entice any major US magazine distributor. Rivalry with **Analog** and **Asimov's** also means the refusal of the discount subscription services to market

Absoriginal because it might diminish sales of the Davis magazines. In spite of all this, **RR** seems optimistic, and say the decisions about frequency and colour will be reconsidered in the near future.

Each issue contains about twelve short stories, and two poems. **Absoriginal** likes serious SF but also includes at least one amusing story per issue. It concentrates on new talent, but occasionally includes established authors. Recent names include Harlan Ellison, Frederik Pohl, Keith Brooke, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Gregory Benford, K D

Wentworth, Lawrence Watt-Evans and Lois Tilton. Every story is accompanied by commissioned art from regular artists like Larry Blamire, Carol Heyer and Charles Long.

There are the usual peripherals: an accessible science column, book reviews, letters, biographies and pictures of the contributors, a TV and film column, and Ryan's editorial. Unique to **Absoriginal** is a 'Message from our Alien Publisher', an alien's view of Earth (particularly the USA) and its inhabitants.

I first came across **Absoriginal** through the May 1991 **Interzone** swap issue. Even though its stories were not quite representative there were more big names, it was more downbeat than usual the contrast was marked. There is a straightforward, humorous, upbeat quality throughout **Absoriginal**, whereas with **Interzone** frequently the reverse is true.

Interzone 67 (January 1993) is a special Bob Shaw issue, containing a bibliography, two short stories 'Timer to Kill' and 'Alien Porn' (an extract from his forthcoming book **Warren Peace**), an interview by Helen Wake, a profile by Brian Stableford, and an excerpt from the forthcoming **How To Write SF**, complete with cartoons by Shaw himself. Smashing! The stories are classic Shaw: concise, vivid and amusing but unfortunately they signal their endings in advance. The interview concentrates too much on the interviewer, the bibliography reveals novels of which I was unaware, and the profile is interesting though rather pompous with its allusions to **Gulliver's Travels**. The excerpt from **How To Write SF** is fascinating, including advice on characterisation, names, aliens, weaponry etc., all topics already covered by similar books, but you want to dig your hand in your pocket yet again.

Besides the material by and about Shaw, **Interzone** includes three other short stories, the best being Stephen Blanchard's 'The Gravity Brothers'. What are the twin brothers up to next door, and why are they willing to purchase lead with gold nuggets? For seedy atmosphere and weirdness, Blanchard is unbeatable. Stephen Baxter's 'Pilgrim 7' asks, what if the nuclear exchange occurs while an astronaut is in orbit? The science rings true, as does the astronaut's reaction. 'The Dead' by M John Harrison and Simon Ings is a curious, atmospheric tale of a woman giving birth to something strange. **Interzone** seems to have had several of these lately.

Absoriginal 35 & 36 (September 1992) has twelve stories, too many to detail here. The longest and most exuberant is Richard K Lyon's 'The Secret Identity Diet', in which an unusual jogging outfit leads to a fat, middle-aged, balding clerk being mistaken for Lightningman. It's not really SF but reminiscent of superhero and detective comics. Paul C Shuytema's 'The Silver Abacus' is the genuine article, a poignant tale of a decaying civilisation, lost dreams, self-sacrifice and, eventually, hope for the future. 'Dead Sky

eyes', by John W Randal, is a brilliant combination of SF and western. With a protagonist reminiscent of the Yul Brynner cowboy in *Westworld*, it produces an unexpected yet satisfying ending. Other mentions go to 'Patterns of Little Gods', by Sharan Newman, for the weirdest use of DNA that I've seen, and to 'Rescue', by E H Wong, for a movingly tragic space opera.

John Clute continues to lead the *Interzone* book reviewers; his portentous style seems to be spreading to the others. Graham Andrews is the exception with his enthusiastic review of the latest *Sector General* novel. You either love or hate Clute, and you certainly need a dictionary (prognathously? tessitura?). In contrast, *Aboriginal's* regular reviewers, Schweitzer and Eisen, aim for clarity and provide a star rating system. I don't go along entirely with Schweitzer, though, he thinks it likely that "Robert A Heinlein was the greatest science fiction writer of all time."

Aboriginal's Alien Publisher asks: If McDonalds and Coca-Cola are the result of homogenised food, could Disneyism be the result of homogenised religion? Ryan's editorial discusses his magazine's philosophy: "Remember the tomatoes: to be truly literature, a story has to appeal to the common and elite alike". Roger Penrose's book *The Emperor's New Mind*, about artificial intelligence, is discussed in painstaking detail by the science column. The letters column seems full of requests for submission guidelines, and the film and TV column is unaccountably absent, though there is news concerning the cast of *Deep Space Nine*.

Interzone has little room for an editorial, and no letters. It wasn't until I reached the end of Nick Lowe's amusing comments about PHIZ (Pictures from *Interzone*) that I realised he doesn't review a single new film. Not bad going for a film column! **David Langford's** *Ansible Link* news column is the first thing I turn to each issue, and as good fun as ever.

A final illustration of the contrast between the two magazines is the inclusion in *Aboriginal* of 'The Curse', by Anthony R Lewis, a slight story about leprechauns and baseball. Had it been in *Interzone* it would surely have been about menstruation!

Darklands

Daniel Buck

In this review I'll be discussing the most recent issues of two magazines, *Dementia 13* no. 9 and *Peeping Tom* no. 8. In addition, I'll be taking a look at the first two issues of a newcomer on the scene, *Phantasy Province*.

All three titles sit most comfortably within the horror genre, although *Peeping Tom* should I consider SF stories if they are good enough. Of the issues before me, only *Phantasy Province* has what could be called an SF story, and that purely by virtue of it

being about a nuclear holocaust in Scotland, the other two zines each having only one story which could be defined as fantasy.

The two more established magazines both seem to be aiming for the same market, with a cross over of contributors, but *Peeping Tom* has just joined the New SF Alliance, so is presumably committed to publishing more SF-related material. Perhaps this is just the change it needs to revitalise the package. Back in issue 3, the magazine had 8 stories in 41 pages, whilst issue 8 has 9 stories within 47 pages, keeping the same format and using a slightly heavier cover. The fiction is good, as it always has been, but not brilliant. The whole reads easily and doesn't ask the reader to think too hard about the stories, the downside being that this can leave a certain emptiness when the cover is closed. We see the usual names, Des Lewis, Jack Pavay etc. writing stories that deserve to be published but which lack the sparkle to make them special. A seventeen year-old, Shane Greenaway, turned in the best piece; it's great to see there are still markets for new writers. Four workmanlike internal illustrations complete the equation and make *Peeping Tom* the typical small press magazine we have come to know and love, a reliable and enjoyable read.

Dementia 13 is altogether different; A4 in format, it places as much stress on the illustrations as writing, with 9 full page pictures and 13 smaller illustrations. This zine has come a long way since its third issue, which was typed, photocopied then stapled down the edge. The latest issue is well typeset and printed, with a card cover, and is exceedingly clear and readable. In addition to the twelve stories, there is a useful three page listing of current fanzines and we are promised a letters page and some non-fiction articles in future issues. The quality of the fiction is amazing, considering that the zine does not pay, although the clear layout does help the reader to enjoy the work even more. In *Peeping Tom*, we read the fiction, but here we absorb the atmosphere.

However, *Dementia 13* is not for everyone and Pam Creais, the editor, is not afraid to shock by printing stories of an explicit or erotic nature. Within this issue, we have biblical stories defiled, child murder, zombies, vampires and more murderers. As with any magazine, there are stories you don't understand and pictures that don't take your fancy, but here we have stories to reread again and again a man who carries his time around with him everywhere, when it loses it and one by Edward Rand, which I won't spoil for you. This is a magazine you will keep picking up to flick through and admire; and a special mention must go to Andrew Haigh, who has excelled himself by producing the best picture of a gate ever seen!

Phantasy Province is also trying to be different. The first issue has the editor playing with his DTP program and producing something

almost illegible in many cases. Issue 2 improves on this but why each story has to have a different typeface is beyond me. The launch issue looked trendy, with boxed borders on each page, and sketches inserted in the text; it shouted 'exciting' at the reader. The non-fiction was fine, with tales of the Mary Celeste, Peter Cushing, recent video reviews, jokes used as space fillers, all giving the zine a chatty and lively feel.

Unfortunately, the fiction was crap! Apart from the final and best story, none of the other five pieces, had a real story-line. For instance, 'An Enigma' seemed to be nothing more than an exercise in wish fulfillment and sexual perversion. In another story, a blind woman opened an envelope and read a telegram, whilst the spying intruder had to wait for her to make a noise before locating her. I couldn't help wondering if all the fiction was by the editor under pseudonyms.

Issue 2 brought an improvement in artwork, with Kerry Early supplying a full page lilo for each story, but the small sketches have disappeared, as have the jokes and video reviews, apparently by popular demand, leaving a zine that looks much more traditional. The fiction has also improved, although in most cases it still lacks plot and meaning. However, the final story convincingly described the feelings of a young boy when his parents are late in returning home, and wouldn't have been out of place in either of the other two magazines. I think this shows that once the submission base enlarges, we will see better and more challenging pieces in *Phantasy Province*.

If you're an avid reader of Asimov or McCaffrey, they you are unlikely to find these two magazines to your taste, but if you mix a little Ramsey Campbell into your reading, then you might consider reading some of the "Campbells of the future". For a bit of everything, visceral, gothic, subtle, erotic and classic, then *Dementia 13* is a must. *Peeping Tom* can be just as brutal at times, but has a much more predictable feel to it, as *Deep SF* used to, and offers value for money. However, *Phantasy Province* isn't worth £2.50 an issue at present. It reminds me of *Dementia 13* in its early days, so perhaps there is a rocky future for it, the only question being: are you prepared to support it through the first few issues and thus enable it to continue?

Dementia 13:
Pam Creais, 17 Pinewood Avenue, Sidcup, Kent, DA15 8BB.
£2.30 per issue or £7.50 for a 4 issue subscription (cheques made payable to "Pam Creais")

Peeping Tom:
David Bell, Yew Tree House, 15 Nottingham Road, Ashby de la Zouch, Leics, LE65 1DU. £1.95 per issue or £7.25 for a 4 issue subscription (cheques made payable to "David Bell")

Phantasy Province
PO Box 6, Frasnearburgh, AB43 5ZX. £2.50 per issue or £12.00 for 6 issue subscription (cheques made payable to "DBS")

And that's all for this time. Regrettably, there should have been a review of some of the digest magazines but this seems to have gone missing in the post. Normal service on

“Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us.”

This line from *Ecclesiasticus* seems rather apt with regard to Robert Silverberg’s experimental novel published in 1971. *Son of Man* most certainly deserves to be praised. The book begins and ends with biblical quotations (from *Matthew* and *Mark*). It is about our future, seen from a viewpoint so far removed that the furthest future is the remote past. Being written prior to the advent of political correctness, it is quite, well, male (despite sundry female metamorphoses). The manhood of protagonist Clay rises quite often in unshakeable affirmation. So this isn’t really a case of praising famous *persons*, and our parents that begat us. But belay this caveat. Times change. That’s what the novel is all about — the changes wrought by time, the endless changes wrought by time without end.

Son of Man is perhaps the most remarkable of the clutch of passionately felt and intensely crafted novels (*Downward to the Earth*, *The Book of Skulls*, *Dying Inside*, and such) which Silverberg generated in a seeming white heat in the very late 60s and early 70s. Thereafter, disillusioned with the crass mediocrity of the SF marketplace upon which he launched these, yes, masterpieces, he retired to devote his energies to his cactus garden. Subsequently, of course, he bounced back with broad-canvas science fantasies (*Lord Valentine’s Castle*, and onward) which appeared perfectly to said marketplace.

And previous to his harrowed and exalted period, Silverberg had been one of SF’s most prolific and smoothest word-spinners.

Snatched by the time-flux, a man of our own time who chooses the name Clay awakes in an era when our utterly distant descendants have mutated into beings of godlike power, and quests across an altered Earth towards a transcendent and redemptory climax. Clay’s erratic companions are lotus-eating, sex-shifting “Skimmers” who can dissociate and gird the Earth or fly to Jupiter in ecstatic but perhaps shallow appreciation. Other varieties of future human being are less immediately endearing, though all have viewpoints which are at once vast yet ultimately narrow. Clay undergoes metamorphoses and conversions. The changing environment itself alters him physically and metaphysically. Peppery water fills him with keen expansive sadness, gifting him with a new means of perception.

Metaphysical weariness grips him as he trudges through a zone known as Old, where everything becomes achingly ancient. (Other zones are Dark, and Empty, and such.) New primary colours induce aching new emotions.

All this, of course, is the territory of David Lindsay’s wondrous metaphysical other-world of 1920, *A Voyage to Arcturus*. (New bodily states produce new moral perceptions; the sun Alpin radiates new primary colours; eldritch magic transforms reality; capricious new species arise from

Compass Points

5 Son Of Man

by Robert Silverberg

Recommended
by
Ian Watson

rivers of life-force, only to evaporate.) Whereas Lindsay’s was a dour Calvinistic spiritual quest despite all the extravagances, Silverberg’s — all be it periodically anguished — is more Californian. (“Why limit yourself? Accept experience as it comes.”) Or so it seems, for a while. Lindsay’s watchword was *duty*. Silverberg’s best slogan is *love*. So it seems for a while.

Add a great, pulsing dollop of decor by Hieronymus Bosch (or visualize an animated version of Dougal Dixon’s *After Man* and *Man After Man*. Plus a Stapledonian soaring, and just a touch of the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. Then serve with consummate lyrical grace, which is Silverberg’s *métier*. Such is this 213-page text (Ballantine, 1971) which seems written in a single breath.

Lindsay (so some complain) is rough-edged and writes with a cudgel. Silverberg is panache incarnate. His speed-writing skills from his old pulp days have led to a kind of sublimity — though the ingrained tricks of the trade are still present, particularly the Thesaurus ploy.

One chuckles (or groans, or begs for mercy) at Lionel Fanthorpe’s rhetorical barrage, when an infuriated character rages and fumes and steams and boils and froths and paws in furious choleric ire like a maddened goaded and terminally provoked bull beholding a matador’s cape *et cetera*, for half a page or so.

Here is Silverberg: “Night is coming on. The waters hurry. He is dismembered, disintegrated, dispersed, dissected, disjoined,

dissociated, disunited, disrupted, divorced, detached, divided...” And a few pages later “The sun rises and sets and rises and sets... Time does not pass. Not-minute flows into not-minute, and the not-minutes mount into un-hours, which pile into anti-days and contra-weeks and non-months, and these into the antitheses of years and the converse of centuries.” Yet such is the passionate flow of *Son of Man* that such tics of logorrhoea are bootstrapped into a tool of vision. Indeed the whole novel is in essence incantatory. It’s a banquet of strangeness, not a surfeit. A lyrical fugue-fest. A scintillating visionary cadenza amidst the more narrative-structured (though still intense) novels which Silverberg was generating at that period.

And Clay’s manhood rises now and again — perhaps a little more often than that. It rises. Fiery jets of jssom trumpet across the cosmos — although Clay experiences some deep qualms when he is conjugated into a woman and penetrated. Eventually a phallic column of light arises, with which Clay becomes one, to experience the whole evolutionary history of Homo past and future, which in itself can be but a mere prologue to even stranger futurity. In the final rapturous hymn he becomes the world’s redeemer, taking into himself all the anguish of existence, which he alchemizes into affirmation. “He is man, and he is Son of man, and the dream is over.” Unfortunately this mightn’t have quite the same buzz if he was offspring of person.

Let us now praise.
Celebrate. Honour. Acclaim.

The Machineries Of HOKUM, In Space Opera & Elsewhere By Norman Beswick

It was Melissa Scott's 'Silence Leigh' trilogy that started me off. I began noticing, all over again, how characters in sf stories managed to get around the cosmos. The spaceships in Scott's trilogy surprised me; but were they any more remarkable (I asked myself) than those I'd blithely taken for granted ever since I first discovered **Astounding** on a Woolworth counter in the early 1940s? What was Melissa Scott telling me about sf? I began foraging through my shelves; I couldn't look at everything but it might be worth having another browse through space opera; and (with the occasional detour) this sent me out on a short foray into fantasy as well.

Space opera can sometimes be very casual and off-hand about its theoretical under-pinning: space ships "drop into subspace", pilots "switch on the over-drive" or plunge with scant information into the centre of black holes, and mostly end up precisely where they intended and amazing distances from where they were. (They rarely seem to run out of fuel, either, unless I've missed something.)

Usually it doesn't matter much. But some authors make a point of seeing that we think we're kept well informed. An early example is E. E. Doc Smith's **Lensman** series. Bergenholm develops the 'inertialless drive', and in **Galactic Patrol** Smith explains:

With the neutralization of inertia it was discovered that there is no limit whatever to the velocity of inertialless matter. A free ship takes on instantaneously the velocity at which the force of drive is exactly equalled by the friction of the medium.

At first the Patrol ships zoom along with atomic motors, but the Boskonians "solved the problem of the really efficient reception and conversion of cosmic radiation", so that they could use atomic motors "simply as first-stage exciters for the cosmic-energy screens". By the time we reach **Grey Lensman**, such

technology fairly whizzes our hero to Lundmark's Nebula:

Their speed was therefore about a hundred thousand parsecs per hour; and even allowing for the slowing up at both ends due to the density of the medium, the trip should not take over ten days.

A parsec (as we all know, don't we?) is 3.26 light years, and travelling 326,000 light years per hour is, by any definition, quite fast; but even at this breathless pace he needn't watch the fuel gauges too nervously:

[...] The power situation, which had been his gravest care [...] was even better than anyone had dared to hope; the cosmic energy available in space had actually been increasing as the matter content decreased.

One might wonder by how much and how he could possibly collect enough of it, but over one hundred and fifty words of description, with a reassuringly technological flavour, follow to point our attention elsewhere.

James Blish, was equally meticulous (no more, no less) in the **Cities in Flight** quartet, where interstellar travel is accomplished by means of the 'spindizzy', explained by Senator Wagoner in the first story, as a consequence of the Blackett-Dirac equations:

They show a relationship between magnetism and the spinning of a massive body — that much is the Dirac part of it. The Blackett equation seemed to show that the same formula also applied to gravity; it says G equals (CP/BU) .

And more impressive sci-tech exposition leads Wagoner to the daunting remark, "I won't bother to trace the succeeding steps, because I think you can work them out for yourself." (Gulp!) The effects of the 'spindizzy' (so called "because of what it does to the magnetic movement of any atom — any atom — within its field") are at their most remarkable in deep space:

... well, it's impervious to meteors and such trash, of course; it's impervious to gravity; and — it hasn't the faintest interest in any legislation about top speed limits. It moves in its own continuum, not in the general frame.

Later volumes indeed describe fast voyages across stunning distances, even with faulty equipment rapidly deteriorating (a 'bum spindizzy' on Forty-Second Street).

Many decades later, Joan D. Vinge was carefully explaining the Black Gate:

Between the outer reality of the universe she knew and the inner one of the singularity lay a zone where infinity was attainable, where space and time changed polarity and it was possible to move between them unimpeded by the laws of normal space-time. This strange limbo was riddled by wormholes, by the primordial shrapnel wounds of the universe's explosive birth and countless separate corpses of dying stars. With the proper tools a starship could leap like thought from one corner of known space to another.

These examples were chosen more or less at random, and readers will be able to produce their own additions to the list. They have three points in common. They are fairly incidental to the story but 'explain' how their characters move from X to Y quickly enough for convenience of the plot. They introduce reassuring scientific and technological jargon to help us to suspend our knowing disbelief. And finally — although this is no adverse criticism and doesn't matter a jot to the effectiveness of the tale — they are pure hokum; by which I mean that they are literary constructions of a high prestidigitatory kind and represent, not just a change from present possibilities but a change in the very nature of our universe as we currently conceive it. (If you need further explanation as to why, consult the entry under **FASTER THAN LIGHT** in **Nicholls' Encyclopedia of Science Fiction**, 1979)

The Transports Of Silence Leigh

Which brings me to Silence Leigh, space pilot — and a woman, an unhelpful thing to be in the male-dominated universe of the Hegemony: she makes up a threesome on the *Sun-Treader* with Balthasar and Chase Mago, who work for the pirate group Wrath of God. Melissa Scott's trilogy telling her story reads like any good standard space opera, with intrigue and politics, chases and disasters, dilemmas, transformations and escapes: an entertaining, gutsy read.

But, as you'd expect from a Campbell Award-winner, Melissa Scott is very specific about how pilots like Silence Leigh operated:

The essential parts of a starship were the sounding keel and the harmonium. The keel was made of a base metal impregnated with the Philosopher's Tincture, the only celestial substance that could exist in the mundane world. The tincture in the keel always sought to return to the transcendent, non-material world — heaven — beyond apparent reality, but was bound down by the material substances with which it was surrounded.

The key to the use of this surprising Tincture is even more remarkable:

Only under stimulus from the harmonium, which was tuned to as close an approximation of the music which ruled heaven as was humanly possible, could the tincture rise towards heaven, first fleeing the elemental earth of the planet's core [etc.]...
In the void between the stars, where

barriers between the 'mundane' and the 'celestial' are thinned, the ship passes into 'purgatory', presumably the intermediate area surrounding 'heaven' as in medieval explanations of Christian theological space; but theologians didn't describe anything like this:

Time and space twisted, doors opened and the ships passed between the stars in minutes rather than in hundreds of years.

The technology that pushes the spaceships also works in other areas. Security in this society is operated by spells cast by a magus, locks are 'tuned' by a pitch-pipe, and so on: all carefully logical within the story's context. Apart from that, the Silence Leigh trilogy shows a space-hopping interstellar society in which readers of space opera from the *Skylark* series onwards will be, if not entirely at home, at least not greatly disconcerted.

It is, of course, hokum again. This time it is *not* cast in the language of science, or at least, not in anything matching the predictions of science-so-far, (but see my reference to the Nichol's *Encyclopedia*). This will only upset those readers with a simplistic Gernsbackian definition of what sf is or (oh deary me) 'should be'. Wells' Favorite was not science either, as Verne famously complained; nor did Doc Smith offer any scientific basis for those telepathic lenses supplied to Kimball Kinnison and his colleagues by the wondrous Arisians.

The famous Arthur C. Clarke comment, that any sufficiently advanced future science would to us be indistinguishable from magic, is relevant as far as it goes. What we notice about Scott's 'magic' is that it is tightly consistent and linked to a terminology and system of thought we know about and assume we can check back on. It was creatively re-thought for the story, not simply made up as she went along to plug holes in the plot. And she throws in a few bits of scientific-sounding twentieth-century jargon ("Time and space twisted...") to reassure us.

But equally, despite using the names of two areas of theological space, and assumptions made at a time when religious ideas were located 'out there', Melissa Scott's technology is *not* religious, either. Silence has clearly been trained in various techniques of meditation, and as the trilogy swings along she develops into the first woman magus, with suitably impressive psychic abilities, but these are entirely technological in motivation and function. Her behaviour (including her moral behaviour) remains unaltered; she shows no great interest in what if anything lies behind her skills, nor any special insight into supposedly deeper truths, like salvation and divine purpose. She fights, intrigues and manoeuvres for herself and her own, and most readers will (in a space opera context) like her the better for it.

The keel and the harmonium, with the theory that accompanies them, serve to reassure us: the author is playing fair, she know how things work, she can get us across interstellar distances in a rationally acceptable way. They may not be today's science, but we guess she knows that; and at the same time



they add interest and colour to the story:

The deck steadied underfoot, though she could still feel it trembling, and the blurred star dust faded slightly. A line appeared in the haze ahead of the ship, faint at first, then growing solid. Colors ran along its length, black to white to peacock-blue to royal purple, strobing away from her in great waves of light that also carried the sound of heaven to blend with the keeling in glorious diapason.

Blindly, Silence turned Recusante onto that brilliant pathway, feeling the ship's trembling ease further.

Magic And Fantasy

James Blish of course did a very similar thing in his *Black Easter* fantasy novels, which (as I commented in *Foundation 42*) depend on our accepting a mixture of modern science and black magic: or as magician Theron Ware puts it, "the sciences don't accept that some of the forces of nature are Persons. Well, but some of them are." Baines the arms merchant soon comments:

Demons, saucers, fallout — what's the difference? Those are just signs in the equation, parameters we can fill in any way that makes the most intermediate sense to us.

So when, in the second volume, Ware crosses the Atlantic on a broomstick, Blish comments with a straight face, "in some aspect beyond the reach of his senses, the fight was taking place only partially in real time". Magic throughout is portrayed as systematic and described with careful scientific-sounding terminology ('equation', 'parameters'). We even have an up-dated description of demons:

'We know that they are not energy,' Stavie said. 'They may well be fields, falling somewhere within the electro-magneto-gravitic triad. Remember that we have never achieved a unified field theory; even Einstein repudiated his in the last years of his life, and quantum mechanics — with all respects to De Broglie — is only a clumsy avoidance of the problem. These...spirits...may be such unified fields. And one characteristic of such fields might be 100 per cent

negative entropy.'

'There couldn't be any such thing as completely negative entropy,' Buegl put in. 'Such a system would constantly accumulate order, which means it would run backwards in time and we would never be aware of it at all. You have to allow for Planck's Constant.'

And as they are talking, invaders from American military might are toppling before the demonic defences of Dis, Dante's very Hell itself.

This is very different from how things are described in most other fantasy, even the kind of fantasy that gets classified all too often as 'science fiction'. In C. J. Cherryh's *Chronicles of Morgaine*, different worlds and spaces are linked by Gates set up in the unimaginable far past; Morgaine sets out on her great horse Siptah and carrying her only weapon Changing, in a quest to find and seal the Gates, but we never learn how they work nor does it matter very much to the story. The same is true of the Doors in Sheri S. Tepper's recent *Raising the Stones*, a novel with an intriguing religious theme that itself deserves closer scrutiny.

In Philip Jose Farmer's *Maker of Universes*, first of the *World of Tiers* series, Robert Wolff is looking over a new house with a view to purchase, and hears music through the closet doors:

The ghost of a trumpet call wailed from the other side of the doors. The seven notes were faint and far off, ectoplasmic in tone of a phantom of silver, if sound could be the stuff from which shades are formed.

He opens the doors, and finds an entrance to another world, but is at first reluctant to enter. A man in buckskin garment greets him, sees his hesitation, throws him the horn and says he hopes to see him soon. When later Wolff finds the courage to blow the horn himself, he is able to step through. No further explanation, scientific-sounding or otherwise, is either offered or necessary.

Some authors make a try but bungle it. In C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*, for instance, there is a perfunctory early attempt to give the story an sf veneer, as when Weston answers a question on how they are travelling to Malacandra:

'As to how we do it — I suppose you mean how the space-ship works — there is no good your asking that. Unless you were one of the four or five real physicists now living you couldn't understand; and if there were any chance of your understanding you wouldn't be told. If it makes you happy to repeat words that don't mean anything — which is, in fact, what unscientific people want when they ask for an explanation — you may say we work by exploiting the less observed properties of solar radiation.'

Good try, if a little odd (and isn't the methodology of space travel a question for technologists rather than physicists?); but it doesn't last. Lewis hasn't thought through what he is describing. Quite soon in the journey, Ransom is (I kid you not) cooking meals and washing dishes, drying his hands on a roller towel... we begin to boggle. The journey (which Weston has undertaken before) will take 'about' twenty-eight days; we wonder why the imprecision and what might slow them down, but we suspect Lewis has no idea. The spaceship has many rooms, though they are apparently not carrying enough

oxygen to allow much talking (what about the cooking, and what happens to the carbon dioxide they breath out?). Yet when they land, on another planet, amazingly there's air of the appropriate mix and at just the right density — though "it seemed a little rough to the back of his throat". Lewis betrays his lack of understanding; the book improves as soon as it stops pretending to be sf and the fantasy element takes over. Indeed, it is appropriate it should, for Lewis's books (whatever their other qualities) are in fact *anti-science* fiction.

Yet More Elaborate Hokum

Not so Ian Watson's *God's World*, where the spaceship is carrying the multi-national team across twenty light years to their supposedly sacred destination planet circling 82 Eridani. It moves through 'High Space', as opposed to 'secular space', travelling in 'a different mode of reality'. A character speculates:

"So there exist various ways of speaking about experience, is that? Each may have validity. Each may be necessary. Yet they may be mutually exclusive. Well then, the choice we make determines the reality. Whether, for instance, light is a wave or a series of particles. Now it is one, now it is the other. Thought constructs this. Time is a construct of thought, too. In High Space this is all more nakedly obvious, is it not? Space isn't a thing. As Kant said, it is one of the forms through which we organise our perception of things. So we can travel through High Space by organising things differently." (etc)

And just in case we think this is all a bit philosophical, the speaker finally concludes:

"...Possibly, for beings sufficiently advanced such a journey might take no time at all... I've been thinking up some equations along these lines."
Nothing like equations to make it all splendidly scientific.

The copulations of Peter and Amy in Watson's novel play an important part in all the processes. Orgasmic experience plays an even more striking role in Norman Spinrad's eloquent *The Void Captain's Tale*. Here he describes the theory behind 'The Jump':

A psycho-electronic theory of the Jump more or less exists. In psychosonic orgasm, the electronic hologram in four-space that is the Pilot's psyche becomes co-extensive with the space-time hologram that is the total eternal universe, existing in this hypothetical Jump space for a literally timeless moment co-extensive with eternity itself. The vector co-ordinate overlay somehow serves as an 'anchor' to four-space, pulling Pilot and ship back into what we are pleased to call 'the universe', several light years more or less along the computed vector.

Or so we are taught at the Academy.
And what actually happens during Jump?

When I touched the command point, the Primer circuit would boost the Pilot's nervous system into total psychosonic platform orgasm; simultaneously, the Harmoniser would sync the Jump auras with this psycho-electronic configuration, the Jump Circuit computer would overlay this combined field with the vector co-ordinates, and —
— the ship Jumps.

A chaster-sounding version comes from Orson Scott Card in *Xenocide*, where instantaneous travel is achieved by hopping

outside the universe altogether into 'unreal realspace' and then hopping back again. Reassuringly, it is also explained by reference to *quantum entanglement*:

"...I'm going to have to spend some time with Jane on it, to do the really tight calculations and run some simulations, but if the Hive Queen's right and there's a space so universally adjacent to our space that photons can pass into our space from the other space at any point, and if we postulate that the passage can go the other way, and if the Hive Queen is also right that the other space contains photons just as ours does, only in the other space — call it Outside — the photons aren't organized according to natural law, but are instead just possibilities, then here's what might work —"

The reader is now assumed to be ready to accept:

"Here's how we do it. Instead of trying to physically move all the particles that compose the starship and its passengers and cargo from Star A to Star B, we simply conceive of them all — the entire pattern, including the human contents — existing, not inside, but Outside. At that moment, all the photons that compose the starship and the people in it disorganize themselves, pop through into the Outside, and reassemble themselves there according to the familiar pattern. Then we do the same thing again, and pop back Inside — only now we're at Star B. Preferably a safe orbiting distance away."

Scattering the pages with words and phrases like 'atoms', 'molecules', 'structures', 'a philotic organization', 'our space', 'Card skilfully budgeons the reader into bemused acceptance that his characters have found a scientific way to get somewhere by wishing.

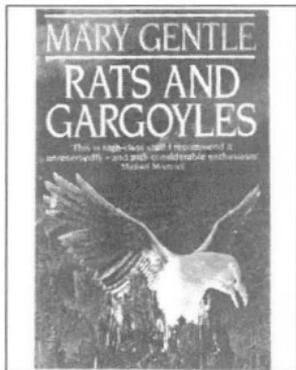
The Reassurance Of Hokum

To call all this 'hokum' would perhaps sound unnecessarily disrespectful in the pages of a journal more pretentiously solemn than this one. To many of us surely the hokum is part of what hooked us into sf in the first place, and we enjoy it while the story's other levels work their will upon us. It is a device that assures us of two things: first, that we are indeed reading of a logically constructed world, neither our current reality nor an uneducated fantasy; second, that the author in describing that world is effecting the necessary changes in a way that pays homage to our scientific understanding, even if in the process we know we are being agreeably hoodwinked.

The wide range of examples chosen (and most readers can provide many others) show that the device doesn't have to be scientifically copper-bottomed; most sf (and all space opera) is taking the imagination out for a romp. But we must be provided with a quick fix of well-deployed jargon that diverts our attention away from its own hidden problems. That is why the device can be Silence Leigh with her harmonium and keel riding through purgatory; or the Pilot with her psychosonic orgasms in Spinrad's tale (where in fact the concept of the Jump is central to the whole fabrication).

And doubtless the same reasoning applies to Mary Gentle's use of Hermetic magia in

Rats and Gargoyles. It seems to hang together well, and the author carefully preempted any reader-misgivings; she listed twenty-three impressive source books in her 'short' reading list — though I can't say more as (how can I put it?) I haven't quite finished reading all of them yet. Have you?



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Artificial realities are all the rage these days, with SF's cyberspace, computer games, a repeat showing for last year's Royal Institution Christmas Lectures, which allowed Richard Dawkins to show off an artificial reality (how many of you spotted Douglas Adams being weighed?), NASA modelling space, architects modelling virtual buildings and many other applications.

In 'Cyberzone' (BBC2, Mondays 6.50pm), DEFIL viewers were presented with a game set in an artificial reality. Little hype had been offered on its behalf so suspicious viewers were expecting half-baked ideas and a dodgy concept. They were right.

The tone was unremittingly macho. All four contestants were men, as was presenter Craig Charles, who had escaped from the set of Red Dwarf, and a computer character (confusingly, a real actor against a computer backdrop) intended to be an internal gamesmaster. Team one was the sporting Fashanu brothers, representing the extreme of competitive fundamentalism, while team two were chaps from the Dangerous Sports Club, representing the extreme of masculine inadequacy; in other words a sort of Clough versus Rambo combination. To top this, there was a manly western flavour; Craig Charles wore an unbelievable frilled black leather creation, more suited to the Rocky Horror Picture Show, while the internal GMaffected white suit, shades and a stoneman, making him look like the manager of ZZ Top. Unreal.

A second problem was that the game mechanics simply did not come up to scratch. In a fast virtual reality, there would be much scope for excitement and interest; but the technology is not yet available. Much of the contestants' time was spent fiddling with the running, moving and pointing apparatus, with Craig Charles giving such encouragement as 'run that way, no left a bit, right a bit', etc; no time for tactics or thought. This is like Carol Vordermann on 'Countdown' instructing contenders to 'sharpen your pencil, turn your calculator on now, and then just press the C button...'

The quality of the computer graphics was fair; in places glimpses could be had of interesting images. The games were inane, reminiscent of 'The Crystal Maze' without the occasionally witty, harmonica playing host. Also the bald one never tells his players how to play the individual games, whereas Craig Charles has to because they are so unnatural.

Meanwhile, on 'Reportage' (BBC2 6.1.93), 6.50pm), also as part of DEFIL, the nature of the down-side of artificial reality and our video/computer/TV culture was depicted. Shying away from calling video games addictive (I suppose that would have been a bit radical) there was instead plenty on Japanese techno-obsession, computer pornography distributed on disk in schoolyards, alienated young boys with square eyes, etc. Had this serious material been presented on *Horizon* it would have been frightening; as it was, jazzed up with computer imagery, it was merely scary. One young researcher summed it up: 'People

Insight

DO NOT ADJUST YOUR REALITY

By Stephen Palmer

in computer culture become estranged from their emotions.' It is this vicarious, interaction-at-a-distance aspect that is dangerous for us.

But artificial reality has a more serious side, as evinced by Howard Rheingold's recent book, *Virtual Reality* (Mandarin Paperbacks £6.99). This 415 page tome tells the reader everything they could want to know about artificial reality in 1992. If this sounds a bit sarcastic, the book could have been half as long if Rheingold had chopped out the matey descriptions of friends and the techno-business verbiage.

Starting with garden-shed post-war stereotypes Rheingold plots the course of invented realities, from film and prisms, through personal computers, to modern VR's. This overview is thorough.

There follow descriptions of computer-aided design, flight simulators, and modern VR. Then, on page 215, the book becomes more interesting. It is here that the author starts relating the whole VR concept to actual people. In particular, he notes that VR is the ultimate in communications technology, and it is in communication that human beings find themselves and one another. But such thoughts, and the understanding of dictatorship-by-persuasion and by secrecy that goes with it, imply long-term planning if VR is to be put to proper use, and Rheingold is aware that in our short-sighted, capitalist society there is little chance of anything long-term. The forlorn last line of the book reads, 'Let us hope it (VR) will be a new laboratory of the spirit — and let's see what we can do to steer it that way.'

The most convincing parts of this book come in those sections that deal with something far removed from the glittering visual treats we are so used to: our senses of movement and touch. The author has been in many artificial realities, and has noticed that, however disguised, people can be recognised by the way they move; a friend disguised as a walking lobster can still be recognised. Observations such as this allow the author to develop his ideas about the future 'high-bandwidth' possibilities of VR, by which he means all the subtleties of gesture, posture, facial movements and so on that mere verbal communication cannot deal with because it is too shallow. Here, perhaps, it is evidence that computer interaction is not entirely vicarious and shallow.

On a similar tack, the chapter describing

Margaret Minsky's work on simulating sensations of touch is fascinating because it sounds so TRUE. Howard Rheingold, having had his hand attached to touch simulator, felt extraordinarily real sensations, such as that of a screwdriver running over sandpaper, or of a pencil in a bucket of ice. These seemed to him more real than the most exciting of visual jaunts: evidence that modern culture with its overload of image and word, has lost touch with physicality and sensuousness. (Is it an accident that one of our synonyms for 'emotions' is 'feelings'?). Margaret Minsky's haptic illusions prove that our internal realities, our models of external reality are based more in feeling and sensing than in image, word or computation.

The author is also aware of the social consequences of artificial realities: 'VR vividly demonstrates that our social contract with our own tools has brought us to a point where we have to decide what it is we as humans ought to become, because we are on the brink of creating any experience we desire.' If, as the author suspects - like J.G. Ballard on the back cover - VR will allow us to define the most fundamental human concepts, such as reality, identity, community, and then the 'looming Faustian bargain' must be thought through with great wisdom.

I read the book on holiday in Wales, and at the same time had my first exposure to Sonic the Hedgehog. All I can say is that it bodes ill for VR that Sega, Nintendo and the rest, not to mention Cyberzone, are what the public experiences of computer realities. *Horizon* ought to follow the example of 'Reportage'

All the new technology in our imperfect society has virtues and drawbacks. What is perhaps most worrying about VR and computer technology is an increasing remoteness felt as human beings withdraw from the real world, and plunge themselves into artificial realities made by the infantile for the infantile. We are divorcing our minds from our sensing, bodily selves.

Dreams are ephemeral because it would be a disaster for any conscious mind to have difficulty in distinguishing them from reality. The issue is: should we not attend to problems in the real world before risking permanent VR nightmares?

SHOCK of the NEW

Edited by Chris Amies Farewell!

The increasing pressure of other commitments has reduced the amount of time I have available for **Vector**, so that regretfully, I have decided to resign. I have enjoyed editing this column, and will continue to appear as a reviewer. I never did an introductory paragraph for myself in the pages of **Vector**, and only once did a photo appear of me (a good one though, I will say that, thank you Catie). And now that I've resigned from the post of Reviews Editor (later, Hardback Reviews Editor), I suppose it's time to come clean with a kind of summing-up.

I was born in 1960 under the sign of Scorpio (whose inbuilt secretiveness may suggest why I never did this piece before). I was born in London, and have lived in Hammersmith since 1981 apart from half-years spent in Bordeaux, Barcelona (long before the Olympic Games and Catalan nationalism made it untenable) and Thessaloniki. My field of study was languages, culminating academically in a degree in French and Spanish, though I hardly get the chance to use them any more. I work at present for the Department of the Environment, answering people's computer queries, though by the time this piece appears that may have changed as I am pushing hard for a move back from the front line. There seems to be an assumption that those who work with computers in some way prefer computers to people. Would you really believe that a fridge repairman prefers fridges to people? No, it's a job. At the time I joined the Civil Service they were looking for programmers, so I thought I'd try that for size.

My interest in SF began at school, when I used to peruse the school library for all and any SF books, and haunt the stacks of the

libraries of my home suburbs looking for the Gollancz yellow spines of our yesterdays. I didn't start writing it in earnest until 1988 when I decided to go on an Arvon Foundation course. I looked at the prospectus to see what closest resembled the pieces I was writing, and decided it was SF. Iain Banks and Lisa Tuttle, as tutors, took care of the rest. I've never really written down-the-line SF as I just don't know enough about science. The science works in the universes I am describing, even if I don't know how!

My published stories include one in **The Gate** (an Arvon workshop sports-SF piece that was snarfed up immediately), ones in **Dream** (21st-century North Africa, biocomputers and insider dealing) and **Auguries** (2001 meets Quatermass IV in darkest Devon), and one each in the Roc series **The Weerde** (a kind of Western duke-out set in Franco's Spain) and **Eurotemp**s (Talented lager lout gets in trouble with the Greek drug barons). Most of my reading these days is political stuff but I do get the occasional burst of reading SF from time to time. I like Ian Watson, Brian Aldiss, Iain M Banks, John Crowley, Samuel R Delany, Tom Disch, Mary Gentle, Colin Greenland, M John Harrison, Ian McDonald... anyone who mixes it with the outer edges of the real.

I don't write very quickly, usually at weekends or whenever I can take a break from the day job. Trade Union work or whatever else is going on. For the technically minded: I have a Ness 386sx PC running MS Works 2 and StarWriter 6. I also have a Psion Series 3 palmtop (a real portable: it fits into an inside jacket pocket) which can download text to the PC. This is truly useful for writing on trains, in bed, and so on, because you don't always have your best ideas while sitting before the computer console.

My hopes for the future? Less pain, more love, the downfall of capitalism, the abolition of the Royal Family (next time it won't be Windsor.

It'll be Buck House!)... the usual things. I leave **Vector's** Shock of the New column in Catie's capable hands for now until she finds a replacement for me. I'd just like to say thank you, it's been surreal, and what happened to the graffe in a top hat playing the pianola?

Isaac Asimov
& Robert Silverberg
The Positronic Man

Gollancz, 1992, 223pp, £14.99

Reviewed by Pete Darby

There are some books, this being one, where a feeling of *déjà vu* permeates even the dust jacket blurb. No, I'm not talking about the fact that this is another Silverberg adaptation of an old Asimov Hugo-winning short ('Bicentennial Man', 1976); but, well, listen to this: artificial human spends all his 'life' trying to be human. I spent half the novel waiting for him to tell a lie and for his nose to grow... So, it's not new. Is it any good? Well, cards on the table, I like neither of these authors, so I was ready to hate this. It was actually far less painful than expected, at times reminiscent of Daniel Keyes' **Flowers for Algernon**. However, neither author is exactly renowned for their depth of characterisation, and this novel is no exception to this failing. For all but the central character (Andrew Martin), this is due to a structural problem, i.e. the book covers two hundred years in just over that many pages. The supporting players strut and fret not so much their hour as their minute on stage and then are heard no more. Having acted as either a mouthpiece or an illustration for a certain argument, they then die to point out what Andrew has that they don't. Few are seen often enough to engage sympathy, and those that are seen become less sympathetic the more I saw them.

Andrew becomes fixated on becoming human, never quite achieving any further dimension to his character. 'Little Miss', who christens Andrew and prompts his first efforts towards humanity, is not engaging, as she seems intended to be, but annoying little prig from the age of 8 to her death, which comes as a blessed relief to all, including the reader. Since these are the two central characters, you can imagine that compared to this, 'Eldorado' is a penetrating insight into the human condition.

Well, to an extent, so what? This is primarily an ideas novel, a vehicle for Zac and Bob's meditations on freedom and the nature of humanity. No real excuse for skimming over character (Philip K Dick managed ideas and people in one novel), and even the ideas go undeveloped (as when the idea is raised that, given full human rights, robots could sue their makers under the US Constitution for infringing their liberty with the Three Laws), or are left unraised (as in the case of whether refusing to complete the construction of a sentient robot is synonymous with abortion) if they threaten the

servile, safe ambitions of the dull Andrew Martini.

We'll let that pass; as a philosophy graduate, these niggly questions are my bread & butter, and may not interest someone who just wants a story with a beginning, middle and end, which this delivers, as well as a refreshing angle on Asimov's US Robots & Mechanical Men, here the 'villain' of the piece for a change, behaving more like a real monopolistic multinational than I've seen them before. Susan Calvin would turn in her grave...

It's not bad; but it's also not long enough to be the philosophical blockbuster it wants to be, nor the short one-idea story it used to be. It's either a wasted opportunity, a plodding, bloated short story, or, let's face it, an attempt to cynically keep the supply of the good doctor Asimov's work ready for the market after his demise.

Clive Barker The Thief of Always

Harper Collins, 1992, 229pp, £9.99
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Clive Barker is a taste I never acquired. **The Books of Blood** I found banally stomach churning. Since then he has become a movie cult, though my life is too short for his kind of movie.

What about **The Thief of Always**? For a start it is *short*, at about 35000 words, and if I am expected to hand over a tenner they must be very good words. Sadly, these well assembled words are used to tell a trifling little story about an unsympathetic protagonist and a villain who is as scaring as Andy Pandey.

Harvey Swick is a bored young lad lost in the greyness of February until a magic 'friend' whisks him away to the Dream House where every day is the epitome of the very best year a boy can imagine. The only fly in the ointment are a few creepy creeps, the hoods of Mr Hood (who just happens to be the house). Of course there is a price to pay, as even Harvey comes to realise as his wan playmates, Wendell and Lulu, slip further from 'reality', and of course the House doesn't want Harvey to leave.

You get no guesses about how the story ends.

Smalltown America is Stephen King country, Ray Bradbury country, and both bring that country to life with just a few words.

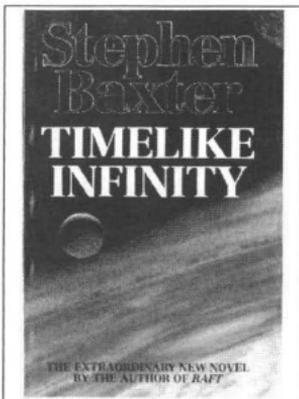
Barker calls his town 'Millsap' and leaves it at that. We get the message, Clive; you neither know nor love smalltown America. King and Bradbury can also people their stories with compelling characters whose fates involve the reader. Barker did not make me care about any of the characters, largely because I never even began to doubt they would all get out of there alive in the end. Which militates against raising the hairs of the neck.

Perhaps this is a juvenile horror story to get past the gimlet eyes of librarians everywhere. If so, any kid who can watch Mum Ra the Everliving isn't going to get excited about this.

Is this a script for a never-made film with a few adjectives added? Actually, it is better written than that, but the story is so weak, predictable, boring.

I still haven't acquired the taste for Clive Barker, and I read all 800-odd pages of King's **Needful Things** while ploughing through this.

Stephen Baxter Timelike Infinity



HarperCollins, 1992, 253pp, £15.99
Reviewed by Andy Mills

I tackled this novel directly after finishing Eric Brown's wonderful **Meridian Days**. Space prohibits a comparison here of these two very different books, produced by writers whose careers have paralleled each other, though such a study would be fascinating. Both **Meridian Days** and **Timelike Infinity** draw on the authors' past work but whereas Brown opts for a small-scale study with lots of loose ends Baxter takes another tack entirely. And, of course, there is the question of style...

In the first chapter of **Timelike Infinity** we are introduced to a future Earth under the metaphorical heel of the unseen, alien Qax. The Qax work through the Spline — giant, space-faring sentient beings — and they followed the domination of humans by the Squeem. In the background, of course, are the mysterious Xeelee who, Heechee-like, leave their artifacts for other races to scavenge. Qax domination is threatened when a "wormhole" portal appears in the solar system. The wormhole allows time travel and is the brainchild of one Michael Poole. Rebels from Earth escape into the wormhole. Named the "Friends of Wigner", after the quantum physicist, the rebels have an audacious plan to end the domination of Earth by the Qax. This plan is threatened when the Qax come through the wormhole in pursuit of the Friends, their intention being to wipe out humanity before a human in the far future destroys the Qax's home planet. But the Qax meet up with Poole as well; he has to not only defeat them but also prevent the Friends from

carrying out their scheme...

It would be unfair to any reader to reveal more of the plot. I confess I had a great deal of difficulty taking the Friends' notions — and hence the resolution of the novel — seriously. (Without going into detail, this is where the novel's title comes onto the scene.

Schrodinger's Cat is rolled out along with the paradox of Wigner's Friend. I am undoubtedly revealing my own intellectual failings when I admit that I cannot readily grasp this concept. To my mind the bloody cat is dead or not regardless of whether anyone actually observes its state of health... but I digress.)

Some of the book is marvellous. The rebels' craft is imaginative, the space battles are fast and exciting and Baxter's visions of Poole's fate and the end of time are nothing if not ambitious. Best of all are the Spline, awe-inspiring alien creatures you want to see much more of. But, unfortunately, on the whole the writing does not match up to the vision. Baxter's desire to explain his universe results in info-dumps and (often unhelpful) didactic speeches:

"The wings are actual sheet-discontinuities in spacetime", the Governor babbled on. 'Motive power for the ship is provided by a nonlinear shear of spacetime — much as acoustical shock waves will propagate themselves through an atmosphere, once formed.' (pp.73-4).

Nor is Baxter's descriptive prose inspiring:

"...globes the size of his fist hovered eight feet above him, giving off a Sol-like yellow warmth, and towards the centre of the disc-craft a concentration of the globes produced a cosy, Earthlike island of light. There was even a hint of blueness about the layer of atmosphere over the disc of land." (p.89).

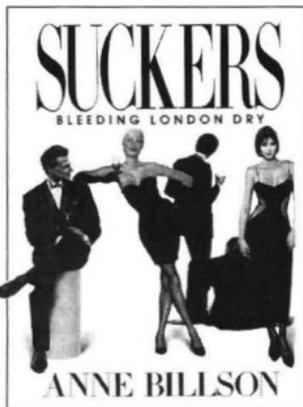
Perhaps the book does suffer from a desire by Baxter to fit it into his previous body of work featuring the Xeelee, thus constraining the author and unduly complicating the novel. On the other hand Xeelee fans will no doubt lap this up, along with quantum physicists. This reader, however, will stick to the softer stuff — like **Meridian Days** ...

Anne Billson Suckers

Pan Books, 1993, 315pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Andy Mills

Coppola's Dracula movie, BBC's opera **The Vampyr**, books such as this one... Vampires are again in fashion, though if it's questionable if they have ever been anything other than the horror archetype. Anne Billson, journalist and critic, has ransacked the subgenre for her creations. But she isn't really interested in the creatures themselves, it's the society they infest which intrigues her. For **Suckers** is a biting (ahem) satire on upwardly mobile but morally bankrupt Britons, and is a wicked black comedy to boot. Thirteen years ago (the date is no casual choice by the author) Dora Vale helped the man she was infatuated with destroy a vampire, Violet:

The head, even when it had been separated from the neck, continued to make noises. This time, I thought I recognised the Humming Chorus from Madame Butterfly. She was deliberately choosing well-known pieces to annoy me. I stepped up my whimpering, trying to drown her out.



"Oh for God's sake shut up, the both of you," snapped Duncan.

Violet continued to hum. I rocked back and forth and tentatively suggested dismemberment.

Despite hacking Violet into little pieces and disposing of said pieces in a variety of locales, the lady returns, and does so as part of a multinational monopolistic company. What does she want? What is Duncan's relationship with her? What is Rotnacht? And can Dora defeat the vampire menace? More to the point, perhaps, is whether she wants to. Because Dora is what used to be called a yuppie, before the term if not the lifestyle went out of fashion, and Dora's only concern is herself. She is not, we quickly learn, a pleasant person. When gazumped by a woman over a flat, Dora develops a hobby out of idly persecuting her:

Once or twice, I got up early so I could loiter outside Patty's flat... That way I could enjoy the spectacle as Patricia emerged, tense and nervous after opening the latest in the YOU ARE A SLUT AND YOU WILL DIE HORRIBLY series, or the slightly more colourful variations on BURN IN HELL YOU VILE NAZI BITCH.

The novel is populated by people like Dora, both alive and undead. The behaviour of her "crowd" is determined by self-interest and hedonism. A few people are banding together to fight the vampires, but it's the thrill of the fight rather than the morality of any struggle which motivates them. When vampires are despatched, using timehonoured methods such as the stake through the heart, the killers have no regrets, no sentimental thoughts concerning who they once were wives, friends, it doesn't matter. "It had been rigorous physical exercise, but now the tough part was over, I found myself regarding it as fun, like squashing greenfly." And becoming one of the undead doesn't necessitate any drastic shift in attitude on the part of such people:

Perhaps this was the first time in history when neophytes had ever been able to embrace the circumstances of their radical new existence with a complete lack of moral scruple. They'd already been halfway there in life...

There are some marvellous set pieces in

the book and Anne Billson permeates it with Dora's cruel but engaging wit. When Dora has to decide what to do at the crux, her choice is entirely in character. If you've been in hiding for the last decade or so and were wondering about the effect of Thatcherite values on the morals of the nation, this will prove an instructive tome. If you already know, buy *Suckers* so you can nod sagely and laugh at the same time.

The Walrus and the Warwolf Hugh Cook

Colin Smythe, 1992, 486pp, £14.99
Reviewed by John Newsinger

A drawback of reviewing is occasionally ploughing through novels that one can't stand, but this is more than outweighed by receiving books that one would probably not have otherwise come across but that nevertheless prove to be a pleasure and an entertainment to read. This volume comes into the latter category. My first feelings when confronted by the absurd title, the awful cover and a blurb that proclaimed it to be the fourth volume in the "Chronicles of the Age of Darkness" were of the 'who have I upset / what have I done to deserve this' variety, but in fact *The Walrus and the Warwolf* was well worth a read.

The novel tells the story of the education of Drake Douay, a young man very much given to gambling, drinking and fornication, all holy activities for worshippers of the demon Hagon. He is propelled through a series of the most unlikely adventures, by a mixture of ambition (for a throne) and love (for the red-skinned Zanya), in a world populated by pirates, wizards, dragons, priests, monsters, princes and merchants. While society has descended into barbarism, into an Age of Darkness, there still endure remnants of a much more advanced scientific civilisation, so advanced as to seem magical to the likes of Drake.

This is a marvellous picaresque tale, a shaggy dog epic that does not so much strain credibility as transcend it. Cook writes with great inventiveness and considerable wit, unfolding a narrative that is positively absurd. The effect is not so much of reading a story as of being lied to, told a tall tale that is not even meant to be convincing but is only intended to entertain. He takes and gets away with great liberties; on one occasion Drake stands trial for various offences and after a long courtroom scene is successfully acquitted, only to have the acquittal overturned and to be thrown into prison anyway. This sort of abrupt reversal is one of the hallmarks of Cook's writing.

His inventiveness is a continual delight. He rescues Drake and his companions from danger and death by the most far-fetched coincidences, strategies, and plot manipulations. On one occasion, Drake and friends are becalmed at sea surrounded by a host of monsters perched on logs that they are paddling closer and closer. They have in their possession the death stone that can turn everything around them into stone, and a

magic bottle that is the entrance to an extra-dimensional shelter. If they use the death stone to destroy the monsters they will themselves drown when their boat turns to stone and sinks. How can they escape? Drake comes up with a suitably inventive stratagem.

Among Drake's many trials and tribulations is an inability to get drunk. This course separates him from other men:

For now, when rascous drunkards sang and shouted, it was no longer the warm hubbub of friendship which he heard, but the braying stupidity of morons and madmen... he no longer fell about with rejoicing laughter when one man vomited over another. Instead he was bored.

Only two moans: Cook too often resorts to casual sexism and the book would have benefited from being shorter. Otherwise a treat!

The King's Buccaneer Raymond E Feist

HarperCollins, 1992, 465pp, £14.99
Reviewed by Jim England

According to the blurb, Raymond E Feist is a Southern Californian, "educated at the University of California, San Diego, where he graduated with honours in Communication Arts. He is the author of the bestselling and critically acclaimed *Riftwar Saga*." The book's cover shows a half-naked man on horseback and there are two maps of imaginary lands inside. These imaginary lands, supposedly in another world, are rather strange since their denizens, despite all the sword-and-sorcery antics, are rather obviously contemporary Southern Californians right down to their fondness for cinnamon and fresh oranges. Seeds of doubt are cast in the reader's mind, however, by learning (p 106) that the coinage consists of "golden ecus".

Feist's determination to exert crude mechanical control over his material is shown by the sentences which start each chapter. The eponymous hero is Nicholas, supposedly a "bright and gifted youngster" of royal blood, and successive chapters begin: Nicholas stumbled, Nicholas winced, Nicholas lunged, Nicholas signaled, Nicholas tensed, Nicholas looked up (he does this at the start of two chapters) and so on. The writing is relentlessly pedestrian and marred by such passages as (p 69) "uttered a cry of pure aggravation" and (p 75) "her expression looked as though the observation was not news to her". Overall, we gain an impression of Feist treating water or padding things out. The blurb refers to Nicholas having to confront "a terrifying force" that "menaces the entire world". But I never found out what it was.

On the credit side, the philosophy that Might is Right and that Royal blood is better than any other kind (a strange philosophy for Americans to have) is more muted in this book than in Feist and Janny Wurts's collaborative effort *Mistress of the Empire* whose eponymous heroine is a spoiled brat of the first order, and which contains much blood and gore.

Joe Haldeman Worlds Enough and Time

NEL, 1992, 332pp, £15.99
Reviewed by LJ Hurst

This is the final volume of a trilogy. In generations past the Earth has put colonies in hollowed asteroids, and those worlds became independent; the drive onwards continued and now a generation starship has been sent towards Epsilon. This is the story of Marianne O'Hara, who has appeared in the previous two books, told through her diaries and, two thousand years after her death, by a computer simulation.

O'Hara is a feisty woman, who succeeds in becoming leader of the controlling group, and then using thought control to ensure that all measures are accepted by the population of the starship "Newhome" (who are only seen in the background, but are not far off Douglas Adams's hairdressers and telephone hygienists). O'Hara lives in an open marriage with two men, who later introduce another woman, whom she then talks of as "my wife", without implying a lesbian connection.

Back on Earth fundamentalists destroy most of the remaining civilisation and blast the starship's computers with an "active intelligent sabotage program" which wrecks the onboard databases. The hardy voyagers are successful in their struggle to get the ship back on course.

O'Hara decides to become a mother, fails in natural means so parthenogenetically impregnates one of her own ova. The daughter grows up to be a credit to her and one of the most important colonists on Epsilon.

Still there are problems facing the ship — a mutant virus destroys all the crops being grown. Only the yeast vats continue to produce, but not enough for everyone. Still the surplus population can go into cryonic suspension. A few die in the ice, but no-one of any importance.

The title of this book is a quotation from Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" — "Had we but world enough and time, / this coyness lady were no crime" — but its every implication is the opposite — there is time, the world is found, there is no crime. The spirit of the book is without urgency. In the final wrap-up of the story, which has overtones of 2010: *Odyssey Two*, someone says "the coincidence ... cannot be a coincidence", but it is uncomfortable to discover why everything has worked out so well.

Hidden Echoes Mike Jefferies

Grafton, 1992, 336pp, £8.99
Reviewed by Tom A Jones

This is a standard Fantasy using the concept of parallel worlds. The creatures from these worlds have in the past broken through the Doorcracks to Earth where they're remembered as the monsters of myth. The book has a couple of interesting concepts: the guides (called waymasters and journeymen) who bring our Heroes to the City of Time are

heavily tattooed; the tattoos create themselves and are maps of their journeys. The second concept is that the City of Time is so called because it contains a host of timepieces, one for each person who's ever lived on Earth; when you're born a timepiece is created which is set with the days of your life. Unfortunately little is done with this idea.

Most of this book is taken up with the protagonists travelling from Earth to the City. The pace is sedate because you know the formula: nothing can happen to them until they've got to the City. I class this as the travelogue part of a Fantasy novel. Once they reach the City things start to hot up, the action piles up as death and destruction flow from the City to Earth. Here the warriors and monsters come up against modern weaponry with the inevitable outcome, which I don't think gives anything away not signalled well beforehand.

There is one particularly nasty draw-out scene where the villain skins a waymaster alive so that he can use his skin as a map to find the doorcrack to Earth. Not only is the skinning described in great detail but there's an illustration of the skinned person. Whilst I can see why this was necessary for the plot I'm not convinced the level of detail or picture were.

This looks to be a big book, trade paperback size and 336 pages but it uses large type and there's lots of space, so it took much less time to read than I'd thought. I'm not a great fan of this traditional Fantasy; to follow Tolkien an author's really got to do something different. Mike Jefferies doesn't. That doesn't mean I disliked the book. But there seems to be a sizeable audience for the formula Fantasy so I guess they'll like it.

Crystal Line

Anne McCaffrey

Bantam, 1992, npp, £14.99

Reviewed by KV Bailey

An author creates a world and believes there is sufficient mileage in it for a number of novels. Readers coming to novel 1+x must react in a number of ways. If none of the preceding novels have been read they may think what kind of a crazy planet is this, its

geophysics obscure, the motivations of its denizens more so. They may find it intriguing enough to persevere, even to back-read, or they may just give up. Those who are constant or addicted readers of the sequence will either eagerly and gratefully slip into a familiar ambience, or they may hope that it will be not entirely the accustomed trip, that it will somewhere break the mould, open fresh horizons. Anne McCaffrey has here a problem in that, once the Guild of symbiotically conditioned crystal singers and their work is established convention, Ballybran is, recurrent stories apart, not a wildly exciting planet. Mining it (metaphorically) can produce diminishing returns, just as can mining it (literally) when, as in this novel, trading planets are tempted by cheaper substitutes for the now costly and unreliably provided dark crystal.

This is the cue for the ever-inventive McCaffrey to shift focus partly off-planet. To get away from the exhausting routines of old Ballybran for a time is, as soon as they can amass the credits, the objective of all of the diminishing band of crystal-singers. Perennial heroine Killashandra Ree, thrown first by the death (inevitably in a storm) of Guild Master Lanzecki, and then by her lover and crystal mining partner Lars Dahl's elevation to that office, goes off-Ballybran to vacation at the port of Trefoil on Armagh III, an attractive planet of sun and sea, inhabited by fisherman who "ran to height, tanned skins and strong backs" (and whose idiom seems to exhibit a trace of the Irish). She goes to bed with one or two of them, has a metabolism which can cope spectacularly with "harmat" the local booze, and becomes knowledgeable about a great variety of exotic fish. This, the most unaffectedly escapist section of the book, is pleasantly joyous culminating in bucolic harmat-harvest junketings before Killa is summoned back to dour Ballybran to quarry black crystal like mad in order to keep that planet's economy in the black.

The need for black crystal provides one of the story's two darker themes of tension, the central Armagh episode being light relief. Crystal singers are paranoiac about their colleagues spying to steal the best mining sites; so they log no coordinates, and their decayed memories are such that they can't re-



adly find the sites again. Much of the Ballybran action concerns schemes to resuscitate memory by techniques devised by Donalla, a new character and recruit to the medical staff. The other theme takes us adventurously again off-planet (the troubles of the ship's operants providing a minor plot-complication) to the airless, cavernous, dangerous world of Opal where a new mineral, the "Junk Crystal" has been discovered. It is to the benefit of the Guild to assist research (even though coerced to do so) into the property of this apparently sentient substance which, when nourished by black crystal, can communicate through the media of patterns, colours and rhythm. It falls to Killa to perform the hazardous feeding. Later, when Lars leaves Ballybran on a distant recruitment drive, the dwindling band of exhausted singers needing an infusion, she has a traumatic but transforming spell as Deputy Guild Master. With an influx of young trainable singers and the emergence in Killashandra of an awareness of new abilities, there may yet be a future for Ballybran. **Crystal Line** will be a welcome and undemanding read for those in tune with the evergreen vein of McCaffrey romanticism.

The Stone Within David Wingrove

NEL, 1992, 425pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Tina Anghelatos

This is the fourth book in the **Chung Kuo** series. I approached it with care since I hadn't read the earlier books and I had heard some, ah, rumours about the quantity of violence in the first three books. I was pleasantly surprised to find no unnecessary gore at all. Which proves you shouldn't listen to rumours.

If you're not familiar with the series, this is a saga about a world where the Chinese empire still flourishes and indeed seems to rule everywhere. It is, as we are told several times, a Yang (masculinity, light) world; that is, a world almost devoid of Yin (femininity, darkness etc.; the concept that Yin and Yang each contain a part of each other seems to have been lost in the overwhelming Yangness of the universe). The result is that the story is told mostly from the male characters' point of view; the few female characters have a tendency to be merely beautiful adjuncts to the ruling men. The major exception to this is Jelka, daughter of General Tolonen and martial arts devotee. Jelka has an engaging method of discouraging unwelcome admirers — she breaks their legs. Sadly, she gets shipped off to the colonies when she falls in love with the wrong man.

That said, there is a lot of plot. Each chapter is split into scenes and there are always several strands being woven together. It is not a good novel to start the epic with, it is very much a continuation of the already existing scenario and you may find yourself constantly referring to the introduction and character list to find out what's going on. However, basically it's a story about power; the T'ang rulers are all intriguing against each other and the ruled classes are plotting to

overthrow their rulers. They all seem to be as bad as each other. There is everything you could desire in a future fantasy: genetically manufactured humans, starship travel, worlds that float above the Earth. A problem that I encountered is that the book is part of a long series; it reads as an episode in the history of Chung Kuo and there are no real conclusions to any of the multiple plot lines. As a result, the end is a little dissatisfying.

The Chinese flavour does proliferate throughout, and I presume that the Chinese history of the novel up until the last century is much as we know it from the references to Empress Wu, the Shang dynasty and the emperor, Ming Huang. I wondered what had happened to the Western monotheistic beliefs of Christianity and Islam in this Chinese world. They're not mentioned here (except for the odd *Jesus!*) but maybe the earlier books reveal this. I also found myself wondering about a few minor details: for example, that the Shang dynasty (1200 BC approx.) wrote in **Mandarin**? However, these are minor nigglings in the vast sea of the imperialistic Chinese aura of the book.

In conclusion, if you've read the first three books I'm sure you will want to carry on with the saga and read this one. If you haven't read the first three, don't start with this one; go back to number one.

Wanted

Editorial Assistant

Write to Catie (Address Inside Front Page)



Your first sale was 'Island of the Dead' to Extro magazine...

That came about basically whilst pottering around Central Station in Belfast and they had a copy of *Extro* and as every writer starts it was a case of "I can do that", followed by "I can do that better!". I wrote 'Island' and sent it off. And that was it. I bought a twelve string guitar with the money, which I still have.

Had you been writing before that?

Well when I got chucked out of Queen's University I didn't have a day job to give up. So I wrote this really, really awful novel (it stinks, I still have it in the files somewhere), which I sent to Gollancz years ago Malcolm Edwards quite properly sent it back, saying: "This is utter shite, come back in a few years when you have learned to write, live, spell, create narratives, tell a story, string two words together." Amazingly I was undeterred.

Your first major sale was to Asimov's with 'The Catherine Wheel'. How long was that after the Extro sale?

There was to be another story coming out in *Extro* but it folded before then. Everyone probably knows the sob story, with circulation problems. There was no British Science Fiction magazine, well there was *Interzone* which was like four pages stapled together at the corner: the 'glory days'. The only market was American. I was in Dublin and called into the Alchemist's Head (a SF/Occult bookshop); they had Asimov's. I bought that and thought why not and sent some things off and 'The Catherine Wheel' was the third thing I sent. It went on from there.

How do you go about selling short stories?

I feel out the market. For example I'll write something and think "this is a David Garnett story," and he often takes them. Others feel like Asimov's stories, and so on. There was one I sold to *Omnibus* which is coming out this year sometime which I knew when I wrote it would be what they would like.

So you write stories for editors?

It may sound like that, but first and foremost I write for me. I write about things that interest me or ideas that I have. I usually get an idea for a story in the shower, which is why I spend half an hour each day in the bathroom.

You once said that you write Novels to live and short stories for love...

Well, yes. That is being a bit romantic but essentially it is right.

So are you more happy with Empire Dreams than say Desolation Road?

Well you employ two totally different approaches. In short stories you don't have room to develop the characters and plot.

Do you prefer to write short stories?

Yes. But they tend to be long short stories. I wrote a story for the *In Dreams* anthology that was over 7000 words but they wanted something around 6000. So I cut, and hacked and ripped the story up until it was 5998 words and sent it off to them. I was then talking to Kim Newman and I told him this and he said: "Ah, you didn't read our brief closely. It said ABOUT 6000 words, we have just

Ian McDonald

interviewed by Tommy Ferguson

at Queen's University, Belfast
SF & Fantasy Society

bought one from Ian McLeod at 9000 words". Damn!! All those nice bits I cut out I could have shoved back in again.

In Empire Dreams many of the stories are not Science Fiction, was this intentional?

I write about what interests me. In the current collection *Speaking in Tongues* there is a story about the medieval myth of the Wandering Jew, for example. It's coward's Science Fiction because my science is not that good. I am more interested in soft sciences, psychology, information sciences things where people are involved. I just can't see the point of Hard SF, okay it's big and expensive but... What has cosmology or particle physics got to do, really, with everyday life, now or in the future?

Do you like the label SF being applied to your work?

I am not ashamed of it, I am proud to be an SF writer, although it does tend to get sneered at. I can remember the guy who was my best man, David Rhodes and his wife Beth (who did her Masters in English at Queen's) took me to a do in the English department. I had just sold *Desolation Road* at the time and was introduced to her professor. "Ian has just sold a SF novel," Beth said and he dismissed me with a contemptuous sneer. Folk can be dismissive of SF because they have a bad image of what it is, they think it is all flying through the universe in space ships full of windows.

The stories in Empire Dreams draw on some particular influences: Van Gogh and David Bowie songs for example. Is this inspiration or fascination?

Neither really, it's rip-off masquerading as art. I justify this by saying that remix culture has been the dominant cultural form of the last two decades of the twentieth century. We haven't invented anything new; most of what we have as popular culture is something that has been round before. You can't have a jeans advertisement unless it has a sixties soundtrack

to it. Having gone through the Betty Boo/1960s/Fireball XLS/PVC dress look we are now in early seventies vj, very silly flared trousers and skinny jackets. Its not new, it has all been remixed from countless sources before and this is as what I do in fictional form.

Most of those stories were written in the early eighties, yet the collection didn't come out until 1988. Did you have problems selling it?

It was because *Desolation Road* had to be rewritten; *Empire Dreams* was scheduled, to appear simultaneously with a very late *Desolation Road* but because I was getting married I needed all the money I could get and Bantam were offering me a three book deal and they said "would you have enough short stories to make up a collection?" At the time I had only had about five stories published which wasn't enough to justify a short story collection so I shoved in a whole clatter of unpublished material. It was for the money. They took it and rushed it out pretty quickly to coincide with *Desolation Road*.

Is it easier to sell novels then, in the States especially?

It is easier to sell novels full stop. You can be like David Wingrove and sell an entire *Seven, Eight or Nine...*

Er... Ten

...decalogue without even ever having written a short story. Yeah, it's always been easier to sell books. However there is the exception of the 'British Rule' (in deep public school English): "You sell a few stories to *Interzone* and they are well received... Then you meet a few editors at Science Fiction Conventions and then you sell a book to them and it appears in the UK and is 'well received in the press' and then you sell something to America... etc". I didn't do that at all.

What happened to me was that Bantam books in America had a little editorial shake-up and they head-hunted Shawna McCarthy, who

Bantam books in America had a little editorial shake-up and they head-hunted Shawna McCarthy, who had been editor at Asimov's, over some power lunch with Lou Aronica, head honcho at Bantam, and she mentioned my name. They then approached me: great fun, I'm certainly not complaining. I'd like to get to the stage where I write something and then sell it, as it is simpler and aids the continuity. It also goes down well with the bank manager.

There is a perceived difference in SF in the States and the UK. One difference that I heard about was that in US SF the hero saves the world whilst in UK SF the hero saves their small part of the world...

...or even saves him — or — herself. It is odd, for at the moment Americans love British SF, they'll say it is great, well written, good plots, believable characters and interesting things are happening.

Would you go along with the typical characterisation of British SF as depressing and downbeat?

Yes... but British stuff isn't all downbeat. I think there is such a thing as midbeat. OK they may not save the world or even their own bit of it or whatever but everything is fairly hunky-dory. And there is a lot of fairly up-beat British SF, the Stephen Baxters and Paul McAuleys who produce American SF but with that particular British emphasis on good grammar, good punctuation and interesting characters, and with that upbeat ending as well.

Desolation Road had a very difficult structure to it, involving numerous characters and events. How did you control those various elements? Did you use flowcharts or diagrams?

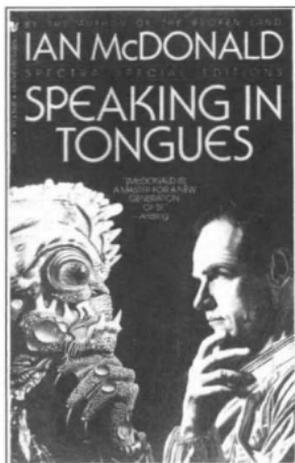
I have my notes for *Desolation Road* somewhere, they run to exactly five pages, the thing was made up as I went along, which is probably why it had to be rewritten. I certainly wanted it to be dense and complex, and have a huge cast of characters. It was about the town, first and foremost and therefore every time the town changed and times moved on you had a lot of characters coming and going.

That is the problem I had with the novel. As you say it is about the town and I found it very difficult to empathise with the characters knowing they weren't likely to be there when I turned the page over. It was almost as if they were wearing Red shirts in a Star Trek episode.

A damning criticism! *Desolation Road* was a fusion of two things: There was Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*...

Damn, there goes my next question.

Aha, I knew you were going to ask that. There was also Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude* which tells a similar sort of story. You don't learn a lot about what their jobs are, what they do even between them. Vast amounts of time pass between one appearance and another, five years even, and you don't learn what they have been doing. They have been leading mundane ordinary lives and it is only when



they interact with the story that you see them again.

I actually read 'The Martian Chronicles' on the Belfast — Liverpool ferry to stave off sea sickness. I have an odd reaction when I read books. The really good books I read twice, the first time very quickly and then again to pick up all the things I didn't get the first time round. It was like that with *The Martian Chronicles*. Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* was another. I knew that something very strange and important was going on with these books and read them again more slowly.

It is interesting that everyone is writing about Mars at the moment. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* has just come out, Paul McAuley is doing *Red Dust*. It seems that Mars' time has come again. When every body saw it was a dead planet they got very bored by Mars but I based my book on terra-forming the planet with the idea of making it into utopia, except it doesn't quite work that way.

How much of your life influences your writing? I notice a lot of credits to your wife, Patricia.

A book isn't just something that gets written, it is as much a product of the environment you write it in. Somebody else has written something better, the cheque hasn't come, and you have to see the bank manager again: those are as much part of the process of writing as actually putting words on a page and is why so many credits appear to my wife because she makes the creative environment.

You spent time at Queen's University, what memories or influence did you take away?

I don't have many fond memories of the place although I still retain my interest in psychology: the differences between the brain and perceptions, neurochemistry, all that.

Have you ever read any Philip K. Dick? his writing was also based on these

themes.

The only thing I've read by Philip K. Dick is *The Man in the High Castle* and the copy I had repeated pages 48 to 122 so it was probably even more surreal. It was an old Penguin, do you remember Penguin used to publish books with really great black covers, Alfred Bester was one, with nice abstract patterns? I sort of missed out on Philip K. Dick. I feel guilty at not having read him, likewise I feel I should have read Roger Zelazny and never did.

Your third book *Out On Blue Six* is a more traditional SF book. Was that a response to the previous two works?

It is very depressing to say it was more traditional SF because it was supposed to be more bizarre than *Desolation Road*. That is it's chief failing, everything is too considered and mannered. I set out to write a really bizarre book, and then I wrote this thing which shows signs of trying far too hard. I had intended to subtitle it 'A Totalitarian Comedy', to indicate that it wasn't a serious book. A comedy not in the sense of bust your sides laughing, more in the sense of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, an allegory on our times.

I take it this is why it is shot through with references to everything from early Genesis albums to Belfast Architecture?

Yes, Belfast Architecture being Courtney Hall the main heroine who is a scout hall on the Cregagh road. She actually had a different name until we got married and moved I was going up the road and thought: 'great name for a character!' Though it does try too hard in general, there are bits I like, the idea of a supposed Utopia where everything is designed to make people happy, everyone is in the job which is psychologically tested to make them exactly happy, no one is about to hurt anyone and they have little computerised consciences riding around on their shoulders saying: 'You shouldn't do that now, someone will be very displeased if you do that'. It is basically about an attempt to over throw this saccharine Utopia, though I didn't want everything to be laid waste. It didn't seem practical to me that a few people could totally topple such a stable society, so they do it bit by bit, and gradually introduce change into this static society. I think this is probably its only half way successful bit.

There is a possible comparison with 1984 and Brave New World?

Well, sort of. The chief influence is Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*, that odd combination of Thatcherism run wild and Reggie Benn Socialism run wild at the same time. Everyone is the ultimate consumer and the state makes sure that everyone has the best possible time. It wasn't meant to be a serious book, though I have seen the odd terribly serious review of it, which depresses me even further.

Moving on. Do you read SF or fantasy in general?

I don't read much SF because, I think it was William Gibson who first said that there are some books you read and they are SO awful you just feel depressed and ask yourself, why am I bothering reading this?

Then there are some books you read and they are so good you are just depressed: "Damn I'll never be as good as that". Rats! Having gone through a couple of years of that sort of neurosis I am getting back into reading more. I'm picking up on Sherri Tepper at the moment.

She is very good.

Yes... A tad ham handed at times, but in general pretty wonderful. At the moment I'm reading **The French Lieutenant's Woman** because I feel I should. I like to read outside the genre, good writing I think is good writing wherever you find it.

Are you aware of the spate of books loosely described as Cyberpunk? I notice a few references in Out On Blue Six which could be described as Cyberpunk, or Steampunk?

I recently read **The Difference Engine** by Gibson and Sterling and the background was great and there were some wonderful bits in Victorian London but I thought the whole was much less than the sum of its parts, unfortunately. Was it Gibson who wrote the thing as opposed to Bruce Sterling?

Pass. Moving on...there is a lot of religion and religious investigation in your work. Is this a reflection of your personal beliefs?

Yes. I feel that the spiritual aspect in people is a valid theme for SF to discuss. It is always assumed (Sherri Tepper excepted,) in the future that people will be, just right on technologically, though that is probably the American humanistic viewpoint coming through. I feel that spirituality is such a fundamental part of humanity that it must be there in the future as much as it is here as it was in the past, and that is something I like to explore. My own particular bent is towards the more contemplative religion, contemplative christianity is very important to me. I tend to go to Thomas Merton a lot. There is a story in **Speaking in Tongues** where the heroine carries about a copy of a Thomas Merton book. Likewise I'm doing a Novella at the moment, for Bantam in America which explores Japanese Buddhism.

I'm interested in more personal, spiritual religions rather than the outward trappings of things, dogma I believe is a very destructive thing.

King of Morning, Queen of Day was originally a short story which was developed into a novel, was that of your own choosing?

Yes, it did start as a story in **Empire Dreams**. I had been up in Belfast and I was driving home one night and the whole novel evolved. I thought: "it could be a book, it could go through three generations of the same mytho-consciousness," and the whole thing just appeared. I'm lucky there wasn't a big pile-up on the road.

The story was the seed of it but it expanded a lot. The first part of the book occupies pretty much the same space as the story but has a bit before it and quite a lot after it and then links into successive generations who have the same talent that

their sub-conscious urgings and symbols can be made real. They have a link into what I call the Mygrnus, the domain where human symbology is stored, and these mythological entities can link through hair minds and become real with a variety of pleasant or disturbing effects. The entire structure of the three sections, starting in the 1900s and ending in contemporary time just appeared at once.

It went through quite a lot of changes while I was writing it. I was quite worried about it when I sent it off because there was a very long pause before my editor got back to me about the book; She hates it, I thought, I'm going to have to return my advance. But as it was it worked out ok, and it won the Philip K. Dick award as well. Yet to see the money for it though.

Oh! Can I quote you on that?

You can.

Novels tend to get splattered with "Won the Philip K. Dick Award" and the like but in King Of... Queen Of... the cover was quite, um... shite.

Are you talking about the American edition or the UK edition?

Well the UK, I've yet to see the American edition.

Well, would you like to? (Produces book).

That is quite atrocious.

The artist on that got virtually as much for doing it as I got for the entire book — sickening. The only artists who have ever done a good job was Jim Burns on **Hearts, Hands and Voices** who phoned me up about it and we had a half hour conversation and he did it as he saw it.

Out right now, it is nearly a painfully obvious allegory to social life in Northern Ireland.

It is, yes; it was supposed to be, but it is also supposed to be extended beyond N.I. as well. In one direction it edges into Israel, it

moves into Sri Lanka into another. The entire Riverboat section was written while the Kurdish refugee thing was going on; the plastic sheets were taken from that. If you've read the book there is a female reporter on the riverboat harassing everyone, checking to make sure they aren't too horribly deformed...

All this ethnic cleansing stuff in Yugoslavia is horribly like some of the stuff in **Hearts, Hands and Voices**. Those who have reviewed it have picked up on the Northern Ireland aspect to a certain extent. I have a copy of a review from **Vector** by Charles Stross in which he said: "Ian McDonald in **Hearts, Hands and Voices** and his other works is writing a secret history of Ireland;" he is right to a certain extent.

That is an interesting viewpoint.

Yeah, it is something I want to do. There is the part in **King of Morning, Queen of Day** about the mythologisation of history where this mythical IRA man appears who is part of a very old mythological tradition of the rebel boy who dies for his country that goes way back into pre-historic times.

That was one side of it, treating history not as history but as a series of beliefs and mythology. **Hearts, Hands and Voices** was the other side of it treating it as the effects of a history that people believe happened rather than what actually happened.

It reads a lot like Mythago Wood.

I actually wrote the story of 'King of Morning, Queen of Day' and then read **Mythago Wood** and went: "Shit!" Then I wrote the novel **King of Morning, Queen of Day** and read John Crowley's **Little Big** and went: "Shit, Shit!" These things happen, I have occasional correspondence with Brian Stableford and I was grumbling about this and he said not to worry that this is happening all the time.

In the book Hearts, Hands and Voices there is a very deliberate use of language. It was one of things that stalled me in the book, to admire the language and the way you have used it.

Ge, thanks. You can interview me any time. There were certain things I wanted to do for example: no one was to use a compression of a word, no one was to say "it's" rather than "it". That goes back to Damon Runyon and **Guy's and Dolls**, in the movie, everyone says "there is" and it has this idiosyncratic sound to it, which I wanted. I wanted to have that kind of precision. Also I wanted to get the Old Testament sound. Years ago I read Alan Patton's **Cry The Beloved Country** which has that kinds of Old Testament, fundamental sound in it. I sort of wanted to have that old fashioned prose style.

One of the things I noticed was a description of a Militia man as: "Shorts Boots Gloves Helmet" with no commas in between.

Yes, I wanted to be able to recreate that image every time I mentioned the character and they were all stored in blocks in the Word Processor so that I would know exactly how that person was described. I would just have to press paste phrase A and up it would



come. Yes, I have LocoScript 2! I wanted resonances to go throughout the book. Likewise whenever the Dr. Kalmasri character appears he is always associated with the word exquisite, that appears throughout as well. It's damned hard work.

The main character in the book is a woman, was that difficult to write in any way?

No, not terribly, because she doesn't speak. That also was a deliberate symbolic thing. It was her dead grandfather who is, basically a disembodied head kept alive by bio-technology, who does all the talking but she has decided not to speak at all as she thinks it doesn't do any good. That was the primary political analogy: that young people don't have a voice and it is the old dead people who do all the talking.

That is a reversal of the early stages of the novel?

Yes, where she was miming everything to him. Sorry, what was the question? Female Characters, yes, I still like doing female characters, it is more interesting, it is easier to put more depth into them. Men are terribly hide bound by genre stereo-types.

The names in the novel are very distinctive:

Yes, they're from a map of East Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, stick a pin there, there and there. That is how the Wombles were named by the way, Bungo, mind you... Likewise for the other community in **Hearts, Hands and Voices** the names are Indian. It's like in Ireland you have the Irish names and the Settler's names and there are two distinct types and I wanted to get that kind of linguistic difference with the African and Indian style names without calling everyone "O" something.

I have great difficulty with names, names are a real pain. Part of the reason that I think the names sound good in **Hearts, Hands and Voices** is because they are real names; they are not just made up names which often don't sound right. Some made names up sound great because they are like words we know and use and the syllables slip nicely off your tongue, others just don't work at all. It is awfully difficult to get character names.

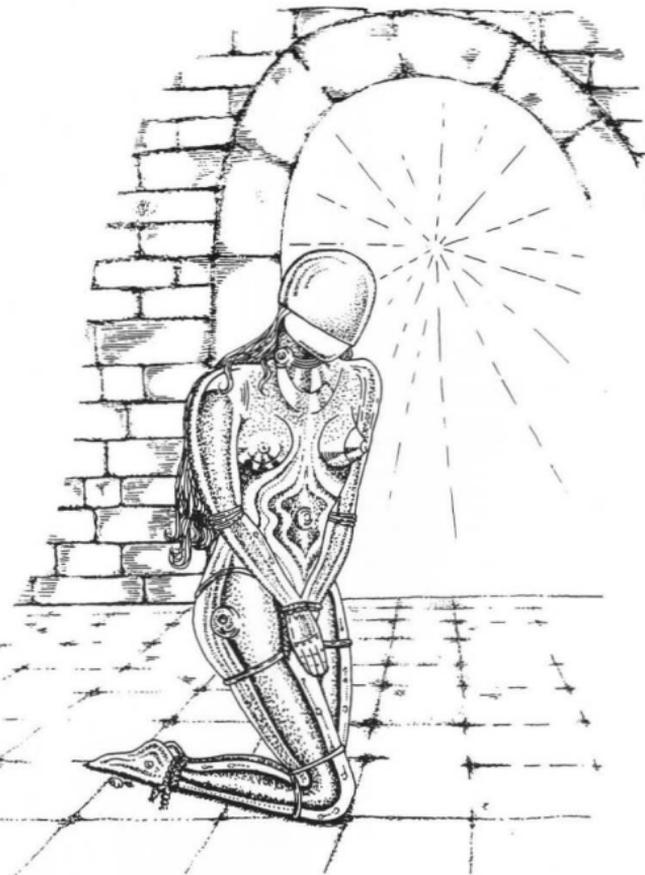
Do character names go to the characters or do the names come from the characters?

The names go to the characters. I have a file full of names which I pick out when the book is being written. Apparently Dickens did the same thing, he had books full of character names for which he never wrote characters, just the names for them.

What are you currently working on?

I'm currently revising a Novella for Bantam in America and trying to get a UK sale on it. I've just started **Necroville**, the next novel which is a hundred or so years in the future where nano-technology resurrects the dead and on such a scale that half the world is living and half the world is dead. It follows five characters on one night, the Mexican Night of the Dead.

Ian McDonald, thank You.



Artwork by Claire Willoughby

COMING THIS SPRING GROUND-BREAKING SF AND FANTASY FROM GOLLANCZ



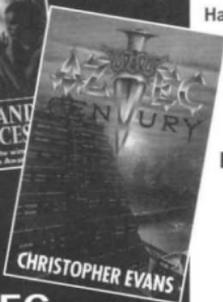
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Phillip George Chadwick The Death Guard

"has now been given a well-deserved second chance. As K.E. Wagner says: 'Read it, and you'll understand why the few who have read it in the past have not let it be forgotten'"

Graham Andrews

Sheila Gilluly The Giant Of Inishkerry

"Gilluly tells a powerful tale, creates characters who capture our imagination, and uses them hard. I shall certainly seek out more books by her, and await the next book in this series eagerly."

Alan Fraser

Joanne Harris The Evil Seed

"Joanne Harris knows Cambridge, she knows her pre-Raphaelite art and she knows how to synthesize a compelling addition to the Vampire mythology."

B. S. Cullum

Michael P. Kube-McDowell Exile

"Supreme storytelling which should see Kube-McDowell on a few award short-lists."

Colin Bird

Novels

Piers Anthony Virtual Mode

Grafton, 1992, 381pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Colin Bird

When I used to read all the SF I could lay my hands on, in the early seventies, I read a lot of Piers Anthony - remember **Chthon**, **Macroscopic** and **Prosthio Plus**? Then I discovered more subtle writers and apart from the occasional foray into one of Anthony's series of fantasy novels I lost track of what he was doing. So it's interesting to examine the start of yet another money-spinning and shelf-filling series.

It begins with an introduction to our heroine, Colene, as she slits her wrist in a college toilet. Colene is clinically depressed and obviously suicidal. Enter Darius, a mysterious and weakened stranger who Colene nurses back to health in her parent's shed. Darius comes from a parallel dimension where magic works and he seeks Colene as his mate. An attraction forms, but Colene learns that as Darius's wife she would have her life force drained so that he could perform his vital magic. When Darius learns of her suicide attempt he realises that she has no life energy to give and he returns alone.

That's the set up for this first novel because the two lovers decide they have made a mistake and seek each other across the modes. The Virtual Mode is a dimensional plane fixed by five anchors, two of these anchors are Darius and Colene, the others are met during the quest. The characters wander into and out of other worlds experiencing adventure along the way. This book ends with the introduction of an evil force who wishes to take over all the modes and many plot strands are left hanging on the last page.

Anthony's books live or die on the quality of his invention and this book suffers from a constraining series of rules controlling the multi-dimensional travelling that is the heart of the book. Consequently we get too much explanation and not enough plot development. The characterisation is adequate, with the love story woven delicately into more conventional fantasy. I didn't quite accept the ease with which Colene, from our universe, embraces Darius as a dimensional traveller and magician to boot! The blend of fantasy and science fiction is well done and you don't get bored reading Piers Anthony. I just wish he wasn't so goddam prolific! All this plus a twenty-two page afterword setting out the authors' position as America's number one liberal!

Chaz Brenchley Mall Time

Coronet, 1992, 284pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Colin Bird

We may have had a fine horror film set in a shopping mall (George Romero's **Dawn Of The Dead**), but I have yet to read an equally original novel using the same setting. This book may be packaged as Horror, but it's really a thriller, and not a very good one at that. It concerns an ex-army man who turns psycho and starts shooting up a gigantic mall. That's it really. No psychological depth to the characters, no originality in the plotting, and badly structured to boot. I was rather uncomfortably aware of the parallels with the very real Hungerford massacre throughout the book. Avoid it!

Phillip George Chadwick The Death Guard

ROC, 1992, 394pp, £5.99
Reviewed by Graham Andrews

The term "underground classic" is usually applied to a novel that has (a) fallen under Establishment interdiction (e.g. **Ulysses**) or (b) been published 'before its time' (e.g. **The Third Policeman**) but remains widely known, if not widely read.

Philip George Chadwick's **The Death Guard** (Hutchinson, 1939) is really a "lost classic" (Karl Edward Wagner: back-cover blurb). **The Death Guard** has never been reprinted - until now. Most of reference books don't even list the title, and Chadwick (1893-1955) himself is more obscure than his one-and-only novel.

The Death Guard was finally unearthed by Nick Austin, a consultant editor for Roc Books. Brian W. Aldiss has contributed the kind of brief-yet-comprehensive Introduction that makes his fellow critics want to spit. **Vector** might as well publish the Aldiss piece as a review and have done with it. But what the hell! Why should he have all the fun?

The basic situation is this: man-made creatures are used a shock troops in a future war. Take **Frankenstein** and **(The Shape Of) Things To Come**, then top it up with

Synthetic Men Of Mars (laid down in the same year). Add **Brave New World** or **The Dragon Masters**, to taste.

The **Death Guard** (or the 'Flesh') was created by Goble, an ex-Great War soldier-turned-biologist. "Supposing that instead of turning ourselves into fighting animals we could breed things or make things which would always act as I acted...Starting with a different life cell altogether, perhaps, from that which forms the natural creation: an artificial life cell. A sort of beast with nothing but the fighting instincts in it, something which would be useless except in battle..." (p. 16).

There's a strong plot, after we get past the first fifty-odd pages of exposition, family histories, and protracted character-drawing. I won't give you a plot summary, but I'll tell you this much...The European powers get the wind up and form a military coalition to bring Death-Guarded Britain to her knees. ("It could still happen!": Teddy Taylor, M.P.).

The story-teller is Gregory Bekide (grandson of Edom), an usually credible Man Who Learned Better. Almost all of the other characters are Dickensian stereotypes, like Sir Godfrey Human (the inventor of 'humanite', a rudimentary atomic explosive), Mundaine (Britain's leading peacenik) and salt-of-the-earth Cockneys whose mothers must have been frightened by Bow Bells: "Wot they cawl Overseas Stytons started. Awl over plice. Fact'ries down below turnin' out Guard. Dohn' know 'ow far" (p.278).

Adiss points out that "...the most damaging aspect of the novel to a 1990's reader...is unthinking racism" (p. vii). When black work-slaves aren't wanting 'pugs' (immature Death Guards) they are chanting allegiance to the 'White Man's Glory Service': "To the Power and the Word of Man! The Black Flesh bows to the Power and the Word of Man!" (p. 141)

But the past is a foreign country; things are done differently there. For the sake of historical truth, I'm glad that political correctors haven't been allowed to tone down or delete the racist passages in **The Death Guard**, as they've already done with Biggles, William, and the Famous Five.

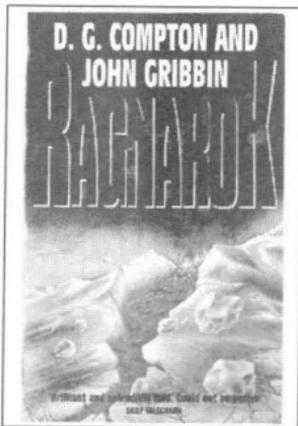
Chadwick (like his Frankenstein-figure, Goble) was profoundly affected by the 1914-18 governments-approved massacre. **The Death Guard** is just as much an anti-war novel as — say — **All Quiet On The Western Front** and 'novel' is the operative word: "One reads and studies history, but drama is felt" (p. 1). H.G.Wells abandoned this important principle circa 1920, with generally awful results. Compare **The Death Guard** with Wells' **The Holy Terror**, also published in 1939!

The Death Guard couldn't have been published at a worse time. Nobody wanted to read about an imaginary invasion of Great Britain by uppity Euros, except Adolf Hitler. If Chadwick had turned the baddies into Germans... No. His idea of the typical Boche might have been something like: "Hold him the arms of, and I will the throat tear out" (from Bulldog Drummond).

The Death Guard has now been given a well-deserved second chance. As Wagner

(K.E., not Richard or Robert) says: "Read it, and you'll understand why the few who have read it in the past have not let it be forgotten."

N.B. Peter Garrock's wrap-around cover illustration is not only descriptive but suitably in-period.



D. G. Compton & John Gribbin Ragnarok

Gollancz, 1992, 344pp, £4.99
Reviewed by John Newsinger

A group of radical activists plant a nuclear device on the Mid-Atlantic fault off Iceland. They threaten to cause a volcanic explosion at least ten times greater than Krakatoa if their quite modest and reasonable demands are not met. Such a cataclysm would blot out the sun and plunge the rich countries in North America, Russia and Europe into a new ice age. This would be Ragnarok, a catastrophe that would not destroy the world, but would instead allow a new beginning. All they ask in return for not detonating their bomb is that the two super-powers dismantle their nuclear arsenals and commit the money and resources saved to repairing the damage the rich nations have done to the environment and helping the third world.

What follows is the story of how the Russians and Americans seek to neutralise these naive, amateur terrorists, all the time pondering whether or not the whole exercise is an elaborate bluff. The security agencies of both super-powers are shown (quite correctly) as ruthless gangs of torturers and killers...But will they save the day, should they save the day.

This is a thriller and has not got a lot to do with science fiction beyond the credentials of the authors. Nevertheless, it is an exciting story, told with competent characterisation and a great deal of tension. One problem with the sort of political novel, that relies on a

contemporary background which in this case is the Cold War, is that events might leave it behind. The collapse of the Soviet Union has, of course, done just that. Never mind. It could happen to anyone.

Fiona Cooper The Empress of The Seven Oceans

Black Swan, 1992, 381pp, £5.99
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Not so much a lesbian-feminist historical fantasy; more of a Politically Correct Daydream set in a nebulous past that demands no tedious research to get the details right. The braided storylines follow the fortunes of several groups of women, a mermaid and an octopus (yes, the octopus is a lesbian and a feminist too) as they hijack a ship away to the South Seas to seek their destiny. The Bad Guys are, of course, Men. But not all males are inherently evil: several turn out to be gay (and thus at least provisionally okay). The women are mostly witches (nice witches), and organised evil is represented by the christian church.

Neither the depthless, unsatisfying background nor the one-dimensional characters were developed enough to divert my attention from the episodic disconnection of the storyline. The book is meant to be frothy, of course: light entertainment. And certainly the world could do with more lesbian froth. But I constantly found myself irritated rather than charmed: comparing **Empress** unfavourably with e.g., Ellen Galford's **Moll Cutpurse: Her True Story**. Plotting and humour are subordinated to ideological soundness, and the book takes its feminism very, very seriously. I did enjoy the descriptions of witchcraft and women's magic. Some of these briefly engendered a real sense of wonder, mystery and delight.

So I end up with rather mixed feelings. I'm pleased that publishers are happy to accept second-rate lesbian-feminist fiction (if something is worth doing, it's worth doing badly); and if a lesbian-feminist book doesn't have to be seventeen times as good as an equivalent non-lesbian-feminist book to get published, that's good.

But I have a faint, uneasy sense that somewhere in the background of this book are people who believe - still - that simply to mention the word "lesbian" is radical, and that's radical enough; as if the word is so dangerous it might blow up in their faces. This is true, of course, particularly in the current social climate of increasing sexual repression and homophobia. But it is also true that to be a lesbian is to be normal. For me, the most effective lesbian-feminist books; the funniest humour, the most imaginative fantasies, the most touching love stories, are those which affirm the reality of feminist and lesbian experience by assuming its normality, and going on from there to parody, extrapolate or romance about that reality. This book fails to do that for me.

Craig Shaw Gardner Scheherazade's Night Out

Headline, 1992, £4.99, 346pp
Reviewed by Alan Fraser.

Scheherazade's Night Out is the third book of Gardner's series from the stories of the Arabian Nights, the first book of which was **The Other Sinbad**. I obtained a good source book, **The Penguin Tales From The Thousand-And-One Nights**, translated by N.J. Dawood, and verified that Gardner's book is a very accurate retelling of the original tale of Scheherazade. After finding his wife cuckolding him with forty slaves, King Shahryar of Baghdad kills her, and takes to wife a succession of young beautiful virgins, each of which he has executed in the morning after the wedding night. After three years, the only eligible virgin in the land is Scheherazade, the daughter of his Vizier. However, being well-versed in all the legends of the land, she saves herself from execution by being such a marvellous storyteller that the King lets her live to continue the stories.

To spin everything out from night to night she tells a series of tales within tales within tales within tale, which Gardner renders by starting the beginning of every paragraph in the book with half a line of quotation marks, as well as inserting half-page long titles reminding you exactly which tale within which tale within... is being restarted. Capping it off, the whole book (except the last chapter) is itself a tale being told by Scheherazade to Ozzie the Djinn, who has captured her, both Sinbads, Ali Baba, and Aladdin. Like Death in Terry Pratchett's books, Ozzie TALKS IN CAPITAL LETTERS, but he's eventually outwitted, and everybody lives happily ever after.

I found Gardner's Ebenezer and Wuntvor books (**A Malady Of Magicks**, etc) mildly amusing, but this book is, in my opinion, completely unfunny. If you want to read a modern edition of the Arabian Nights stories, seek out the Penguin translation of the tales which is an unexpurgated version that retains the humour and bawdiness of the original stories. If you just want a laugh, look up our Tel.

Sheila Gilluly The Giant Of Inishkerry The Second Book of the Painter

Headline, 1992, £4.50, 282pp
Reviewed by Alan Fraser.

Gilluly is a native of H.P. Lovecraft's New England state of Rhode Island, who currently teaches English and Creative Writing at a high school in Maine. Her previous books are **The Greenbrin Queen Trilogy**, and the **First Book of the Painter**, **The Boy From The Burren**, set in the same world.

I am not normally a fan of Celtic fantasy, but Gilluly has used the Celtic mythology as a framework from which to generate ideas rather than as the obtrusive foreground it has become in the work of some other authors. After **The Boy From The Burren**, **The Giant**

Of Inishkerry continues the story of Aengus the former Painter. Aengus survived the massacre of his village Skellig Inishbuffin by the merciless Wothounds but threw himself off a cliff to commit suicide. Horribly mutilated by his impact with the rocks, he was rescued by a dwarf pirate ship, and woke to find himself colour-blind, his Painting skills gone. In this world Painting is not just an art, but a means of reaking very powerful magic, so Aengus has been crippled both physically and spiritually. This second book is set four years after the first, during which time Aengus has grown to be a giant among both dwarves and men, and has assumed the persona of the Haunt, the avenger of his people to the Wollhounds and the man from his village who betrayed them. The story continues with Aengus meeting a sorceress who persuades him and his pirate friends to go on a quest across the sea to find the fabled Maid of the Vale, and save the witches' haven from being overrun by the hordes of the evil lord known as the Wolf. The Wolf captures the Maid in order to perform a travesty of a coronation with a puppet of his as king so he can rule over the kingdom himself. The task falls to Aengus to rescue the Maid and prevent the ceremony, but to do so he must face and defeat Jorem, the Wolf's chief captain, the man who led the slaughter of Aengus' village.

Despite my usual misgivings about transatlantic Celtic fantasy I really enjoyed this book, even though at the end it seems that to save his adopted people Aengus may have sacrificed all hope of ever regaining his Painting ability. Gilluly tells a powerful tale, creates characters who capture our imagination, and uses them hard. I shall certainly seek out more books by her, and await the next book in this series eagerly.

Elizabeth Hand Æstival Tide

Bantam, 1992, 399pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

This book stinks.

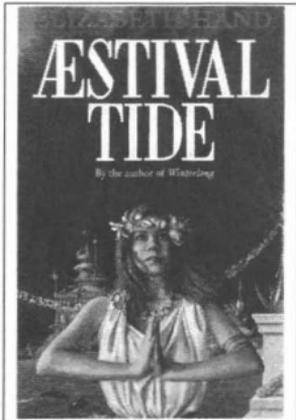
Or, to use its own ornate prose, a pungent aroma wafts from every page. Sweat an cinnamon, frangipani and burnt roses. I cannot recall ever coming across another book which dwelt at such sensuous length with smell. There are colours and sounds and tastes also, so that at times you must struggle through a dense jungle of sense images in an attempt to find the tree of plot.

The clue lies in the opening quotation, from **The Torture Garden** by Octave Mirbeau, one of the erotic works of decadence which appeared at the end of the last century. This is a decadence for our own *fin de siècle*, a lush wallowing in moral, social and physical decay.

Thus we get a massive ziggurat of a city long past its sell-by date. The lower levels have long been abandoned, but now the topmost levels where the autocratic rulers live are starting to experience the cracks and tremors that precede collapse. Here, the dead

are raised again to serve as slaves, drugs are used freely, dreams are interpreted by hermaphrodites, and cruel murder is the sport of the nobility. Here, also, is adherence to festivals and rituals whose purpose is long forgotten.

Within this playground of the senses our doomed innocents try to escape their fates long enough to enable them to escape the city. Death is one of the most common occurrences in this book. While deep in the rotting sub-levels of the city, a pristine mechanical woman from before the fall rises to life once more, filled with her memories of its own culture as a promise of rebirth and redemption.



In this unlikely milieu there is a curious feminist message being conveyed. The woman of glass and metal has been tutored by a feminist and the message of hope she brings is clothed in feminist principles. The fragments of history which she also reveals suggest that the earlier fall from grace was engineered by men against women, that the architects of this cruel regime were men. Yet the three rulers of the city, those who take the lead in every cruelty and moral lapse, are all women. The message conveyed is ambiguous to say the least.

Æstival Tide is too ornate for my taste, but there is no doubt that Elizabeth Hand has produced an effective and often invigorating (if oddly unnerotic) work of decadence for our modern age.

Joanne Harris The Evil Seed

Warner, 1992, 425pp, £4.99
Reviewed by B. S. Cullum

Vampire tales appear to have been proliferating at some rate during the last decade, although this may be more a case of my noticing SFnal writers as they cross and blur the divide between genres plying their trade in search of an honest crust. In fact, this

being a first novel, any preconceptions will relate to the subject rather than the writer.

The narrative juxtaposes a 1977 diary, largely recounting events that had taken place some three decades previously in the life of Daniel Holmes, with what is happening in the here-and-now 1990 lifetime of Alice Liddell, one of the main viewpoint characters. The reader, having been shown portions of the diary before Alice finds it, together with other shifts in viewpoint, mean this is certainly not a book to be skimmed. Nor would the discerning reader wish to do so.

As Harris tells it, vampires are as much eaters of flesh as drinkers of blood. Their force of will is such that they can resurrect their lesser followers, whilst they themselves may be reincarnated by the race memory of their earlier manifestations, but more particularly it seems, by the memory that exists in the minds of those whose lives they have most recently touched. Thus even those that seek to destroy them may, by this very obsession, facilitate their return.

Although Holmes has "died" more than a decade before Liddell begins her battle, there are resonances between them. Towards the end it seems that time unfolds and there is perhaps a stronger link.

Writers are told to write what they know: a graduate of that University, Joanne Harris knows Cambridge, she knows her pre-Raphaelite art and, on the basis of this offering, she knows how to synthesize a compelling addition to the Vampire mythology. Recommended.

Shaun Hutson Heathen

Little, Brown, 1992, 311pp, £14.99
Reviewed by Maureen Speller

Shaun Hutson is ostensibly a horror novelist and yet this novel contains little to suggest horror. Instead, we find that classic thriller device, the woman in jeopardy. The woman in question is Donna Ward, widowed when her husband, the author Christopher Ward, is killed in a car crash. Worse, it seems that her husband was having an affair; the other woman was also killed in the crash. Donna is thus obliged to re-examine her life with Ward in the light of this discovery.

Before his death, Ward stole and concealed a book, which certain people are now keen to recover. Donna must rely on the skimpiest clues as she retraces his steps in order to solve the mystery of his death, and discover whether he was unfaithful. Wherever she goes, death seems to follow. Bent on discovering the truth, she is prepared to confront her pursuers, and to shoot to kill.

Clearly, Hutson finds his female protagonist fascinating, but he seems incapable of treating her as anything other than a castrated man, made whole once again by the possession of the gun. Prior to her mission to explore Ward's life, Donna is shown as vulnerable, without real purpose, then suddenly metamorphoses into a ruthless, gun-toting but somehow sexless character.

The rest of the plot seems insubstantial, dominated as it is by this angel of death. The supernatural horror promised in the title turns out to be an almost routine ability to control the essence of inanimate objects: the missing book is the grimoire of the hellfire club, which is predictably still active. These elements provide impetus for the plot, without ever being central to it. Time and again, Hutson returns to his pistol-packing mama to engineer yet another escape from her male attackers.

In a field which is so dominated by the masculine, it would be tempting to believe that Hutson is addressing its famously problematic attitude towards women by offering us a strong female character. But Hutson offers a woman who seems more like an incomplete man, clutching the gun as a penis-substitute. Without it, Donna snivels in darkness, in stereotypical female fashion, but with it she can take on the world just like a man. Or, more ambiguously, she becomes the figure of male fantasy, a point made most explicitly when she unexpectedly considers suicide, and puts the gun into her mouth ready to shoot.

I am dissatisfied with this novel. Firstly, and most importantly, it fails to horrify. One would have thought that murders and blood sacrifices would be quite sufficient to horrify the reader, but Hutson presents them as though he were reading the news, with about the same effect. There is no tension, no drama, in this novel. Everything happens as though pre-ordained; genre properties are maintained throughout. Secondly, Hutson gives the appearance of breaking through the masculine straight-jacket of horror writing to give us something new, only to renege and offer the same old fare; women are still nothing more than fodder for the activities of brutal killers or the fantasies of adolescent boys. The status quo is momentarily disturbed, but the closing pages of the novel ensure that it is restored.

Stephen King The Dark Tower

Volume 3: The Waste Lands
Warner Books, 1992, 512pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Martin Sutherland

The *Waste Lands* is the third book in Stephen King's epic tale of the Gunslinger Roland, but it can be read quite easily on its own without any prior knowledge of the first two books. Very easily, in fact, as all the characters have been drawn and fleshed out previously, and Mr King doesn't spend the first three hundred pages detailing their childhoods and backgrounds. Let me warn you in advance, though, that this is most definitely not the third book in a trilogy, and does not come to a comfortable close at the end of its 500-odd pages. Finishing the last chapter feels like running off a cliff at high speed and suddenly noticing that the ground has gone away.

The story takes place in a parallel world that has "moved on", and slipped into decay and madness. The Gunslingers used to be the

force of law and order here, as well as symbols of all that is good and honest: Roland is the last of these, and can best be described as a Wild West mystic sheriff. In the second book of the series, *The Drawing Of The Three*, Roland pulled two people, Eddie and Susannah, through from our world to his, in order for them to accompany him on his quest for the Dark Tower. This Tower is a semi-mythical structure that lies at the heart of the world, and appears to be holding it together or letting it fall apart.

After being attacked by a 70-foot bear with a bad head cold, our three heroes follow the path of a Beam through forests and plains to the edges of Mid-World, and onwards to the city of Lud, where they end up in a riddling match with Blaine, a senile train. On the way they encounter demons and long-lost technology, kindness from villagers and cruelty from kidnappers, and rescue Jake (a character from the first book, *The Gunslinger*) from a time-travel paradox.

The Dark Tower is marketed as general fiction probably because it is such a rich blend of fantasy, SF and horror that it is utterly impossible to pigeonhole. It is symbolic, mysterious, darkly humorous ("...don't you get it? You're killing each other over a piece of music that was never even released as a single!"), and packed to the gills with unstoppable adventure. No King fan (does it show that I'm one?) will want to miss this book, and anyone who loves good, exciting stories with well-developed characters should think twice about passing it by.

Michael P. Kube-McDowell Exile

Headline, 1992, 289pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Colin Bird

This is a well written conceptual breakthrough novel set on a colonised planet where the inhabitants cling to ancient technology, but have forgotten their origins. The truth is concealed by a regressive regime who punish all dissenters by banishing them from the geographically agrarian rings surrounding the city of Ana. One day Meer receives a messenger from the community of exiles who tells him that the traitor Kedar Nan wishes to return to Ana to die at home and wishes Meer to be his guide. From a separate flashback narrative, we learn that Meer and Kedar Nan were once friends who revolted against their leaders when strange lights on the horizon gave evidence of outside contact. This revolt was violently suppressed and Meer escaped detection by betraying many of his colleagues in the process.

I thought the story was about to descend into a clichéd quest as Meer travelled out of the city and traversed the world outside the inhabited conclave. To the author's credit the story continues to develop believably as Meer discovers the community of exiles and begins to reconcile his guilty past. As he returns to Ana with Kedar Nan he realises that he must make one more attempt to discover the truth and to overthrow the tyrannical leader.

A refreshing book where the plot is driven by the character's responses to believable situations, rather than an author's intrusive machinations. The prose is crisp and readable, allowing the reader to become emotionally involved without becoming swamped with dense description and explicit motivation. The dual narrative works surprisingly well, fleshing out the characters and slowly revealing the key plot elements; although there is enough implicit information scattered throughout the text to allow the reader to speculate. Even on a basic level it's a pretty good SF thriller with a bit of action thrown in at the conclusion, but *Exile* really succeeds as a subtle work of fiction. Supreme storytelling which should see Kube-McDowell on a few award short-lists.

Richard Laymon The Beast House

NEL, 1992, 294pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Bill Johnson

This is a run of the mill U.S. screamer. The *Beast House* of the title is a dilapidated old house on a remote stretch of the California coast. It plays home to a set of waxworks depicting the horrors of its past. I quote from the blurb, "The old woman who showed them round was well-practised in her grim, money spinning tale of the mysterious beast that had killed again and again. Of course it was all in the past and all nonsense. Anyone would agree to that. Until, trapped, they heard, then smelled and felt the white, night-time creature that had come, grunting and spitte-slicked, for their bodies, their blood."

The story is told in a competent manner that keeps you turning the pages (provided that it is not too near bed-time), but it seemed to me as if the author was keeping more than one eye on Hollywood and the possibilities of a film script. Certainly it was very, very reminiscent of the pot-boiling films that choke up the shelves of local video stores - nubile girls and muscular Vietnam veteran marines set out to destroy the blood ravening monster in its lair. Darn it! I've told you the whole story now!

This of course deprives the book of any surprises it might have had. Unlike the videos, however, the book boasts plenty of sex and violence. After that what else is there to say?

Well, it is long, about 75 pages too long. But then, most books are nowadays. (Have publishers started buying manuscripts by the pound?) If you really like horror books and you don't mind if there is no original thought in them and you have a spare fiver burning a hole in your pocket, you could go out and buy it. Alternatively, you could give the money to charity and watch yet another rerun of the Carry On films on TV. Decisions! Decisions!

Brian Lumley Spawn Of The Winds

Grafton, 1992, 224pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Bill Johnson

Spawn Of The Winds concerns a telepathic Texan, Hank Silberhutte. He has a build like Schwarzenegger and spends his time chasing a Chulu deity called Ithaqa - the Wind Walker. Best of all he chases this lord of the winds in an aeroplane armed with a machine gun. (Deep groan - Oh no!) Surprisingly enough he fails to kill the baddy. Instead he gets himself kidnapped by the Wind Walker. This superbaddy divides his time between Earth, around the area of the Arctic circle, and his home in an alternative dimension, a frozen planet called Borea. (Now there's an original name for the home of a wind god.) He kidnaps people from Earth and takes them back to

Borea. Don't ask me why he does it, but he has been at it for thousands of years. He has an unfortunate pendant for bonking white women but in all this time he has only managed to produce one daughter who has inherited some of his god-like abilities. What happens next? Yes, you've got it. She doesn't like Daddy and she falls in love with the well-muscled

Texan. The bulk of the book, nearly 200 pages, is concerned with the battle on Borea between the baddy's wolf rider followers and his daughter's bear rider followers. And is all this mayhem exciting? Well, it might be if the characters were anything more than badly drawn shadow puppets and Lumley did not telegraph his punches so far in advance that you always know what is coming. The only reason I managed to finish the book is that I had to in order to write this review and, having done so, the kindest thing I can find to say about it is that it is rubbish.

Patricia A. McKillip The Sorceress and the Cygnet

Pan, 1992, 224pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Jessica Yates

Patricia McKillip is known for the Pre-Raphaelite beauty of her writing — and the relative infrequency of her publications. Like Ursula Le Guin, she has written fantasy in British English, not American English — but Le Guin devises stronger plots. McKillip's characters do take rather a long time to get the point without, it seems to me, overpowering external obstacles; the plot of her new fantasy exemplifies this by turning on the refusal of one of the heroines to know herself fully, thus setting cosmic figures in motion.

It is, however, not until the surprise climax that we discover the reason for the disturbance in the heavens which has brought the constellations governing the sky above a fantasy realm, down to earth to threaten it's rulers. The Cygnet is both a constellation and the emblem of the royal house: the other star signs being Gold King, Fire Bear, the Dancer, Blind Lady and Warlock, who all take on human shape with apparently sinister purpose. There are three protagonists: Corleu, a young man of a Wayfolk (i.e. a gypsy) tribe in search of his lost beloved; Nyx, the sorceress of the title who has deserted the house of the Cygnet in a quest for magical knowledge in the swamplands; and Meguet, her cousin, who makes a late, dramatic entry in chapter six as a classic woman warrior dressed in black with her family's ancestral sword at her belt, and immediately snatches the reader's interest away from Corleu and Nyx. Unconventionally, Meguet does not wait until the story's end before claiming her lover, the household Gatekeeper of humbler birth, who courteously waits for her to woo him.

Unlike the usual fantasy quest where a group of companions are given a task and know their enemy from the outset, our three protagonists do not know what they are looking for, and neither do we. I much preferred my second reading, when I had grasped the plot. This is a book to grow on you: one can forgive McKillip the indeterminacies of plot when partnered by such exquisite prose style.

Christopher Pike See You Later

Hodder & Stoughton,
1992, 189pp, £3.99

Reviewed by Martin Sutherland

Christopher Pike is rapidly becoming a major force in young adult horror fiction, and with books like *See You Later* it is easy to see why. Mark Forum has just graduated from high school. He writes computer games, is shy, witty and intelligent, but is troubled by a congenital heart defect. Out of the blue he falls in love with Becky, a girl who works in his local record shop, and asks her out, only to discover painfully that she already has a boyfriend. The love story between the two of



them would have ended here but for the intervention of Vincent and Kara, a young couple who seem uncannily familiar to Mark, though he can't quite place them... Kara is intent on breaking up Becky and her boyfriend, and in doing so tips the first domino in a disastrous chain of events.

Despite the rather menacing cover, **See You Later** isn't quite horror, and the ominously mysterious events in the first half of the book turn out to be the set-up for a race-against-time-travel thriller. The plot is straightforward and exciting, with an unexpectedly unexpected ending, but it is the characters that really pep up the book: they are so easy to identify with. The first chapter is almost a textbook example of how to get a reader personally involved in the story. Teenagers will see themselves in the characters, adults will recognize reflections of their younger selves, and after the first 18 pages it is impossible to put the book down any more. It's an undemanding but fun read if you have a few spare hours to kill.

Julia Taylor-Stanley Mystica

Mandarin, 1992, 346pp, £3.99
Reviewed by Andy Mills

Picking this book up for the first time, one would not hold out much hope for the contents. With its cover featuring a gargoyle's head, its one word title and unknown author, it looks as though it belongs on the cut-price shelves of a bargain shop. But one would have been misled. **Mystica** is actually an enjoyable read. Unusually for a horror novel these days, it is not a gruesome book; the chills it conveys owe more to "old fashioned" ghost and witchcraft stories.

For about half of the novel, Taylor-Stanley's plot is leisurely and straightforward. Following an accident which left him injured and his girlfriend in a coma, Miles Hanson, scion of a wealthy Connecticut family, tries to leave his troubles behind by taking a vacation in Venice. He is captivated by the city. Ensnared in a boarding house with a matronly landlady, Miles explores Venice, befriends a cockney punk and falls for a beautiful Italian girl, Daniela. But she has designs on Miles that are not exactly wholesome. These designs come to a climax in the Ca' Rezzonico museum. At this point the languid book moves into overdrive and the plot twists and turns as it also becomes a detective story.

Julia Taylor-Stanley's debut is a good addition to the horror genre. Her descriptions of Venice bring the sights, sounds and smells of the city alive and she manipulates the complex strands of the novel with dexterity. Occasionally, her writing becomes too florid, even ridiculous. "As he walked on, his intellect wrestled with the facts, twisting them into submissive conclusion", she observes at one point. The conclusion that the reader comes to is that the editor was asleep here. **Mystica** reads like a screenplay and is populated by rather too many beautiful people: Miles and

the detective, on the side of the angels; Daniela and Alicia for the opposition (though I don't think that Taylor-Stanley could quite decide who should take the lead roles). As Molly Brown said of Graham Joyce's **Dark Sister** in **Vector 169**, you finish the book and start casting the parts.

With a little more control of her material, Julia Taylor-Stanley could be a name for the future. As it is, you have here a solid, entertaining first novel.

Freda Warrington A Blackbird in Amber

NEL, 1992, 437pp, £4.99

Freda Warrington A Blackbird in Twilight

NEL, 1992, 387pp, £4.99

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

A year after they brought out the first two volumes in the Blackbird sequence **NEL** have released the third and fourth. They are more two pairs than a quartet - **A Blackbird in Darkness** ended with the Worm M'Guffin and apparently all his demons and human emissaries destroyed. **A Blackbird in Amber** reveals that one survived, devoid of some powers, but still totally evil, intent on world domination and willing to become involved in any subterfuge to achieve it.

The previous novel pair moved between two worlds on a number of planes - this pair stick to the earthy plane, and the vast continent of Vradrav, where one Empire is striving in its turn for power, and various kingdoms of varying moral worth are opposing the imperial drive.

That empire, Gorethria, supplied one of the trio of heroes in the first pair. As **Amber** begins, internal revolutions in the palace quickly lead to a boy being replaced Xaedrek taking his place. Xaedrek is a philosopher-king, unfortunately without a mind to appreciate the higher thought, and quickly the one surviving demon becomes his eminence grise. Working together in his laboratory they begin to distill spirit of tortured slave into a magical potion to further empower the soldiers of the empire to more military quest.

Meanwhile, two women appear to save the world - both former mistresses of Xaedrek. One of them, Kharan, discovers a happier love with a stable-hand, while the other, Mellorn, is disconcerted to discover that the new power of the empire is based on vivisection and magic even though she herself is a sorceress.

Kharan's stable-lad is sentenced to the old human-hunt, while Xaedrek's love for her lets her off with a sentence of beheading. You can guess whether the plot allows either of these sentences to end in their intended conclusion. Mellorn escapes from the palace too.

So follows the epic trek of three heroes across a mythic continent with a completely different flora and fauna from the home life of our own dear planet. And although supernatural laws such as sorcery work here, there are some strange suppressions of

natural law.

As in the first two books there are some good set pieces of invention, but they are never related to the plot. The characters go there and meet new circumstances, but **the** they leave. The two best are in **Amber** - the lizard-loving community of Mangorav with its vast pyramids in the jungle, which is followed by the shifting sands of Ungrem where humans live in the pouches and of the milk of vast sand-burrowing marsupials. But the tribe are taken by the Gorethian army and no more is heard from them. The invention occupies only fourteen pages.

A lot is made in the books of the difference between the natural and the supernatural. However, as Mellorn spends so long worrying about the use of her supernatural powers and why she is usually too late in using them, the stories start to forget the natural - the huge pyramids, for instance, are hollow, one having a central chamber "sixty feet square" and with "an apex high above their heads", but of course all pyramids are solid because classical civilizations had not invented the lintel, and the sloping forty degree wall is the easiest way to build high without using much material. This is true for Egypt, Asia and South America - there is no reason why it would not be true for Vradrav, except for the need to create that sense of wonder. You get the barbaric splendour without its causality.

I guess a lot of readers will forgive the books that, for their other invention.

Shorts

J. G. Ballard Vermilion Sands

Phoenix, 1992, 208pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

On his preface to this 1963 collection of linked stories, Ballard wrote: "It is a curious paradox that almost all science fiction, however far removed in time and space, is really about the present day. Very few attempts have been made to visualize a unique and self-contained future that offers no warning to us."

Whatever he may have intended when he first began to explore this universal Torremolinos, this suburb of the soul, Ballard was clearly writing about his present. Here, lovingly enfolding his wrecked human beings, his artists tumbling to their fate, are all the trappings and emotions of the 50s and 60s. However curious this resort may seem on the surface, with its sea creatures that have taken to the air, the cars and clothes, the attitudes and ambitions are all firmly of their time, as is the total absence of anyone who is not white, middle-class and usually Anglo-Saxon.

And it is this evocation of a particular place and time which is the strength of these stories, for the plots have a repetitive sameness to them. A male inhabitant of Vermilion Sands speaks elegiacally of an incident which feels as if it is far in the past.

though internal evidence often suggests it may have been as recent as yesterday. The narrator is generally an artist of some sort, the trigger for the cataclysmic events he describes is invariably a woman. Yet while the women in these stories have a touch of the demon about them, the man is doomed from the outset. The story always tells of a man swept helplessly along by events unleashed by the magic or malevolence of a woman.

Vermilion Sands is Ballard not at his best, but at play. An eternal holiday resort provides a perfect backdrop for his images of crumbling decay and of the unkindness of women. Only in his first published story, 'Prima Belladonna', is the formula genuinely fresh, and only in the last story in this collection, 'The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista', does he escape the straight-jacket long enough to display the genuine capacity for shock and horror offered by the setting. Yet even so, this is a collection to be enjoyed simply for the pleasure of watching a craftsman shaping his vision with more care and subtlety than just about any of our contemporaries.

J. G. Ballard
The Voices of Time
Phoenix, 1992, 197pp, £4.99
 Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

This short story collection was first published in 1963. Ballard has said that if there were one story by which he would wish to be remembered it would be 'The Voices of Time', it deals with so many of the themes that concern him: "the sense of isolation within the infinite time and space of the universe, the biological fantasies and the attempt to read the complex codes represented by drained swimming pools and abandoned airfields, and above all the determination to break out of a deepening psychological entropy and make some kind of private peace with the unseen powers of the universe." (From *The Best Science Fiction of J. G. Ballard*, 1977).

All those things that he lists can be found in the other stories in this collection as well. But what Ballard has always done is bring things home — it is not space that is fascinating, it is here; it is not the future that is interesting, it is now. He once said that the only truly alien planet is Earth, and I suppose that could be extended to say that the only true stranger is oneself. The unseen powers are close at home — so Faulker 'The Overloaded Man' in the third story wants to switch everything off, while Abel, a sixteen year old boy, on a prison-like spaceship in 'Thirteen Centaurs', accepts his imprisonment, and in 'The Watch-Towers' Renthall alone maintains his rejection but also his ability to see the towers. What Abel sees from his secret porthole on the spaceship is passed over in a paragraph, and the story ends with a psychologist realizing that his subject was studying him.

We know where Ballard saw the drained swimming pools and abandoned airfields, but until they were re-cast in his SF they were not complex codes. Now they are. In the



Artwork by Claire Winbigler

Ballardian world everything tends to entropy except the minds that revel in it — their patterns grow more bizarre, their justifications more stretched, but equally they confirm their existence in the here and now.

A lot of SF dates quickly; this collection has not. I am typing this on J. G. Ballard's sixty-second birthday. This collection has been printed and re-printed ever since its first publication. Its effect in another thirty years, when Ballard is the grand old man of English letters, will still be as strong, I feel sure.

David Sutton
& Stephen Jones (eds)
Dark Voices 4:
The Pan Book of Horror
Pan, 1992, 317pp, £4.99
 Reviewed by Stephen Payne

There has been little movement recently, at least from the major British publishers, in the original horror anthology market. So it's good to see that **Dark Voices**, still bearing the brand of **The Pan Book of Horror**, continues to hold the torch aloft for what is, in the main, short British horror fiction. And it's not a disappointment.

From the quietly evocative 'They Take' by John Brunner, a sort of **Straw Dogs** set in rural Italy, to the truly vicious 'Razor White' by Charles A. Gramlich, a story which would not be out of place in **Grue**, this collection takes a snapshot of the current state of contemporary horror and I have to admit this collage of different stories and styles does work. What is also encouraging, is that in addition to the well-known authors, for example Kim Newman's bizarre 'Week Woman' or Graham Masterton's 'Absence of Beast' — all child's eye view with a twist ending — or Stephen Gallagher's sad tale set on the pathetic fringes of the music business, 'Casey, Where He Lies', the editors have also selected stories from newer, younger writers. Indeed, two of the stories are from previously unpublished authors, 'A Night With Claudette' by Bernard Donoghue and 'Cold as Iron' by W. Elizabeth Taylor, and though both are rather slight, they fit the pattern of **Dark Voices** very well and round it out nicely. The only negative point about this collection is the inclusion of a couple of reprints. 'By Bizarre Hands' by Joe R. Lansdale and 'Pick Me Up' by David Schow. Both stories are good, but they seem out of place here — as if the

editors felt they needed a couple of big international names to help sell the anthology. They don't; the remaining 18 tales are quite capable of standing up for themselves.

I liked **Dark Voices** and if you enjoy short contemporary horror fiction, I think you will too.

Shared Worlds

Robert N. Charrette
Battletech: Wolf Pack
ROC, 1992, 442pp, £4.99
 Reviewed by Graham Andrews.

Wolf Pack is Volume 4 in the **Battletech™** series. The previous volumes are **Way Of The Clans**, **Bloodname**, **Falcon Guard** (all by Robert Thurston) and Volume 5 is **Natural Selection** (by Michael A. Stackpole).

"My name is Brian Cameron. I am a MechWarrior of (Jaime) Wolf's Dragoons. I would like to say that I am only a simple soldier, but my friends tell me that my attempt to tell this tale makes me more than that...my hope is that those who come after will profit from the mistakes and experience of those who went before" (p. 17).

But Cameron is only a simple soldier, and so is everybody else appearing in the three Parts (Intermix, Old Feuds, Crucible) plus Epilogue. "It's a dirty job and I love doing it" would be near the mark. **Biophibia**. Malignant escapism. Power fantasies.

Technoporn. I'd give you my detailed opinion about **Wolf Pack**, but (a) you've probably got the general idea and (b) someone might leave a copy of **Vector** lying around for the servants to read.

The most entertaining part of **Wolf Pack** is the Glossary, which tells us everything we wanted/didn't want to know about the **Battletech™** universe. For example...
BLOODNAME: "The clans have approximately 760 Bloodnames. These are..." (pp.423-4).
BATTLEMECH: "BattleMechs are the most powerful war machines ever built. First developed by..." (pp433-4). Stuff like that. Also, for those people who don't do unit dictionaries: **BATTALION, COMPANY, PLATOON and REGIMENT**.

Robert N. Charrette and others of his wargaming ilk should be set down in a real war zone. Bosnia? That'll do nicely, thank you. 'The toughest hide will last the longest' (old Belfast saying).

Seriously, folks, my basic attitude towards **Wolf Pack** and other we'll-do-anything-to-anybody-for-the-highest-bidder emetics can be summed up as follows: Nothing that is wrong in principle can be right in practice. Or, to put it even more succinctly: "Sod this for a game of soldiers!"

Nigel Findley
2 X S
ROC, 1992, 324pp, £4.99
 Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

This novel is also called **Shadowrun 4** - it is

the fourth in a series of novels tied in with the Role Playing Game of the same name. Luckily for me it stands on its own. This is essentially a cyberpunk thriller, with some magical overtones – but the magical features are not very important. They get the hero out of scrapes occasionally, but it would have been just as easy to make him a little stronger or a tad quicker on the draw.

Dirk Montgomery is a self-employed private eye in Seattle on 2050, who is employed by Jocasta Yzerman after he has avoided her attempts to kill him, to find the killers of her sister. His investigations soon take him into the murky world of private ambulance companies, the vast multinationals behind them necessary to finance the new world of prosthesis, and into the shadows of wireheading and illegal chip implants. The latest bootleg chip giving the most vivid mental worlds in 2XS (just say it out loud).

I reckon I've read everything here somewhere else, but that did not stop me enjoying the book. It is obviously written by someone being censored for juvenile reading — there is a lot of swearing, but the oath is "fraging" and the noun "drek" (which author and censor do not seem to know is the Yiddish equivalent of "shit" or "merde"), and if someone asked to be recommended reading like it, I'd send them to Robert B. Parker and Andrew Vacchs, but it was a lot better than anything else associated with RPG I have read.

L. A. Graf Death Count

Titan, 1992, 276pp, £3.99
Reviewed by Andy Mills

Death Count is number 57 in the series of **Star Trek** novels being released by Titan. Need I say more? After all, if you're a Trekkie you'll probably buy it anyway and if you're not, why should you purchase this book as opposed to the previous fifty-six? The short answer is, you shouldn't. Graf's hack-work offers no more than a non-Trekkie would imagine, except that it does provide the odd (presumably unintentional) laugh.

I don't envy L. A. Graf, whoever he or she is. Character development is well-nigh impossible, given that the cast have to comply with the audience's perception of how they should behave throughout the book. Similarly, dramatic tension is also difficult to achieve. At one point, Chekov is trying to deal with a bomb on the Enterprise. Does he die in the explosion? Three guesses!

The Enterprise has a saboteur on board who is killing people. In addition, it has a team of auditors, there to inspect the crew's efficiency, who have the temerity to be critical of Kirk and Chekov (who is in charge of security). The chief auditor is drawn most unsympathetically, but you only have to say he's right: the plot of this novel only works because the starship's security is so inept. (Chekov doesn't agree. "Since I assumed command of security, department fatalities have dropped

more than 28 percent!" he declares proudly, presumably achieving this by refusing to allow anonymous guards to join Kirk's landing parties).

There is some nifty prose here too. In chapter five "the battered roar of warning sirens" is augmented by "jolling noises" and "hissing explosions" ("hissing...?"). And in chapter twenty it's revealed that Uhura and Kirk are really aliens — just check out their eyes: "The communication's officer's dark eyes warmed to rich mahogany with her smile..." (p.256) and "Kirk smiled at her, a quick, understanding smile that lit his eyes to gold..." (p.259).

But what made my day – and those who recall the **Spizz Energi** song will understand my delight — was that on page 125 someone actually asks: "Where's Captain Kirk?"

Harry Harrison & Jack C. Haldeman II Bill The Galactic Hero...On the Planet of the Zombie Vampires

Gollancz, 1992, 217pp, £3.99
Reviewed by B. S. Cullum

Trooper Bill is forced to undertake a long journey acting as MP to a mutinous convict crew on the not-so-good ship *Bounty*. The ship's decrepitude is such that the various jail terms will have been completed because of the length of the journey, a fact which attracts surprisingly little comment from Bill's superiors, one Captain Blight, a Mr Christanson and the android botanist, Caine. Naturally things do not go to plan and Bill is pulled along by events self-consciously reminiscent of the **Alien** films, but perhaps that's enough of the plot...

Of course, if one avoids the plot then of necessity some attention should be paid to the author's themes and, in a comic novel, to the use of humour...

"Witty" allusions are made to many other SF/nal sources, apparently at random, and one or both of the authors took a childish delight in inserting film titles at every appropriate and inappropriate opportunity. Fun is poked at the idiots you see in horror movies who never seem to do the sensible thing; one character commenting, "I guess I should be scared, but what I really feel like doing is wandering around and exploring on my own." Quite.

Fifth in a series hitherto unread (avoided?) by this reviewer, little was encountered to indicate that those not already fans would be converted by this offering from Harrison and his latest collaborator.

Sondra Marshak & Myrna Culbreath (eds) Star Trek – The New Voyages

Titan, 1992, 237pp, £3.99
Reviewed by John D. Owen

This collection of eight **Star Trek** short stories is something out of antiquity, though you wouldn't know it from the publishers' imprint,

where there is no mention of the 1976 first publication, pre-dating all the films and ST:TN.

Read the book, though, and there is no doubt about its seventies origins: not through the stories, which are relatively timeless, but via the dated 'introductions' by various ST luminaries. Roddenberry contributes a forward, while Shatner, Nimoy, Kelley and other cast members provide intros to each story, all along the lines of "isn't it great that the series we worked on ten years ago has so many fans still?" Most intros are terribly self-congratulatory and rarely say anything worthwhile about the stories.

What about the stories? Well, this book gathers together examples of fan fiction, and the quality varies enormously, from the professional competence of Juanita Coulson's 'Intersection Point' to the amateurish whimsy of Marci Ericson's 'The Enchanted Pool'. There isn't anything particularly bad here: just nothing that rises above the merely good. The stories nearly all revolve the Kirk/Spock axis, with only Bones getting a look in as more than a supporting character. At times especially in Doris Beetem's 'The Winged Dreamers', the storyline runs perilously close to giving Spock homosexual leanings towards Kirk (a course followed much more closely in fan fiction of this era), such is the intensity that the writers bestow on the central pairing.

Probably the most powerful story in the book is Shirley Maiewski's 'Mind-Sifter', which opens with somebody recognisably Kirk imprisoned in an asylum in 20th Century America, switching to an Enterprise captained by Spock, who is still looking for Kirk, who disappeared months before while on shore leave. Although the emotional weight of the story is overdone, Maiewski does get across Kirk's terror at having had his mind scrambled (by Klingons), and Spock's single-mindedness in tracing and rescuing his friend.

Overall, this collection is an historical curio, weighed down by its major selling point (the introductions by the cast, touted so heavily on the cover), while not offering a great deal of originality, humour or excitement to offset the dated content.

Misc

Isaac Asimov & Robert Silverberg Nightfall

Pan, 1992, 352pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

You don't want me to review **Nightfall**. You don't want anyone who's actually read Asimov's original short story, or indeed who knows what "sharecropping" involves: a 12 year old who hasn't read any science fiction at all would do nicely. (The introduction, which says that this is really an alien world and when its characters speak of "miles" or "hands" they are speaking of *equivalents* to our terms, seems to address such a person).

That's not me. To be honest, if it were, I would have enjoyed this book a lot. It's got an apocalyptic scenario which plays on some fancy theories about astronomy and a classic 'what-if?' plot - (what if a planet's relationship to a multiple-sun system was such that "Night" came once every 2,049 years?). It's just a pity it doesn't add much to "Nightfall" the short story.

The actual events of the original are inserted about a third of the way through, and Silverberg's fleshing-out of the plot's bare bones is certainly skilful. He changes a few names (like that of the planet itself), adds more character involvement, creates readable scenes out of expository background, and above all extends the story to bring us what happened *after* the cataclysmic vision of darkness and the Stars (reproduced as nearly verbatim as Silverberg can get it). Strangely, this is the oddest part of the adaptation. In one level, it's the imagistic power of the ending power of the ending, and that alone, which makes the Asimov's original more than a run-of-the-mill 'what-if?' pulp by a young and promising writer. On another, the ending which Silverberg eventually moves toward is so bleakly cynical that he is either treating this exercise with the indifference it deserves or recreating Asimov's adolescent apocalypse on more metaphorical grounds.

As a novel, this is competent hackery with glimmerings of more (the characterisation of the renamed Apostle/Cultist, nothing more than Stock Fanatic in the original, is particularly interesting). It's readable, enjoyable and a fascinating technical exercise. True, Silverberg failed to convince me that we really needed this novelization, but I wonder if the mythical 12 year old with which I began might come to think the same of the short story.

Ronan Coghlan The Encyclopaedia of Arthurian Legends

Element Books, 1992, 234pp, £6.99
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This book comprises a brief introduction tracing Arthurian romance in Europe from the earliest extant manuscripts to Tennyson and modern retellings (Alan Garner and Rosemary Sutcliffe are mentioned, impeccably-researched adult fiction by T. H. White and Mary Stewart are not), an alphabetical listing of persons, places and objects mentioned in the early literature, together with brief accounts of the stories or incidents associated with them and a bibliography listing the main early Arthurian sources. It is illustrated with 8 sketch-maps and 12 full-page black and white pictures in neo-Celtic style. The author suggests the book may be of use to people developing new theories/explanations of Arthurian material, and as a sourcebook for fiction writers and scholars (in that order).

There are some curious inclusions (e.g. "Windfall Run: A place in America where, according to legend, the wounded Arthur came to drink the healing waters of the Great

Spirits Spring"), omissions (e.g. Mont St. Michel appears on the of "Arthurian Brittany", but has no entry) and lack of cross-references (e.g. the entry on Merlin gives the original Welsh Myrddin, but there is no cross-referencing entry under Myrddin).

All in all, a book which is neither ornamental enough for the coffee table nor useful enough for the reference shelf.

**Louise Cooper
Revenant**
Grafton, 1992, 325pp, £4.99
**Simon Green
Two Kings In Haven** *Headline,*
1992, 211pp, £4.50
Reviewed by Chris Hart

It is a beleaguered Indigo that wanders into book 7 of Louise Cooper's long running saga. Readers who have followed her thus far must be feeling pretty weary themselves, as they continue to follow her tribulations as she tries to chase the seven demons she inadvertently let loose in Book 1.

Indigo and her wolf companion Grimya arrive at the village of Joyful Travail at an ambulatory pace. The population are an infuriatingly pragmatic bunch who adopt Indigo as a physician. She accepts their ways, thankful of a respite following the arduous 25 years since her Pandoraesque curiosity awakened the demons. Her quest was previously dictated by a lode-stone demon detector, but she abandoned that in the previous volume and Indigo's sense of freedom after the straight-jacket of the lode-stone has been removed is contrasted against the constraints of Joyful Travail and its insipid, precocious people. The peace of the village is soon disturbed when Indigo has to convince the population that there are more things on heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in their philosophies. The hauntings that they ignore offer the chance of a life of 'difference', but it takes a wordy, metaphysical battle with Indigo's altar-ego before they are willing to acknowledge that she has a point. I soon began to realise why this series has received a mixed reaction in my magazine previously, it is high-gloss hum-drum, but told with such sophistication it is hard not to admire her style.

In a stark contrast to the sobriety of the Indigo saga, but equally as benign, is the latest in the hawk and Fisher swords and robbers series, **Two Kings In Haven**. Imagine Fritz Leiber's Grey Mouser and Fafhrd appearing in Starsky and Hutch and you'll get the idea.

Hawk and Fisher are a husband and wife, cop partnership, who are members of the city's crack SWAT team. The opening scenes involve the team attempting to suppress a riot in Damnation Row, a prison that tries to contain the wayward sorcerers and their creations. Wolf Saxon is released from his portrait cell, à la Dorian Grey, and is determined to avenge the city for his imprisonment. The world has changed since

he was locked away from it. His homely code of criminal honour has been discarded long ago, replaced by terrorists hell bent on anarchy. Wolf's simple plot to foil the eponymous two kings is contrasted against the genocide planned by the terrorists.

This is the sixth book in the series that Green rattles off at a devil-may-care pace, resulting in a brisk, fun read that freely borrows from thrillers, while adding a dash of post-Pratchett absurdity of sword and sorcery novels such as Cooper's.

As a foot-note, fantasy followers might be interested to note that this is the second novel I've reviewed this year that has featured a dubious relationship with a wolf. Could bestiality become a universal theme in fantasy novels, like quests for lost rings, etc.? Let's face it, most of these serials are flogging a dead horse anyway.

Graphics

The observant may have noticed that the following two reviews were absent from Andy Sawyer's round-up of graphic novels last issue. Here they are in full (and apologies to all)...

**Terry Murray
& Jeff Anderson
The Shadow's Edge**
Lion, 1992, 48pp, £3.99
**Michael Jan-Friedman,
Peter David & Pablo Marcos
Star Trek:
The Modala Imperative**
Titan, 1992, £8.99
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

I only know Jeff Anderson's art from his part in the Judge Dredd **Democracy Now!** but in **The Shadow's Edge** he confirms my impression as an artist to watch: clean, combining atmospherics and realism. Although there's a Dredd-like feel to some of the early panels, it reminds me less of **2000AD** than more traditional stuff such as **Eagle**, though that may be subliminal recognition of the fact that Lion, like the original **Eagle** comic, is concerned to portray christian values.

However, we're not given doctrine, but an exciting middle-of-the-road fantasy story starting with a cynical half-elf manhunter being offered a commission involving Sheela, a blind girl and her mentor-priest. Sheela has been crowned Queen of a tiny but strategic state, which upsets the balance of power and opens the way for an evil noble to march in with his army. Exactly who's working for whom is not wholly revealed: the story ends rather unsatisfyingly in the air, to be continued in the next volume. It suggests a meaty plot developing, however, some unhappy dialogue, which occasionally reaches woodiness beyond comic-book minimalism. There's potential here, and if the Han Solo-ish character of Madlin is developed this will be really good. There's nothing wildly original, and the moral dice may be well loaded in

advance, but in a world of Watchmen and Sandmen it's necessary to have a solid, 'B' list of graphic novels to provide context for works of genius. **The Shadow's Edge** certainly fulfills that role. It's Anderson's art which carries it off, and I look forward to more.

Finally, we're firmly into genre in **The Modala Imperative**. Two stories (by Friedman and David) bring together **Star Trek** and **The Next Generation**. Kirk, with Chekov (on his first mission with the *Enterprise*) help to foil an unpleasant regime which has taken control of the planet Modala using alien weapons. 100 years later, the Modaliens are celebrating liberation and Picard brings Spock and McCoy to be guests of honour. Out leap the Ferengi who were behind the first affair. I liked the way the elderly Spock and McCoy interacted and the way McCoy is a hero to the "Next Generation" and the one after that. I can't like the plot much with its ever-so-comic-book damp squib of a grand climatic duel, and Walter Koenig's ill-written flux of an introduction is best avoided. **Star Trek** rouses strong feelings among many; if, like me, you experience mild amusement whenever you've nothing better to do than watch it, you'll enjoy this. There's nothing patronising in preferring this comics adaptation to most of the novelizations I've read. For a straightforward adventure story the medium is ideal: it's visually well-paced and (like the TV originals) carried mostly by dialogue. This isn't "graphic novel" as "cutting edge of the new post literate age", but it's an entertainment told in the form best suited to its strengths.

Terry Pratchett Witches Abroad

Corgi, 1992, 286pp, £3.99

Terry Pratchett,
adapted by Scott Rockwell,
illustrated by Steven Ross
The Colour of Magic

Corgi, 1992, £6.99

Reviewed Andy Sawyer

Witches Abroad is, I suspect, an attempt to do two things at once. On the surface, it's an exploration of the Discworld with old favourites Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg and Magrat (plus Greebo, Nanny's cat, and a magic wand that only does pumpkins), travelling through foreign parts to prevent a girl marrying a prince. It's full of glorious one-liners and verbal slapstick between the three. True, Pratchett "did" tourism right at the beginning when he created Twoflower. However, Granny and Nanny are not following Twoflowers's search for the quaint and folkloric. They are the archetypal Brits abroad: either totally suspicious of anything foreign or willing to try anything so long as it's green and lurid with the kick of a mule, and in either case convinced that communication is mostly a matter of shouting very loudly and adding extra vowels to the ends of words.

Underneath, we have the reason for the journey; the terrifying ability of Stories to twist reality into the desired state, so that heroines treated as skivvies have no option but to go to

the ball and marry the Prince. And the Godmother, understanding the nature of Stories, is using it for her own manipulative ends. This is Pratchett being seriously funny as opposed to satirical, looking at the nature of good and evil and the choices some people have to make to be one of the two *whether they like it or not*. And to keep all this in the realm of comedy, there's a few characters like the diminutive Great Lover Casanunda to keep the gags going.

The colour of Magic was the first exploration of the Discworld and introduced us to the failed wizard Rincewind and the engagingly naive Twoflower, whose luggage moves on hundreds of tiny legs and is particularly vicious to anyone it doesn't like (nearly everyone). Having been instrumental in the incineration of Ankh-Morpork, the pair stumble from adventure to adventure before ending up thrown over the Discworld's rim in the interest of science. Rockwell's adaptation (originally for a four-part comic published by Innovation Inc.) is slightly transatlantic in flavour, but this is to be expected. It may lack the full force of Pratchett's distinctive tone (and his famous footnotes), but Rockwell and artist Steve Ross have created some effective visual parallels — for example, Twoflower's garish tourist garb and the puzzled expression on the face of Hrun the Barbarian as he struggles to subtract one from three.

Many illustrated editions of well-loved books suffer from the fact that the characters aren't like those the reader imagines; it's not the least virtue of this well-adapted version that this isn't a major problem here. The visuals have a strength of their own and occasionally — the first page is a classic example — brilliantly capture both the text on the page and the spirit of Pratchett's original. This may well appeal as much to the younger readers who came upon Pratchett through his "nomes" trilogy as those who've grown up with the Discworld, but it has an appeal of its' own which should not be underrated. If I have any major criticism, it's the lack of interpretation of Death's suave majesty whenever he appears to collect Rincewind.

Science

Howard Rheingold Virtual Reality

Mandarin, 1992, 415pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Jim Provan

The latter years of the last decade saw the establishment of "popular" culture and science as pseudo-intellectual status symbols to be displayed fulsomely alongside their more materialistic counterparts. Ironically, though, the popularisation of classical music, quantum mechanics and the like was not the result of the civilisation of the masses but of the distillation, simplification and ultimate bastardization of cultural icebergs for the benefit of myopic, epidermis-grazing consumers. Gilbert Ayoob, in his recent book **The Postmodernist Always**

Rings Twice, highlighted the trivialization of art in the media, where the most accessible works on the fringes of culture have been lapped up by that section of society barely a single rung up on the proverbial ladder above the brain dead! The "Flying Duck" triptych has been superseded by the Monet print, which doubtless will ultimately claim its rightful place in the ranks of crass bad taste.

The most ridiculous product of this intellectual mass-self-delusion in recent times must be Classic FM. Although in an unenviable position of power whereby they can determine the listening material of your average culture-yuppie, they are content to dish up the usual Raymond Gubbay/ **Hooked on Classics** crap *ad nauseum*. "Bach, Brahms and banter" indeed — what about catching them unawares with an aural assault of "Stockhausen. Schoenberg and some serious stuff"? At the very least it would rid us of some of the would-be intellectual poseurs — a real artistic Nemesis to their culture-shmulture Hubris!

The trivialisation of science in the name of popularity has, of course, much more serious implications altogether. Only a few weeks ago, **Equinox** (Channel 4) ran a programme on the mechanisms of HIV infection in which the concept of the prophage was replaced with the ridiculous scenario of a game of hide-and-seek between viral DNA and host immune system, set in the interduplex region of the cell nucleus. This type of ludicrous over simplification should be more answerable to some scientific equivalent of the Trades Description Act if we are to avoid the establishment of a type of virtual reality far removed from the facts themselves and populated with deluded sitting-room scientists.

Virtual Reality (VR, no less) is the latest trend to sweep the popular science markets. Hot on the heels of chaos, the only remaining artefact of which are the extremely marketable fractal images, and quantum physics (complete with equally marketable afflicted-but-brilliant figurehead) comes this book, which does little to strengthen VR's already precarious position as a useful scientific development. Rheingold's anecdotal style presents us with various simulations whose scientific worth (in the light of the unthinkable amounts of money required to develop the associated hardware to an adequate degree of sophistication) pales in comparison to their entertainment potential, with the word "priorities" continually recurring in the minds of the even-vaguely perceptive.

At this point, I can try to put this into some context by drawing my own comparisons with the first of the author's virtual experiences recounted in the book, in which he describes a system whereby the operator can "push" and "pull" molecules into each other to elucidate steric and electrostatic interactions using sensitive "gloves". I have used similar molecular modelling software without the assistance of horrendously expensive extras and can honestly say that such additional toys would add little to my understanding of such processes.

