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Spring 1995

- **Hard SF**
- **Graham Joyce on Science, Superstition & Yeast**
- **Peter James Interview**
- **Reviews**

The Critical Journal of the BSFA



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Printed by PDC Copyprint

11 Jeffries Passage, Guildford, Surrey, GU1 4AP

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The British Science Fiction Association Ltd – Com-
pany Limited by guarantee – Company No 921500 –
Registered Address – 60 Bournemouth Rd, Folke-
stone, Kent, CT19 5AZ



Vector is a bi-monthly publication of the BSFA, which also brings you
the news magazine *Matrix*, and the writers' magazine *Focus* for only
£18 per year (UK & EC). Concessionary rates are available. For
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Tailor-Made

An Interview with Peter James

by

Martin R Webb

There can be few British writers who can boast the experiences of Peter James during his varied and adventurous life: from domestic (he once cleaned house for Orson Welles' family) to globe-trotting in a second-hand hearse, from scriptwriter to film maker (his most well-known being *Dead of Night*), from apprentice glove-maker to one of Britain's best-selling writers of supernatural thrillers.

While being hailed as one of the most literate writers of the genre, he is certainly one of the easiest to talk to. On the drive to his secluded home (said to be haunted) we talked of our favourite authors and the publishing business in general.

Over lunch he told me how his career began.

"I started writing at Charterhouse, winning a poetry prize (the kiss of death for anyone who wants to be a commercial writer)."

Peter then worked on the school magazine which despite its cute name — *Petal* — was banned by the school authorities. He went on to write *The Great British Bubble* "... which is still sitting in a trunk in the attic somewhere, but it got me an agent.

"I was trying to get into the film industry — it was then, as it is now, I suppose; pretty near bankruptcy. I had an uncle in Canada who suggested I try my luck there.

"When I got to Toronto I got a job with a TV station working on a programme for pre-school children (*Pork-a-Dot-Dor*). It was a thirty minute show going out five days a week."

The day the scriptwriter fell ill was a lucky day for Peter. He ended up writing the show for eighteen months before moving on to make films like *Children don't Play with Dead Things*. For the ten years he was in films he didn't write one word for a novel. He wrote to his agent, pointing out his achievements. The initial reply cannot be printed here, but some sound advice was to follow: "If you want to write books, got to work in a library or a factory."

While Peter was working on *Spanish Fly* (about which Barry Norman is said to have commented: "This has to be the worst British film since the Second

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World War, and the least funny film ever..." Peter's father was taken ill and the family was thinking of selling the business (Cornelia James – glove makers to the Queen) if Peter didn't want it.

"I desperately wanted to write and decided to take sanctuary at home – almost like taking a sabbatical, really. My father said that if I wanted to come into the business I would have to start at the bottom. So, at twenty-eight, I became an apprentice glove-cutter. I was still trying to get *Biggles* off the ground – I'd just bought the film rights. For three days a week clocking in at the factory, and for the other two I was donning a suit and going up to London to try and raise £3m for *Biggles*."

It was about that time that he read an article saying that there was a shortage of spy-thrillers.

"So I decided to write a spy story (*Dead Letter Drop*). I had no real idea what I wanted to write. It was a Chanderlesque pastiche about finding a mole in MI5, and it got published."

Two more similar novels were to follow (*Atom Bomb Angel* and *Billionaire*) before Peter found his niche.

Possession was, he says, based on personal experiences with the supernatural. *Dreamer*, his least favourite book, followed by a year later. *Sweet Heart*, a disturbing tale of re-incarnation established him as, if not the leader in the field of horror fiction, a good second. In *Sweet Heart*, Charley's bet friend and part-time employer, Laura, suggests a customer buys a Cornelia James scarf, the company of which Peter is a director. Considering his position, I asked if there were any plans to base a novel in the clothing industry.

"Yes, I've got something on the back burner. I've always thought the best rag trade scene was in Klute. You know there is a killer about as Jane Fonda follows Patrick Machie between rails and rails of clothes in plastic bags, and she finds a body in one of the bags."

Twilight clearly illustrated Peter's progressive quality while *Prophecy* returned to the theme of reincarnation.

While researching *Prophecy* Peter discovered many coincidences that suggest there might be more to it than pure chance; the strongest being the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations. Both were shot in the back of the head; Lincoln in the Ford theatre, Kennedy in a Ford Lincoln car. Wilkes-Booth ran from the theatre to a barn. Oswald ran from a warehouse to a theatre. Neither lived to stand trial. The victim's names have the same number of letters as do the killers' names. As if that wasn't enough, both presidents were succeeded by vice presidents Johnson.

In 1967 some of Peter's friends attended a ouija board experiment – Peter had been invited but went to a party instead. During the experiment several predictions were made and came true within a week, and all involved a death. Were these events the only inspiration for the book?

"All my life I've had coincidences, none of them all that remarkable, but I've always questioned them. I'd be somewhere in the world and I'd meet someone I was thinking about.

"I remember being at a market stall in Marrakesh, in '67; I was jogged and stepped back onto someone's foot. When I turned to apologise I saw it was someone I was at school with and hadn't seen for years."

The eeriest coincidence happened while he was writing *Prophecy*. He had just written the chapter in which someone falls to his death down a lift shaft. That same day he heard a news item in which it actually happened. The next morning's post contained the second draft of the film script of *Possession* in which the writer had, without consulting Peter, included that very scene.

In *Twilight*, his third novel, Peter used a Brighton-based journalist (Kate Hemmingway) as his heroine. Her brief reappearance in *Prophecy* led me to ask if we might not be seeing her in another novel.

"When I first started writing, somebody gave me the advice: 'never kill your best characters, because it upsets your readers'. I liked Kate, and I thought it would be fun to bring her back in a cameo role. In *Twilight* she was working on a small rural paper, and the books all have dates in them. She wanted to progress to a bigger paper. Her boyfriend had moved on to the *Daily Mail*, and because there had to be someone from a London paper in it, I included her to show she got her promotion. I have thought about bringing her back.

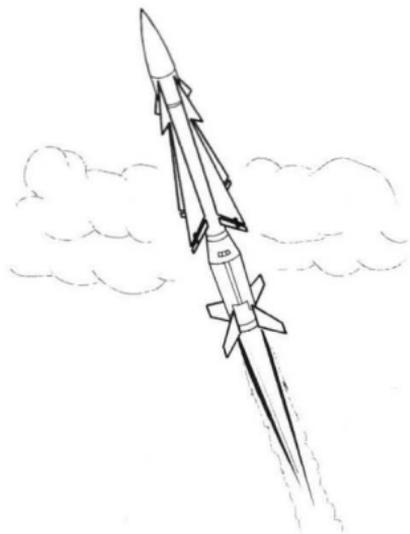
Like most of us, Peter works regular hours, though his week often includes Saturdays and Sundays.

"When I'm actually writing which is seven or eight months of the year, I guess, I stick to a rigid routine. I run about two miles every morning to charge up my brain, then have breakfast. About quarter to nine I light my pipe (he quite cigarettes a couple of years ago) and sit down to work. Lunch is around one o'clock, then I walk the dog (Jessie, a Hungarian sheepdog who has since died). I'm back at my desk by four and work till eight."

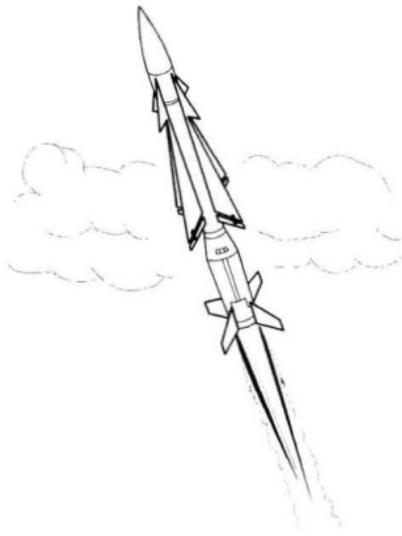
Where to next?

"Artificial intelligence? Cryonics?"

How Hard is SF?



by Paul
Kincaid



In the late 1950s, P. Schuyler Miller coined the term 'hard SF' in his book review column in *Astounding*. It is a term that has never been adequately defined (much like 'science fiction') but it is generally recognised to be that branch of SF built around the hard sciences (physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology) as opposed to the 'soft' sciences that were then creeping into SF (psychology, sociology). The term arose out of John W. Campbell's *Astounding*, and is most closely associated with Campbellian writers, Asimov, Heinlein, Clement, Clarke, and their natural descendants, Niven, Varley, Forward, Sheffield, Benford, Brin. By the time the term was coined, what it represented was already under threat. *Astounding* was declining in influence as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and a coterie of writers and editors such as Pohl, Kornbluth, Bester, Knight and Merril introduced newer and more varied literary styles and devices into the genre. The New Wave of the 1960s didn't actually sweep away hard SF, but it did nudge it into a backwater where, with occasional eruptions, it has remained ever since. There are still devoted readers of *Analog*, there are still works which are identifiably hard SF and which have a significant impact on the genre (the most recent has probably been Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy), but even that has changed beyond anything that Campbell might recognise as hard SF.

Through it all, the nature, the identity of hard SF has hardly been questioned. We know what it is, or we assume we do. But in the last couple of years David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer have orchestrated a debate about hard SF in the pages of *The New York*

Review of Science Fiction, and that debate has finally engendered a massive anthology, *The Ascent of Wonder: The Evolution of Hard SF*. The three introductions, by Hartwell, Cramer and Gregory Benford, were all rehearsed in the pages of the *New York Review*; many of the stories featured (especially Godwin's 'The Cold Equations') have been discussed there at length. As a result this huge volume must be seen as providing some definitive prospectus on the nature, character and constitution of hard SF.

It is a labour of love, a massive enterprise, bringing together key science fiction texts from the last 150 years. Whatever the criticisms that must follow, the book stands or falls by the value of these stories. And the value is high. Here are 67 stories from 57 writers, good stories that are not widely anthologised (John M. Ford's 'Chromatic Aberration' (1994), Hilbert Schenck's 'The Morphology of the Kirkham Wreck' (1978), Michael F. Flynn's 'Mammy Morgan Played the Organ; Her Daddy Beat the Drum' (1990)), and classics that belong in the library of every SF fan (Rudyard Kipling's 'With the Night Mail' (1905), Henry Kuttner & C.L. Moore's 'Mimsy Were the Borogoves' (1943), Tom Godwin's 'The Cold Equations' (1954)). There are stories not worth the effort of reprinting, where the writing limps, the ideas crumble before your eyes, stories which demonstrate why SF was consigned to the ghetto for so long (Raymond Z. Gallun's 'Davy Jones' Ambassador' (1935), Raymond F. Jones's 'The Person from Porlock' (1947) and (to prove it isn't connected with being called Raymond) Jules Verne's 'In the Year 2889' (1889)); but in such a monumental anthology, they are mercifully few. In short, this is an excellent collection of good science fiction.

Here, then, as the sub-title advises us, we will find the stars of the hard SF firmament: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, J.G. Ballard and Ursula K. Le Guin, James Tiptree, Jr and Gene Wolfe...

Therein lies the problem. We are presented with a radically different view of hard SF than any we might have felt comfortable with before. By my count, for instance, fewer than half the stories are what I would describe as hard SF. Under the guise of the word 'evolution' they have brought together stories that predate hard SF and stories that have emerged, changed, from it; there are stories that contradict and argue with hard SF, and stories that appear to have nothing whatever to do with the subject. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how they bring hard SF forward, if only because, publishing economics being what they are, we are unlikely to see a similar such enterprise for some time, which means

that this characterisation of hard SF is going to stand unchallenged as the hard SF canon.

It is, of course, all a matter of definition. At one point in his introduction David Hartwell says: 'Devoted readers of hard SF know the real thing when they see it.' This is a deliberate echo of Damon Knight's famous and (intentionally) inadequate definition of science fiction as 'what we point to when we say it,' and it seems, if anything, an admission of failure, for Hartwell has already accepted that readers of hard SF will not recognise it in the works of Le Guin or Ballard. If this is how he has to define his subject, then despite the title this is no collection of hard SF.

The three introductions are interesting. Benford provides the perspective of a working scientist and writer of hard SF while Cramer gives us an historical lit. crit. approach: both assume that we know what hard SF is. It is, therefore, left to Hartwell in his main introduction and in the individual story introductions which appear to be mostly his work, to provide the agenda for the anthology, to define hard SF and place the disparate stories within that definition. Unfortunately, he presents no one coherent argument, but a series of conflicting perspectives.

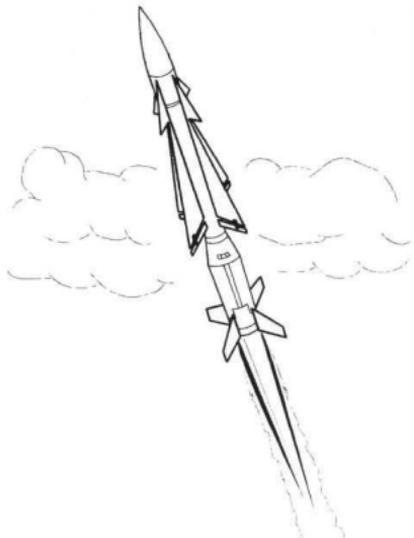
At one point, 'Hard SF is about the beauty of truth'; a position amplified by Cramer who says: 'Hard science fiction is about the aesthetics of knowledge... at its core [it is] beyond questions of optimism and pessimism, beyond questions of technology and application. Hard SF recognises wonder as the finest human emotion.' Yet this romantic view sits ill with Hartwell's later claim that 'Hard SF embodies the fantasies of empowerment of the scientific and technological culture of the modern era and validates its faith in scientific knowledge as dominant over other ways of knowing.'

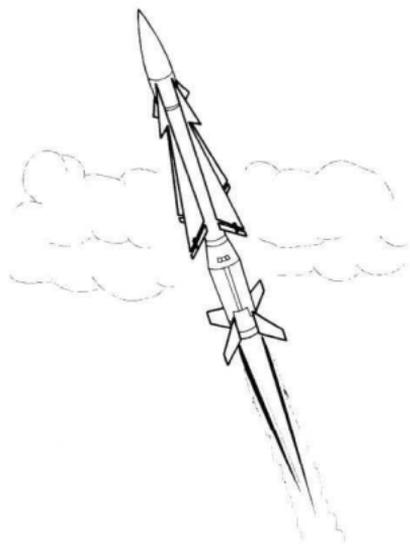
Again he claims that 'Sf readers ... expect to be surprised at some point by a sudden perception of connection to things they know or observe in daily life. If the revelation is of the inner life, as in... *Flowers for Algernon*, then the story is not hard SF; if the revelation is of the functioning of the laws of nature, as in Arthur C. Clarke's "Transit of Earth" or Isaac Asimov's "Waterclap" then the story is hard SF.' Elsewhere he points out that 'Generally the central characters of hard science fiction are winners (the competent man, the engineer, the scientist, the good soldier, the man who transcends his circumstances, the inventor...).' These would seem reasonable enough, were it not for Hartwell's repeated attempts to recruit Ballard into the ranks of the hard SF writers, despite the fact that all Ballard's fiction hinges upon

revelations of inner life and his central characters tend to be losers, anti-heroes, figures lost within the sweep of events. He maintains that: 'The implied argument of the Ballardian stream of hard SF, written in reaction to the main tradition, is: Campbellian hard SF said that if you know, you may survive; Ballard says, knowing is not enough to survive.' This argument drives a coach and horses through both the two previous attempts to put a frame around hard SF. However much Hartwell may puff Ballard's scientific background (he was medically trained), this is still to change the nature of hard SF and of the argument. If hard SF is so fluid in intent, in style, in content, then we are hardly dealing with one clearly defined subset of science fiction, we are dealing with a number of subsets which may share some characteristics, and which may huddle close to each other, but they are not the same thing. The argument works if we are talking about the core of science fiction, it is a multiform genre after all, but it has to fail if Hartwell is presenting just one branch, one aspect of SF which stands central to SF but is somehow clearly distinct from all its other forms.

Trying to pull all these statements and counter-statements together we are left, therefore, with no straightforward, easily graspable account of what hard SF actually is, as opposed to SF in general. But do the stories help?

If we assume that hard SF is as various as all of SF then, taking Hartwell's finger-pointing definition, there is still a heartland which all readers readily recognise as hard SF, and which is probably congru-





ent with what Hartwell further defines as 'Campbellian hard SF'. Such stories might show a common characteristic which will help to provide a measure of hard SF for the rest of the anthology. Perhaps the archetypal hard SF story is Tom Godwin's 'The Cold Equations' (1954) in which a girl stowaway has to die because her weight would add to the fuel consumption of the landing craft just enough to make it burn up on re-entry and destroy the precious cargo of medicines. We can leave aside for the moment the countless calculations which show that if Godwin had really wanted to save the girl, he could have done so. What hard SF is doing here is presenting a set of implacable rules that are dictated by the very nature of the universe; the little man in the face of a huge galaxy must come to terms with those rules or die. Philip Latham's 'The Xi Effect' (1950) presents a similar argument: scientists discover that the universe is shrinking but wavelengths remain constant, so gradually the different means of communication are taken away from mankind until even the visible spectrum slips away into blackness. Again we see how cold and unmoving the universe is out there, how man is humbled before a power as mighty as former generations would have imagined God. (And there is a strong religious, or at least transcendental element running through hard SF, which I will come to later.)

Of course, not all hard SF leads to inevitable tragedy. By understanding the physics, the chemistry or the maths, the competent man can comprehend the rules and see the way to salvation. In 'Down and Out on Ellifive Prime' by Dean Ing

(1979) one minor accident on a space station leads, step by inexorable step, to the point where the entire station is threatened with destruction. But the competent administrator joins forces with an engineer who is living with the down and outs in the interstices of the station, and disaster is averted. The scientific and technical knowledge of the engineer raises him from the lowest in society to his true worth. 'The Hole Man' by Larry Niven (1973) shows a different way in which the scientific man will triumph through his knowledge, in this case using a quantum black hole as a murder weapon. Quantum black holes may be a discarded notion nowadays, but that is not important, what matters is the central understanding of some scientific 'truth'. Hard SF is hard in the sense of being rigid, unbending. The key hard SF stories involve rules that are not made by man, rules that cannot be broken. Hard SF is often portrayed as being right wing (and the apparently more liberal attitudes of the editors of this anthology makes for some awkward moments in the individual story introductions) but the political angle in 'The Cold Equations', for example, revolves not, as is popularly supposed, around the fact that the victim is a girl (though hard SF is overwhelmingly male in its authors, its heroes, its characters) but around the harsh law that everyone must obey. As soon as you introduce character, or man-made rules, you introduce ambiguity; so much hard SF, particularly early in its history, is schematic in formula and cardboard in its characters. When Hal Clement says he doesn't need human villains because the universe is opponent enough, he is saying that his hard SF is about men coming up against the rules of the universe. Those rules are neat and predictable (this SF is not about change), so a human opponent would upset the apple-cart by introducing the possibility, nay the necessity, for change, development, other interpretations.

A right-wing political stance may, therefore, be a defining characteristic of hard SF. Even when a story or a writer attempts a more liberal stance, as James Blish did in 'Beep' (1954), it comes up against the inflexibility of the rules and ends up, at best, as libertarian. In 'Beep' there is, in effect, an elite who rule the world on the strength of privileged, if partial, knowledge of the future. They try to rule by liberal principles, but there is still an elite, there are still all-powerful, secretive masters, and there are still rigid codes which must be obeyed.

When the authors deny the rigidity and inevitability of the rules, when they admit human frailty and fault, when they entertain ambiguity, then you get a story which, however much it follows scientific notions and principles, cannot be hard SF. Which is why writers like Ballard, with 'Prima Belladonna' (1956) and 'Cage of Sand' (1963), are out of place in this anthol-

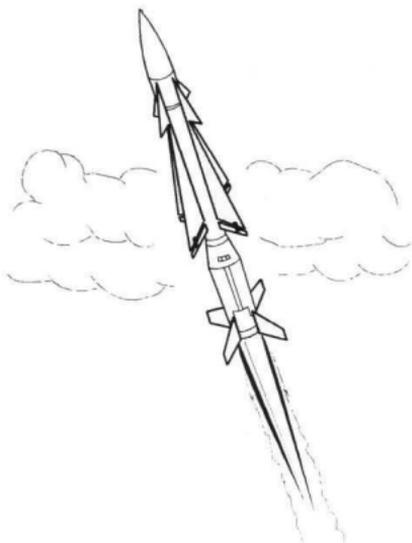
ogy. The dead astronauts endlessly circling Earth in 'Cage of Sand' are there as a sign of failure, are liable to burn up (as one of them does), are open to misinterpretation, and are generally symbols to highlight the frailty and ambiguity of the human watchers coming to terms with their own failures amid the Martian sands of Florida. So much does Ballard deny inevitability that the very landscape of the story is in constant flux. Similarly H.G. Wells may have exulted that the tank warfare of the First World War was engendered by his story 'The Land Ironclads' (1903) but, a poor example of his work though it is, the story itself is one of defeat not victory. And Wells, with his abiding interest in Darwinian evolution and social criticism which imply a focus on change, even the desirability of change, in his work, was no hard SF writer.

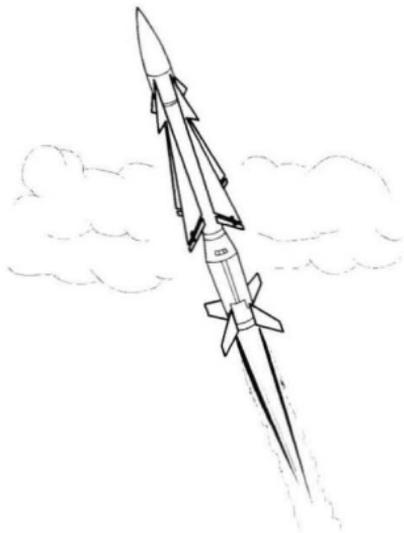
So how does this approach to hard SF sit with the more borderline inclusions in this anthology? Anne McCaffrey has always insisted that her dragon stories and novels are science fiction, not fantasy, and that certainly holds true of their progenitor, 'Weyr Search' (1967), even though the world-building is confined to a brief scene-setting introduction. The story itself is straight, old-fashioned medieval fantasy of lords and heroes and a quest for the saviour. What betrays the hard SF antecedents is the strict, rule-driven attitude of the story. After centuries in which the threads have not returned to Pern, human society has not evolved, has not changed one jot. Within the scheme of things it cannot be allowed to change, to develop new weapons, new defences. Salvation can only come by strict adherence to the old, implacable, unchanging rules; rigid, unquestioning obedience is good, ignoring the law leads only and inevitably to death. Certainly there is an element of SF in 'Weyr Search', certainly the underlying political attitudes of the story reflect the attitudes of hard SF - but that doesn't mean the story actually is hard SF.

When you consider Bob Shaw's 'Light of Other Days' (1966) you come up against another problem with the editors' selection policy. This is a genuine classic of the genre, a simple story of slow glass in which the passage of light through glass is slowed to a matter of years, so city dwellers use it to give themselves windows showing the unspoilt landscape where the glass was 'farmed'. So far, so hard SF. But what makes this a story is the recognition that light passes both ways through glass, and the slow glass farmer uses it to gaze into his home to glimpse his wife and child who have since been killed, with the added unstated poignancy that there has to be a known, predictable ending to the vision. The question that must be considered is: how much is this a hard SF

story, and how much a sad little tale about love and loss which happens to employ a science fictional device to set it on its way? In this case the answer is probably a bit of both, and in so far as the anthology represents the spectrum of hard SF the story belongs here. But there are other instances in which the presence of SF devices bulks far too large in the editors' perceptions of whether the story is hard SF or not.

In the introduction to Gene Wolfe's 'Procreation' (1984), for instance, we are told that his acclaimed novel, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* was 'set on an alien planet, featured robots, colonists, a mysterious alien race. But it was constructed with so much sophisticated literary ambiguity that it was not apprehended as hard SF.' This is a curious notion, for it suggests yet another definition of hard SF as that which uses certain devices from a prescribed list (and judging from the stories in the anthology, that list includes time travel, robots, computers, space ships, alien worlds and many more devices which are readily associated with SF of any stripe). A similar point is made in the introduction to the second Wolfe story, 'All the Hues of Hell' (1987): 'his stories rarely have the overt affect of hard SF. It is therefore often a challenge to the reader to perceive the scientific ideas of which the characters in the text are unaware.' This seems to suggest that if you search a story hard enough, if you ignore the literary characteristics in order to discover some SF device or scientific notion buried however deep in the text, then that story automatically qualifies as hard SF.





But does the paraphernalia of SF qualify a story as hard SF? George Turner's 'In a Petri Dish Upstairs' (1978) might seem like hard SF if devices are what count, there is, after all, an orbital space station. However, the main focus of the story is about the way the two societies have grown apart; in orbit people are uncouth, forward-looking, aggressive and unpleasant, on Earth they are over-sophisticated, double-dealing supporters of the status quo. The result is not so much hard SF as a comedy of manners, very like a Henry James story of gauche Americans and their cultured European cousins, but with a nasty twist. A genuinely hard SF version of the same sort of story, Robert A. Heinlein's 'It's Great to be Back' (1947), has less actual hardware than the Turner story yet its attitude is totally different. Would-be lunar colonists return to Earth thinking themselves unsuited to the Moon, but as they encounter Earth society they realise how well they have actually adapted to the Moon. The story is full of the rightness, the inevitability, of the outward urge, the step into space. There is none of the doubt, the unsettled ambiguity about the future in space as well as on Earth that is expressed in the Turner story. It is more than paraphernalia, therefore, which makes a story hard SF.

'Heat of Fusion' by John M. Ford (1984) is, according to the introduction, interested more in 'the metaphorical and emotional reverberations of the scientist's work': it tells of a scientist dying as a result of an accident which killed most of his colleagues. The location, the nature of their research and the details of the accident are all hidden amid suggestions and hints, but as he thinks back over the causes

of the accident the scientist comes to understand the characters and drives of his colleagues. Yet, 'the underlying belief in the power of science (physics) and scientists (physicists) is still here'. We seem to be moving towards yet another definition of hard SF: any story in which scientists do science. Certainly that is what we must gather from the introduction to Theodore Sturgeon's 'Occam's Scalpel' (1971) which 'is on the edge of being not SF at all ... yet it more centrally concerns science than a majority of Sturgeon's genre works: it is about scientists ...'. It is, in fact, about model makers and businessmen: when the world's most powerful businessman dies, his corpse is presented to his chosen successor as being that of an alien invader in order to change the course of the business to more ecologically friendly directions. There are no aliens, there are no scientists, this is not even a science fiction story, let alone hard SF. But if we are to believe that the presence of a scientist is enough to render a story hard SF, then we may presume that, for example, John Banville's historical novels *Kepler* and *Doctor Copernicus* are hard SF. Perhaps it is not even necessary to be SF in order to be hard SF?

In fact, the belief in science, the exploration of 'metaphorical and emotional reverberations' of scientific endeavour, are common currency in the domain of science fiction, but are not congruent with the rule-driven practicalities of hard SF. If you want to show man's place within the strictures of a vast and unbending universe, as hard SF does, then you cannot do so by metaphor, which opens other meanings, other possibilities. The editors are much nearer the mark in their introduction to Robert L. Forward's 'The Singing Diamond' (1979) when they say: 'The wonderful ideas are the whole point, the foreground interest for the hard SF reader. The fiction exists to display them.' Nothing here about metaphor, or hiding the science beneath Wolfe's 'sophisticated literary ambiguity'.

To often, in fact, the editors seem to change their notion of hard SF in order to fit another story into the picture. In the introduction to Frederik Pohl's 'Day Million' (1966), for instance, they ask directly: 'What's so hard about it? The attitude is right ... It is written for the reader who understands the hopelessness of a universe without physical constraints.' This is understandable: rules, physical constraints, are the be-all and end-all of the hard SF universe, so that a universe without them would be hopeless to the hard SF reader. Except that this description of 'Day Million' must refer to a completely different story than the one printed here. The attitude is satirical, which hard SF almost never is (except in stories such as James P. Hogan's 'Making Light' (1981) which crudely satirise those who do not subscribe to the hard SF belief). 'Day Million' is not about

'hopelessness', rather it deliberately confronts modern attitudes with an overtly fanciful future in order to challenge those attitudes. It is sexually, socially and politically liberal. In directly addressing the reader and foregrounding the fictionality of the story, it uses postmodern techniques in contrast to hard SF, which Hartwell is at pains to point out is resolutely modernist in manner. 'Day Million' may be the best thing that Pohl has ever written, and it can be described in all sorts of ways, but it is not hard SF.

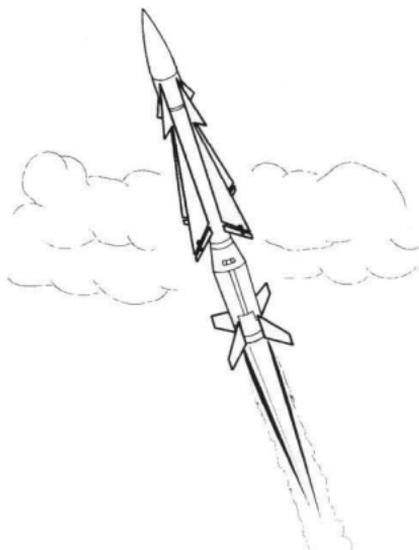
This attempt to bend stories to the will of hard SF is highlighted in one of the rare but significant factual errors in the book. Ursula K. Le Guin's 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds' (1974) is described as anthropological notes by an intelligent ant. In fact the first part of the story features a translation of a possibly rebellious statement by an ant, but the translator is a human anthropologist (a soft scientist) and the piece is just one extract from an academic journal. (It is significant, also, that the story is not given its full title, 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Therologistics', either in the contents list, at the head of the story or even in the copyright notices, so removing the sense that the story is, at least in part, parody.) The revised view of the story makes it more alien and allows the 'science' to be considered less 'soft', so making it fit more nearly into the hard SF category.

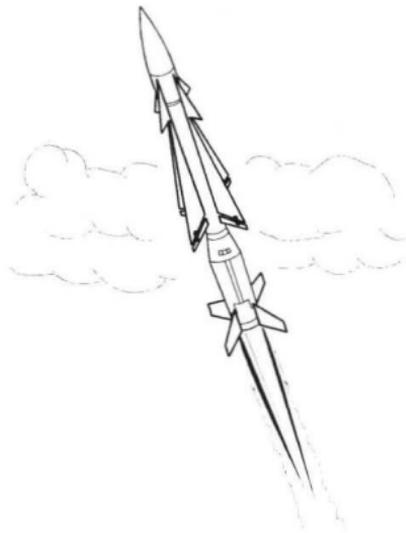
The alien, the other, is important in hard SF, even if the story does not take us off Earth or introduce any character other than human. Much of the direction of hard SF, a positive step forward into the future, man taking his place on the universal stage, has a transcendental element. The brave, the competent, the knowledgeable, the archetypal hard SF hero is the man most able to understand the rigorous laws of nature, and so doing find a way around. And this way transforms us into beings greater than we are. This may be simply the better society of competent people on the Moon in Heinlein's 'It's Great to be Back' or the Stapledonian progress of our progeny in Isaac Asimov's 'The Last Question' (1956), or the literal transformation in Clifford D. Simak's 'Desertion' (1944). In this story a human base on Jupiter has been unable to survey the planet because the human explorers sent out in the shape of the native inhabitants have all failed to return. Finally the station commander and his dog undergo the transformation and step out onto the surface of Jupiter to discover a glory that was unimaginable to their merely human (or canine) senses.

It is a religious awe at the majesty of what the future holds for us if we obey the commandments, the rules of the universe, which crops up time and again

in hard SF. As Edgar Allan Poe's protagonist says in 'A Descent into the Maelström' (1841), 'how foolish it was in me to think of so paltry a consideration as my own individual life, in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God's power.' Substitute science or the universe for 'God' and you have the sensibility of much hard SF. Where religion actually features in the story it is either belittled, as in Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Star' (1955) or shown as the only recourse for humanity unable to face the enormity of the universe, as in Poul Anderson's 'Kyrie' (1969).

'The Star' tells of an expedition to a one-time supernova where the explorers find evidence of a flourishing civilisation destroyed when the sun exploded. The astrophysicist, a Jesuit, works out that the supernova was the Star of Bethlehem. How could God allow one advanced civilisation to be destroyed to herald the birth of his religion on Earth?, is the question posed by the story. And the implicit answer is that God is as nothing beside the raw nature of the universe. Much the same response is implicit in Ian Watson's 'The Very Slow Time Machine' (1978) in which religion is explicitly linked with madness. A time traveller appears in a laboratory, and it becomes obvious that he is living backwards through time to the point of his appearance. He is also progressing steadily and inexorably into insanity, which the observers from outside his time-frame know all too well, but this doesn't stop them making the time traveller the focus for a new religion. Religion does not mix with a hard SF universe that has wonders enough of its own, though in 'Kyrie' religion can at least provide consolation when those wonders prove too awesome. A





young woman on a ship exploring the effects of a nova, that manifestation of the glory of the universe, is telepathically linked to an alien space creature who provides a deeper and more understanding relationship than she has ever achieved with other humans. The alien disappears into the black hole at the heart of the nova, and because of the time dilation effects she is permanently telepathically plugged in to his endless dying scream. She ends up in a religious retreat on the Moon.

When a writer is genuinely religious, as Wolfe is in 'All the Hues of Hell', in which a survey ship scoops up dark matter and a creature which may be a devil, this is not just another manifestation of the same theme. For Wolfe is expressing the importance of religion, of belief in general, in its effect on his very human characters. This affirmation of religion goes directly against the hard SF position, for it cannot conform with the hard SF substitution of science for religion.

But is Wolfe in dialogue with hard SF? This collection is, after all, subtitled 'The Evolution of Hard SF', and its intent must therefore be taken to include the fiction from which hard SF emerged, and that into which it developed or which it influenced. Benford, in his introduction, makes an important point about the development of ideas: 'Like other subgenres of fantastic literature, hard SF works in part because it is an ongoing discussion ... Genre readers immerse themselves in a system of thought,

so that each fresh book or story is a further exploration of that system, mental play illuminated by all the reader has discovered before ... With learned genre competency come the pleasures of cross-talk the books speak to each other in an ongoing debate over big issues, such as our place in creation, the nature of consensus reality, etc ... Hard SF mirrors science itself in the importance of cross-talk.' This is picked up in a number of the story introductions, especially to those writers not normally associated with hard SF, such as Ballard, Le Guin and Wolfe, which talk of them being in dialogue with or opposition to hard SF. It is a valid point, but it is unfortunately too broad a point to work without greater rigour than is employed here. For all SF is in constant dialogue as ideas, themes, devices are picked up from various sources and carried forward in different directions. In Wolfe's 'Procreation', for instance, the children who wander into the dying of a different universe are witnessing a scene which carries echoes of the final moments of *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, while Watson's 'The Very Slow Time Machine' echoes that same novel in a very different way.

To trace influences, therefore, and show them to be specifically hard SF in character or intent requires something more than the vague linking of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Rappaccini's Daughter' (1844) with J.G. Ballard's 'Prima Belladonna' (1956): 'This Faustian-Gothic strain, with its echoes of the sublime, is persistent in twentieth-century science fiction ... and re-emerges, full-blown, in the early work of J.G. Ballard'. It is especially galling since the editors have not established the hard SF credentials of either story (so they have not established the evolutionary development into or out of the subgenre), have not pinpointed the precise points of influence, and then separate the stories by some 250 pages.

In fact, the evolutionary theme seems to have had no influence whatsoever on the organisation of this book. None of the stories is dated (except in a copyright listing which is incomplete. Poe, Hawthorne, Verne, Wells and Kipling are all missing and inaccurate 'Prima Belladonna' has a copyright date of 1971 though it was one of Ballard's first published stories in 1956). The stories are divided into three sections though no reason is given for the division and no link is apparent between the stories in any of the groupings; nor does the order in which stories are printed do anything to provide a thematic or a chronological sequence. The first four stories, for example, are Ursula K. Le Guin's 'Nine Lives' (1969), Bob Shaw's 'Light of Other Days' (1966), Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Rappaccini's Daughter' (1844) and Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Star' (1955); an order which follows no logic whatsoever. And though Kathryn Cramer, in an

Appendix, provides a thematic grouping of the stories, this does not include all the stories in the collection, but does include others ('Nightfall' by Isaac Asimov) which are not published here. To derive any evolutionary pattern from this collection, the reader needs to do a lot more work than the editors have done.

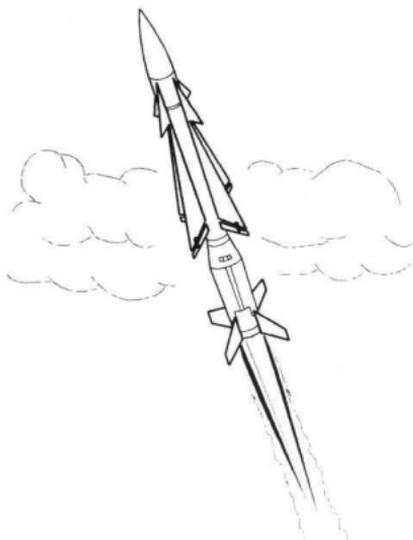
The reader must also contend with stories which are not only not hard SF, they are not SF at all. Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelström' (1841) shows a pattern of problem-solving which does indeed seem like the precursor of hard SF's heroic competence, while Sturgeon's 'Occam's Scalpel' (1971) reflects SF sensibilities that do throw an interesting sidelight on the subgenre. But other stories, such as John M. Ford's 'Chromatic Aberration' (1994), seem to have no part to play in this anthology whatsoever. It is, as the introduction makes clear, a form of magic realism which tells of a revolution in the old, brutal, military sense so complete that the new order can even dictate that colour is different. The introduction tries to justify its inclusion with some froth about paradigm shifts as proposed by Thomas S. Kuhn, the philosopher of science, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. But that is not what the story is about. A brief nod is tossed in that direction to set up the narrative, but in the series of vignettes that introduce the new colours the strength and point of the story is the persistence of human nature, the way that the change of political order, even the change of perception, doesn't alter the essential love, duplicity, heroism and cruelty of mankind. This does not come close to SF in character, and in affect (a word drastically and ludicrously over-used in the introductions) it runs directly counter to everything that is hard SF.

Yet while we are presented with a host of stories (Cordwainer Smith's 'No, No, Not Rogov!' (1959), Bruce Sterling's 'The Beautiful and the Sublime' (1986), James Tiptree Jr's 'The Psychologist Who Wouldn't Do Awful Things to Rats' (1976)) which are at best tangential to hard SF, or even (Ford's 'Chromatic Aberration', Ballard's 'Prima Belladonna') irrelevant to it, much that is central to hard SF is absent. There are no stories by A.E. Van Vogt (despite repeated references to the notion that 'fans are Slans') or L. Sprague de Camp, nothing by Ben Bova or John Varley. Heinlein and Clement, two of the central figures in any reckoning of hard SF, are represented by only one story apiece (as opposed to two apiece by Ballard, Le Guin, Ford and Wolfe), while a leading contemporary hard SF writer, Michael F. Flynn, is represented only by one atypical ghost story, 'Mammy Morgan Played the Organ; Her Daddy Beat the Drum' (1990), which imposes a periodicity on ghostly appearances but otherwise features none of the typical, rule-driven hard SF characteristics.

**The Ascent of Wonder:
The Evolution of Hard SF**
David G. Hartwell & Kathryn
Cramer (Eds)
Orbit, 1994, 990pp, £25.00

In other words, if this collection is to be seen as in any way definitive, then the definition of hard SF has undergone a sea change. The way it stands, *Ascent of Wonder* suggests that hard SF evolved out of SF in general, at its height was distinguished by its use of typical SF devices, and has evolved back into SF. There is little here, in other words, to say that hard SF is in any way different from any other form of science fiction. This reads like a collection of hard SF put together by people who don't really like hard SF and are therefore looking for excuses to include stories they do like but which aren't really hard SF.

How hard is SF? If this collection is anything to go by, not very.



Science

Superstition and
Strange things
like Yeast

Graham
Joyce

The following text is
taken from Graham's
Guest of Honour
speech at Novacon 24

I've been a fan of Science Fiction and Fantasy for as long as I can remember, without ever feeling a great need to make much of a distinction between the two. But I see before me an audience with seemingly a desire to refine the palate and define the savour of its Epicurean appetites. I'm about to try to explain that fixation with SF and Fantasy, but I'll also try to explain why I'm pretty much AC/DC in genre terms. It may get messy. For example, I happen to think Science Fiction is not about Science; on the contrary it's about breaking rules rather than making them. But already I'm getting ahead of myself, so more about this later.

First I want to pay tribute to bookshops like *Andromeda*, *Forbidden Planet* and *Magic Labyrinth*. Why? Because they seem to be the only shops that stock my books. And they all have something in common, which is that as you go into these shops you go down several steps, literally and socially. In *Magic Labyrinth*, as you browse through the books you inevitably risk being stung by Dave Holmes' escaped tarantulas or attacked by a baby scorpion; features he assures me he introduced into his shop to generate trade. Similarly *Forbidden Planet*, where most of the staff seem to go for body piercing on a surgical scale. Thank God we say, for the restrained and conservative precincts of *Andromeda*, where a quaint, reassuringly Victorian sign says: *Roger Peyton, purveyor of high-quality Science Fiction*. Followed underneath, in smaller script, the words *Fuck Off If You Like Fantasy*.

How is it that a writer comes to find his books on a shelf in close proximity to badly painted Terminator dolls and Batman regalia for people with IQs so high they obviously can't function in normal society. To get the answer to that you have to go back a long way; but at every stop on the journey you'll find, glistening like three foreign coins in a fountain, crisis, ambiguity and doubt.

Crisis, ambiguity and doubt.

This is how my life started. I was born three minutes after midnight. If you believe the nurse who recorded it all. Or three minutes before midnight, if you believe my Mother. Who do

you trust? An overworked, and probably exhausted nurse on night-shift to whom midwifery has become a bit like the task of shelling peas? Or a shattered, pethadine-doped mother with a dubious claim to keeping her eye on the clock? Perhaps you don't actually care, but let me say, to me it's rather important. Every October for forty years I've had a sneaking – and growing – suspicion that I've been celebrating the wrong fucking birthday.

Worse still, there's every probability that I've been reading the wrong Star Sign every day. The wrong Star Sign. On a daily basis, since reading age, that's about 12,000 information bytes, all wrong. Forget whether you have the slightest belief in astrology – I don't care about that. It may well all be childish and simplistic balderdash. What concerns me is that all these years I may have been reading the *wrong* childish and simplistic balderdash. It's mind-blowing in its insignificance.

So there I am, right at the commencement of the great miracle and adventure of life, and the first recorded information up for scrutiny is seriously questionable. I put it to you that all this crisis, ambiguity and doubt is more than any innocent, three-minute old baby should be asked to endure.

Nor did the crises, the ambiguities, the doubts ever diminish. On the contrary, the prospect of life actually became even more provisional. Before I was twelve months old I developed serious whooping cough. But SCIENCE was there with an answer, coming at me out of the sky like a winged god, there was a new vaccine available from America, as yet not fully tested, but it would be FLOWN IN FROM

AMERICA. A deus ex machina even before the play had properly begun. There was a risk of brain damage – no jokes, I'm ahead of you – but the whooping cough was life-threatening. My father had to make a decision. Can you imagine the choice? It's 1955 and we still have every reason to be optimistic about Science and the Future. cars are being manufactured with tail-fins like science fiction rocket-ships. Juke boxes are like scaled-down futuristic robots. The future is in full-colour good-order,

“When you are given glasses at age five, the world is already mediated. You have become a cyborg, of admittedly low-tech character, but still a cyborg. Technology has enhanced your interaction with the outside world.”

16 Vector

now, do you want this drug? But watch out because IT MAY DAMAGE HIS BRAIN!

What a choice. But to have this drug FLOWN IN FROM AMERICA. the very word America in 1955 probably seemed fresh enough to come off on your hands like wet paint. Imagine the scenario: An American scientist in white lab-coat, and my father, a Midlands miner with a muffler and a whippet and a ferret in his top pocket.

Meanwhile I'm on a life-support machine, existence hanging by a thread.

SCIENTIST: Mr Joyce, if you give this drug to your boy, we have to tell you he may go on to become a fantasy writer.

DAD: Just turn off the support machine.

But finally the drug was FLOWN IN FROM AMERICA, with Science as I say cast like a winged god, and the threatened brain damage appears to have been only minimal, or at any rate manageable. But would we, I wonder, treat this with the same optimism today?

AMERICAN SCIENTIST: Well, we got a drug here for ya. Course, we didn't test it on our own kiddies, maybe you'd like to try it out, heh heh heh.

Am I being too cynical? After all I owe a debt of gratitude don't I? But the future today is not as good as it was in the old days. And where SCIENCE was once a stately, high-tech, inter-galactic spacecraft calmly cruising through steady space, now it's an escape pod with a distress-bleeper, buffeted by solar storms, all knowledge-systems in a state of entropy.

Crisis, ambiguity, doubt. But then I was always slightly suspicious of the exact sciences.

At five years old I was given a new way of looking at life. Literally. I was given spectacles. (I had snow-white hair and was made to suffer agonies because I looked like the Milky Bar Kid. SCHOOLBOY: Hey, he looks like the Milky Bar Kid. Punch him in the mouth).

"When I realised the Daleks couldn't get me, I got so close to the TV set to inspect the Black Dalek I can still remember the disconcerting clink as the lenses of my new spectacles collided with the glass of the screen."

Now it seems to me that spectacles are well represented in fandom. As I look across the audience at this optician's hinterland, I make no claims about the relationship between wearing glasses and Science Fiction, but what I will say is that when you are given glasses at age five, the world is already mediated. You have become a cyborg, of admittedly low-tech character, but still a cyborg. Technology has enhanced your interaction with the outside world. But it's not enough to have to endure the ritual name-calling and humiliations of the school-playground, no. To be given glasses you have to be traumatised AND have your already shaky faith in science dented forever.

At the Coventry and Warwickshire eye hospital I was bullied by a fat, pissed off nurse into declaring that Mickey Mouse was in a cage when in fact he wasn't. Let me explain. At the eye hospital you were seated on a high stool and made to squint through some heavy binoculars. The far end of the binoculars disappeared into a kind of TV screen. As she selected different lenses, or black-out lenses, the nurse could make an image of Mickey leap inside a cage-like box and out of it again. A perspective test, basically. My problem was I could always see two images. A strong Mickey and shadowy Mickey, one in the box, one out of the box.

NURSE: NOW, FOR THE LAST TIME, IS MICKEY IN THE BOX OR OUT OF THE BOX?

TERRIFIED BOY: ERRR.....

NURSE: (SCREAMING) FOR GOD'S SAKE? YOU'RE NOT AN IMBECILE! IS MICKEY IN THE BOX ? OR OUT OF THE BOX?

You may have picked up that Big Nurse is a metaphor for Science. I didn't know then that life was going to go around resolving itself into metaphors, but Big fat Nurse had reduced me to such a state of quivering terror that I started giving her the answers that I thought she wanted to hear. It worked. I was out of there in ten minutes, with a pair of NHS glasses. How could I explain to her the duality of the universe, the plural nature of reality? How could I? I was five years old, I'd only just learned to tie up my shoelaces. How could I account to her for a universe in which

Mickey was simultaneously In the cage and Out of the cage?

Crisis, ambiguity, doubt, there was so much of it floating around my formative years, no-one could persuade me that this world was ever going to yield up a single, scientific, rationally-demonstrable principle that was worth dying for. Everything was always going to be other than empirical evidence might suggest.

But while I was having National Health glasses strapped to my face, probably for no good reason, other things were happening on television, things from outer space were trying to conquer the Earth. They were called the Daleks. I watched my first episode from behind the sofa. When I realised the Daleks couldn't get me, I got so close to the TV set to inspect the Black Dalek I can still remember the disconcerting clink as the lenses of my new spectacles collided with the glass of the screen. There was another interesting factor about that programme. The hero, played by William Hartnell, was unlike other heroes. He scared me almost as much as the Daleks.

The Jesuits say: give me the child, and at seven I will give you the man. there I was at seven, in a world in which nothing was certain, fat eye-nurses were capable of behaving like prototype Orwellian interrogators from the worst room in the world, and even time and space were capable of infinite infolding inside a police box. I was seven, I was cooked. Where else could I have gone but the world of Science Fiction and Fantasy?

When other people say, as they do, that their favourite genre is Romance or Crime or Westerns or whatever, I want to say: But didn't you see Dr Who when you were 5? Or I look for an explanation and say, well, you obviously didn't have to wear glasses.

You make an assumption that writers are people who, ever since childhood, were charged by words, or who enjoyed wielding words or indeed who had an easy facility with words. You'd be wrong. Words, for me, have always

been dangerous and duplicitous. Double-dealing confidence tricksters. they change before your eyes, they switch character the moment they've left your tongue. One of my early memories was being sent to the co-op (14901 – I can still remember my dividend number. You'd go up to the shop on some errand repeating it over and over in your head and by the time you got there you'd forgotten what you came for) by my father to ask for some yeast. Not knowing exactly how much he wanted, he told me to use my 'discretion'. A teacher that day had told us of the need to be more discreet, and I managed to conflate the two things as usual. 'I want some yeast,' I whispered to the woman on the till. 'What's that?' she bellowed. 'I can't hear what you're saying!' I didn't know why Dad wanted the yeast, but I was certain his reasons were either subversive or faintly perverse. I didn't know what a banana-flavoured condom was in those days, but if I had I could have said, 'Forget it, I'll take some banana flavoured condoms instead.' I still feel my cheeks flaming as all the early morning shopping ladies with curlers in and teeth out turned from the bacon-slicer to look at the boy who'd lost his voice but wanted some yeast.

Thank God I corrected the misapprehension, or I might still be whispering the word now. Point is that words, like birth-times, and star-signs, and American vaccines and Science itself disguised as a fat nurse in an eye-clinic, were totally unreliable, double-dealing, apt to humiliate you if you ever tried to get a grip on them.

Not too surprising then, to develop an interest in dreams, where things have such a protean form, shifting and swirling, a place where if there are any

words, they're only half-formed, and reality is so provisional that its not even considered to be reality at all. Yet dreams are real things. They are empirical rather than theoretical, yet because we can't get them to repeat in any observable way, like a well-behaved experiment, science backs away from them and they're consigned to a misty, semi-occult basement of knowledge. Except that this is where writers of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror come in.

'Hey! Don't go down there. There could be a psychopath with an axe down there!'

"Dreams are real things. They are empirical rather than theoretical, yet because we can't get them to repeat in any observable way, like a well-behaved experiment, science backs away from them"

'Sorry. I just love unexplored basements!'

One of the first books I started writing, unfinished after two chapters, was about dreams. Having this obsession or even interest in dreams wasn't easy when you were from a mining family. Enter Dad again, cloth cap, muffler, whipper:

FATHER: 'What are you on about, what do your dreams mean? They mean you're asleep.'

YOUNG WRITER: 'No father, there's a world of the unconscious mind, and Freud and things, which people like you working down the pit don't understand.'

FATHER: Freud? What's he on about? You hate your father? That's what your father's there for. I hated my father; didn't hurt me. He hated his father; didn't hurt him.'

But the wonderful thing about dreams is that, although they refuse to stand still and be counted, measured or indexed, they still have their own internal coherence, and a logic which transcends their inner contradictions and absurdities. Crisis, ambiguity, doubt, all over again, but as properties which reveal something about the nature of our humanity rather than distort it. Over Delphi was written: Know Thyself. Everyone in this room knows that to see one's darkest anxieties and greatest expectations, you only have to consider how you behave in a dream.

And sometimes the answer seems unspeakable. But speak about it we must, and storytellers were doing it long before Homer committed the dreams of the *Odyssey* to paper, and writers have been doing it ever since. Because each dream, and each new fiction, is an island in the long, long quest for home. The island as dream. The island as an interlude in the cause-and-effect perception of the passage of time. We can invert the normal imagery and see the dream as an island in the endless and oppressive seas of necessary (for survival) rationality. Because what Homer and his forbears were doing when they invented each new island condition was to ask the golden question: what if?

"Technological advances are making the moral base to much SF more and more obvious to people outwith the genre. What if, they begin to ask. What if? What would our characters do if technology can offer now even this?"

What if the normal rules of life were suspended on this island and our heroes had to encounter a Sorceress, a Cyclops, a bevy of Sirens who sang so sweetly the hero might be lured to his death? And what if the only way our heroes could get out of these magical and dangerous situations was through eminently human resources, of intellectual cunning, of courage, of creative response? What would we learn about the strength and beauty of humanity? And what of its weaknesses and failures.

And so the motif, of island as dream, is so strong it its message that is replicated throughout the history of literature. By Petronius in his *Satyricon*. In the adventures of Simbad, in the *Arabian Nights*. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In *Gulliver's Travels*. So on and on, until science and technology shrink the planet and the Seven Seas, and space becomes the new ocean. Homer was attracted to the motif of islands because it was possible to believe that beyond every island, lay another one, and then another one. Just as we believe about space. Only instead of islands we have planets, forbidden and otherwise. So infinite in possibility, that where the uninitiated still think of Science Fiction as something to do with "outer space", the insider to the field knows that what Science Fiction is really about is INNER SPACE. In which questions can be asked, such as what if the normal scientific conditions were suspended on this planet, and our heroes had to encounter, say, absence of sunlight, altered gravity conditions, dilations in Time itself, and the only way they could get through these dangerous conditions was through the human verities of intellectual cunning, and courage and the creative response?

And we become more creative about the possibility of our islands. They don't have to be seagirt islands anymore, or even planets in outer space. These islands can be alternate universes; near futures; mythago woods; anywhere in which the normal rules can be suspended and characters can be exposed to what sociologists call the "liminal zone"; a place in which the consciousness of the protagonist

is raised by the condition of ritual in a very special rite of passage.

So when I wrote my first published book, *Dreamside*, it was about an island which characters created for themselves out of the ability to have lucid dreams. In other words, an island within a dream. I happened to be living on a Greek island while I was writing this book, so life began to take on a satisfyingly concentric form, in which theories about art, life itself, form and content all enjoyed a hitherto unexperienced pattern. Perhaps there was order to the universe after all. This momentary illusion was shattered when I came home to England and my new publishers said to me: We like this novel. We want to publish this novel. there's only one problem: can you tell us if it's science fiction, fantasy or horror?

Crisis, ambiguity, doubt. Given my background, I mean the agonies I've confessed to you about birthdays and the rest, was I honestly expected to provide the answer? Here we go again. Is Mickey in the box? Or out of the box? Well, Mickey's fucking about somewhere in the middle, so what.

I don't know the answer. All I know is this – that I've been lucky enough to have the Science Fiction community pay serious attention to these novels, whatever label gets slapped on them by marketing people in publishing houses. It's true that there are a few fossilised SF fans who don't want SF to go beyond anything that was offered in 1959, but the majority of enthusiasts for the genre are extraordinarily generous in the scope of their attentions. The publishing houses tell us that the market for SF is in decline. I'm not sure about that. I think that SF has been appropriated, annexed, asset-stripped by other industries. We know it feeds the commonplace imagery of the pop video and the advertising industry; we know a reduced, anodyne version of SF feeds the Hollywood conveyor belt; and we know that numerous mainstream authors cheerfully cannibalise SF ideas without ever acknowledging the traditions they raided (I'm thinking of PD James and Martin Amis reworking what

for the SF fan is hackneyed material) One of my favourite writers, Dennis Potter who died recently, has left us with two screenplays forthcoming, one about Virtual Reality and one about Cryogenics. the reason this is happening is that technological advances are making the moral base to much SF more and more obvious to people outwith the genre. What if, they begin to ask. What if? What would our characters do if technology can offer now even this? (Philip K Dick is the exemplar here, of course, but who amongst the mainstream knows it? Would he even get published today? I doubt it.) Our SF interests have already been colonised, and unfortunately given a new language – but this has long been the fate of SF!

Perhaps this is because never before in history have we felt so close to the future. Or is it that the future keeps seeming to fail us? Let's be honest. When we talk about the failure of the future, what we mean is loss of faith in SCIENCE and TECHNOLOGY. I suppose the failure of science was inevitable when it attempted to – or we asked it to – replace a discredited religion. It has, in its turn become a discredited faith.

Stephen Baxter last year lamented the stereotype of the mad scientist, that fond old image of early SF books and films. Doctor Morbeus on the Forbidden Planet and a thousand direct descendants. But this distrust is explicable. If we still fear the archetype of the mad scientist today, it's because experience has taught us to look closer. And as we do so, there is something strangely rubberised about the expression on the mad scientist's face; and the strings operating his hands and manipulating his jaw become as jarringly obvious and as appalling as in those early episodes of *Thunderbirds*. It's not the scientists or even the science we're afraid of: it's the naked lusts and leers of the financial and military imperatives of the puppet masters we fear most.

And where does that leave us, when the failure of the future, characterised by this distrust of science, is coeval with the failure of the greatest social experiment in the history of humanity. After the toppling of the Berlin Wall, what do we have. Fanaticism in the east. Cynicism and the politics of Greed in the

“I suppose the failure of science was inevitable when it attempted to – or we asked it to – replace a discredited religion. It has, in its turn become a discredited faith.”

West. What other way is offered. Superstitious Millennium Fever? In the West at least, religion is even more discredited than science. The answers will only come from old human verities, like with Odysseus, intellectual cunning and courage and the creative response, and from difficult ones like compassion and co-operation. After spending so much time talking about dreams and islands it would be tempting to suggest that all we must do is row, row, row our boats gently down the stream. But life is so much more serious than that. Our books have got to say that people are more important than money, that human relationships are more important than things, and that human resources must match scientific progress. Personally, I'm ready to be called naive. It's never hurt me in the past.

Crisis, Ambiguity, doubt: they come to seem like old friends. You wouldn't want to be without 'em. The real meaning of the word Crisis, by the way is not about a house in flames. It means choice.

Science Fiction might flicker, but it will never go out of fashion. We're hooked now, in that cybernetic loop to the future which keeps changing as it feeds back. We're addicted to the enterprise of trying to pinpoint the course of the human heart, and that after all, is the grand purpose behind all these fictions.

Writers and their readers are like voyagers on an odyssey trying to find answers to these questions. I say writers and their readers, because one man or woman alone is adrift, lost in a search with no meaning, whereas a ship full of fellow travellers is a quest. This Convention is such a craft. Writing books for an audience as well travelled as this audience – you've been to so many strange islands, you've seen the Cyclops and the sirens and the flying fish – it's not easy to come up with new maps and you might have been this way before. One always hopes that people don't get jaded by the search.

But the point of all this is to say that I don't think we will ever get jaded by the search for as long as we

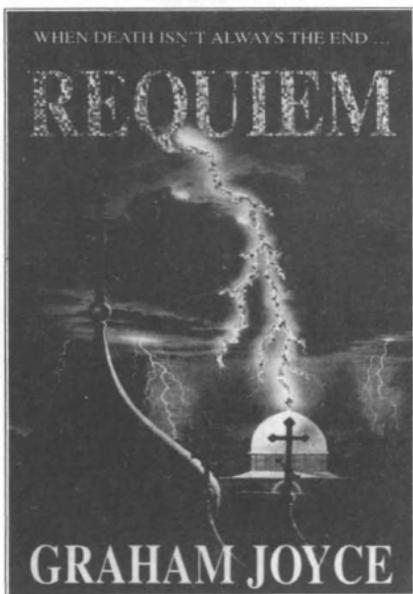
Our books have got to say that people are more important than money, that human relationships are more important than things, and that human resources must match scientific progress.

continue to dream in our beds at night. SF, Fantasy, Horror, oh for God's sake *literature in general* is the point at which dreams and the external world interface. The best among them are books which detonate *after* the act of reading them. Science is not the hero of science fiction. It never was, and it never will be. Human beings are, and Science is only the beautiful penumbra of the human psyche, the most potent of the artifices of these literatures are those which don't exactly

explain the dream (for an explained dream is after all a dead dream, a fossil of a dream); on the contrary, the most powerful are those which lead us from the dream to the very portals of interpretation, and leave us to take the next step ourselves.

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Graham's fourth novel, *Requiem*, is available in Hardback and Paperback from Penguin in May.



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FIRST IMPRESSIONS

**Romulus Barbolescu
& George Anania
& Nemira '94:
Romanian SF Anthology
Nemira, 1994, 239pp
Paul Kincaid**

Science Fiction is a language game. We play it with words that, literally, denote nothing. But their cultural references allow them to conjure worlds we have never seen, machines we have never imagined, beings we have never met, experiences we have never shared. You have to play the game for a while before you figure out all the rules, which is why so many readers who come to SF cold are at first mystified by or even shut out from what is going on. You need to share the language, and you need to trust the language. If the connotations break down, then the paper-thin denotations will not hold up. That is why, with occasional exceptions such as Stanislaw Lem or the Strugatski brothers, SF does not do well in translation. There are too many stumbling blocks in the way: the writers need to have acquired their knowledge of the language of SF in translation, and then have it translated back, and in each instance the translator is not just communicating the words but a vast cultural baggage that underpins them. The words we finally receive are so removed from

their source that it is not that easy to trust them as we need to do.

That is part of the problem with this anthology of Romanian SF stories. Despite the enthusiastic involvement of Lee Wood in the project, they have not been well translated. Even the common words between the SF images seem to have been divorced from any real reference. Add to that the fact that they have been typeset and proofread by people who are, at best, not native English speakers, at worst not English speakers at all, and the result is a babble that barely begins to make sense. Particularly in those stories which are most extreme in their science fictionality, set in the far future or the depths of space, it is often impossible to work out what is going on and why. Conclusions are reached without any apparent intervening steps of deduction, and while in some stories this is clearly because the original quality of the writing is poor ('All Bets on 'The Black Widow' by Cotizo Draia is particularly amateurish), in others ('Moreaugarin's Crusade' by Ovidiu Bufnila) there is a nagging sense that something in the words themselves is missing.

Wading through a morass of typesetting errors and words that are not quite right means that the unique SF vision of the Romanians, lauded by Norman

Spinrad in his *Afterword*, doesn't have much of a chance to come through. It is stories with limited amounts of strangeness and a fairly strong narrative drive, like Danut Ivanescu's 'The Land of Every Opportunity' which comes across a little like Terry Bisson's 'The Coon Suit', or Cristian Lazarescu's new-wavish 'The Symbiotic Man', which work best. Though sometimes an authentic surreal madness does emerge, notably in 'Some Earthlings' ADVENTURES in the EXTERIOR' by Lucian Merisca which does take a strange and at times wonderful approach to the alien. But the presentation of the book, the unreadability of so much of the text, does no favours even to those stories well worth reading.

**Eric Brown
Engineer
Pan Macmillan, 1994
Barbara Davies**

In this, his second novel, Eric Brown has developed the ideas which underpinned his short story, 'The Time Lapsed Man'. In the process he has produced a book which totally hooks the reader and invokes that good old 'sense of wonder'.

Starships have been made obsolete by Keilor-Vincioff Organisation (K-VO) Interfaces-portsals which connect the colonised worlds and enable instantaneous travel between them. The Enginemen and

Reviews of Hardbacks and Paperback Originals edited by Paul Kincaid

women who powered the ships, and in the process became addicted to contact with the Nada-Continuum, are now drifters and has-beens, desperate to 'flux' again.

The Mirren brothers were both Enginemen once. Ralph is now an atheist, depressed and caring for no-one, not even his ex-wife and child. Bobby lives constantly with the effects of Black's Syndrome - the disease which killed the hero of 'The Time Lapsed Man': all of his senses, except touch, are a day behind reality. Yet of the two, it is Bobby who has transcended his day-to-day existence. What they both want, more than anything, is the chance to 'flux'. Enter Hirst Hunter, mystery man with power and money, a red growth concealing half his face, who offers the Mirren brothers the chance to 'push' a starship once more. But where does Hunter want the ship to go, and why?

Meanwhile a young artist, Ella Fernandez, after watching her Engineman lover commit suicide, seeks reconciliation with her father and travels to the Rim world of Hennessy's Reach, home of the indigenous Llo-Dharvo. But there she finds herself in the middle of a genocidal offensive against the aliens by the Danzig Organisation.

The plot threads gradually become more and more entwined, spiralling towards transcendence, for it seems the Nada-Continuum is not just

Gregory Benford
Furious Gulf
 Gollancz, 1994, 290pp,
 £15.99
 Brian Stableford

In 1988 Gollancz published Gregory Benford's Great Sky River, which was advertised as the first volume of a trilogy. This projected three-decker was itself the third element in a series begun with *In the Ocean of Night* (1977) and carried forward by *Across the Sea of Suns* (1984), which featured astronaut Nigel Walmsley. The second of the earlier volumes introduced the notion of an ongoing galaxy-wide war between organic life-forms and 'mechs' - smart machines which have escaped the governance of their original makers to carry forward their own evolutionary programme. Great Sky River took a great leap forward in time to a medium-term future in which humans live as fugitives widely scattered about the vicinity of the galactic centre, dodging the mechs which seem bent on their extinction; it introduced the family Bishop (one of a number named for chess-pieces), their charismatic leader Killeen, and his son Toby. *Tides of Light* (1989) provided the second part of this trilogy but no third volume followed. Now, after a five-year gap, we have *Furious Gulf*, which turns out to be only half of the projected climactic volume; as one might expect of such an awkward entity its narrative begins in the middle, ends in the middle, and fills the in-between with lots more middle. *Furious Gulf* is likely to prove a difficult text for anyone who is unprepared to revisit the first two volumes, and it is likely to seem a trifle unsatisfying to anyone sufficiently eager not to wait for the concluding part.

We are, of course, well used to this sort of thing by now; it is the way modern publishing works, and understandably so. Marketing theory is very hot on product continuity, many readers delight in discovering new texts set in imaginary universes with which they are already familiar, and many writers similarly appreciate the

renewed benefits of work already done and the relative steadiness of income which multi-book contracts can produce. It is, of course, inevitable - given the hectic pace of staff turnover in publishing and the fact that writers sometimes find grand designs far more difficult to complete than to envisage - that many plans of this kind are interrupted, complicated or simply aborted, but Darwin explained to us long ago why there is no progress without wastage. If being without sin is a necessary prerequisite to casting the first (or any other) stone, I am certainly in no position to complain about this state of affairs, but I will say with scrupulous objectivity - that it is the kind of situation whose essential perversity might readily lead to at least some readers to feel thoroughly pissed off.

Meanwhile, back at the plot...

Toby is now the central character of the still-unfolding narrative - a move made politic by the fact that Killeen is now half way mad (a problem encouraged if not engendered by the loss of his loved one Shibo, who now survives in potted form somewhere at the back of Toby's brain). Toby remains, however, a useful ignoramus whose principal narrative function is to have things explained to him in bite-sized expository lumps. He is now fast friends with the alien Quath, who caused a great deal of botheration in *Tides of Light*, but he is not in the least delighted to find that the aesthetically-inclined mech called the Mantis, who provided all the spiffing chase scenes in Great Sky River, was not permanently killed off by that volume's *deus ex machina*. Here, Quath does a lot more enigmatic talking after her eccentricity-bracketed fashion, the Mantis does a lot more chasing, and a dwarf who might well prove to be able to explain the whole plot if he only gets the time makes an entrance but unfortunately claims up immediately after introducing himself. All this

does not prevent Toby from pausing repeatedly in order to contemplate the eerie spatiotemporal landscapes into which he has been delivered (somewhere in the 'ergosphere' of a massive black hole) and to pose the all-important question of why a little trick like him, insignificant even by the miserably pathetic standards of his species, is so uniquely important that a specially-selected agent of admittedly-ambivalent mech-kind is bothering to chase him half way to hell and back.

The author's afterword promises that the answer to this puzzling question, which has already been delayed for five years, will be made available next year - which presumably means that he knows what it is and isn't procrastinating simply because he hasn't yet made up his mind. Readers who find themselves marooned in mid-text on p.287 with nothing but an apologetic note to keep them fed will inevitably be tempted to wonder whether any conceivable answer could possibly be worth the wait. Personally, I began to wonder about that as long ago as the sub-climax to Great Sky River, when one of the many typographically-emphasised dialogues featured therein between Killeen and Yet Another Unbelievably Awesome Entity informed the reader, Maxwell Perkins-fashion, that this epic odyssey - like all other noteworthy American examples - was to be the hero's search for his father (and, of course, everything that might be metaphorically symbolised thereby). Readers who can sympathise with the author's seemingly long-held determination to write the Great American Science Fiction Novel by following various well-established precedents will doubtless have taken that news with equanimity and may still be eagerly looking forward to the long-awaited true climax of the whole shebang; I don't, I didn't and I'm really not sure that I am.

of throwaway detail which thoroughly convinces.

The human characters are complex and flawed individuals with histories and futures, while the aliens are ... well, alien. I admit that at first I found it hard to feel sympathy for the introspective and selfish Ralph Mirren, but somehow Brown pulls off even that trick. If I have any quarrel at all, it is that the characters and relationship of Max and Caroline Thorn in 'The Time Lapsed Man' are remarkably similar to those of Ralph and Caroline Mirren in *Engineman*. But then, if something works, why not keep it?

Allan Cole & Chris Bunch
The Warrior's Tale
 Legend, 1994, 487pp, £15.99

Janny Wurts
The Ships of Menor
 HarperCollins, 1994, 494pp,
 £15.99
 Martin Brice

It is impossible to read these two books in quick succession without comparing them.

Both are the second volumes in their respective series: *The Ships of Menor* follows *The Curse of the Mistwaith* in *The War of Light and Shadows* series; *The Warrior's Tale* follows *The Far Kingdoms* in the trilogy of the same name.

The dustjackets of both reproduce marine art of high quality. *The Warrior's Tale* shows vessels of Ancient Mediterranean or Renaissance Venetian appearance on a storm-tossed sea, while survivors struggle to stay afloat in the mountainous waves. *The Ships of Menor*, on the other hand, are barquentines and ketches, slipping on a calm tide past surfbound islets into a rocky inlet, while pterodactyls fly overhead against a brilliant sunset. The artist in this instance is the author herself.

Janny Wurts is also a musician, with an understanding of the power of that art-form - which is put to good effect in her novel. One of her characters is Medir, apprentice to Halliron Masterbard. Medir uses the fourteen-stringed lyranthe to reduce to tears the people in the municipal banqueting hall/execution chamber of Jaelot - and then unleashes a sonic crescendo which destroys the whole unjust city.

Medir's real name is Arithon s'F'alenn, although he

something through which starships travel - and its very existence is threatened.

The story gripped me so hard that I read it at one sitting. Brown inexorably raises the stakes for each protagonist to

life (and even death!) threatening proportions. He also makes excellent use of the viewpoint switch, making the reader desperate to know what happens next. As for the settings, Brown's future Paris is

as vivid as anything by J.G. Ballard; it has figuratively and literally gone to seed, having been colonised by spores of alien vegetation which came through the Only Spaceport KVO interface. This future is full

is also known as the Bane of Desh-There and as Master of Shadow. He is the villain of the book, using dark arts and cunning against his half-brother, the Lord of Light. This latter is also entitled Bane of Desh-There, although his real name is Lysaer s'lessid. He is handsome, charismatic and dedicated to justice, but, bent on the destruction of Arithon, he raises armies to shed the blood of innocents for the sake of lasting peace. So, perhaps Lysaer is really the villain and Arithon the good guy, after all?

I must say that the only character I felt certain about was Dakar, the Mad Prophet. His sole aim is self-preservation. Yet though he has been alive for several centuries, he has not yet learned to avoid the temptation of alcohol, nor has he yet devised a magic charm against hangovers.

Apart from Dakar, I needed frequent recourse to the map and to the glossary of people, places and things — and still found myself confused.

The Ships of Merior is written as an epic, in contrast to The Warrior's Tale which, as its name implies, is related in the first person. Thus, although there are epic adventures, they are described in simple language by Captain Rali Emilee Antero. The background to the novel is the war between Lycanth and Orissa. Antero's Maranon Guard spearheads the capture of Lycanth and kills one of the two ruling Archons. The other escapes, pursued by the Maranon Guard in a fleet of temporarily-friendly pirate ships. After the resulting naval battle, the story really begins, with Captain Antero's band wandering across uncharted seas, encountering magic, demons, Sargasso seaweed and a variety of monsters and hostile humans.

As for who Captain Antero is, the opening paragraphs are composed in such a manner as to keep the reader guessing — but it doesn't take long to find out.

D.G. Compton
Justice City
Gollancz, 1994, 288pp.
£14.99
Andrew M. Butler

After his long silence in the 1980s, D.G. Compton has now returned to writing sf, even if he has not yet approached the qualities he displayed in *The Continuous Katherine*

Mortenhoe. After the small press *Scudder's Game*, the collaboration with John Gribbin, *Ragnarok*, and the poorly received *Nornansland*, Compton has produced a near-future thriller, *Justice City*.

Justice City is a high-tech, high security prison where inmates are punished with a variety of neurological and electrical devices. This has satisfied the public's demand for cost-effective retribution, but the whole system is at risk of being brought into disrepute when one prisoner is murdered by one of the four attendants on duty. Deciding to cover up the murder until the killer has been identified, the governor brings in a black detective based in Liverpool to solve the case as soon as possible.

On the plus side, Compton has set up a series of ethical dilemmas which admit no easy solutions: the rights of victims against the rights of villains, retribution or rehabilitation, humanity or efficiency. The murder victim, Albert Beech, is a convicted rapist and murderer, and his death is perhaps desirable in the eyes of his victims or even society as a whole. But the carefully monitored fairness of the punishment, the scientific correctness of the procedures, can all be undermined by vigilante-style acts.

Compton's characters are carefully drawn, if a little too schematically arranged. The suspects are a female white nurse, a female black nurse, a gay nurse and an elderly janitor who was formerly a prisoner. Through their attitudes — together with those of detective Alec Duncan — Compton can explore issues of sexism, racism and homophobia, whilst avoiding having to take a side himself.

But Compton's use of several viewpoints, which he had mastered in his novels of the early 1970s, backfires for once. In giving the thoughts of his characters it is obviously impossible to keep the identity of the killer secret from the reader. There are precedents for this, of course, but Compton has not got the skill to repeat the cat-and-mouse games of detective and criminal played in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or even in Colombo. *Justice City* is perhaps closest in tone to Stephen Gallagher's horror/policier novels where early relations serve to heighten

the tension further. Here tension is dissipated, although the climax is mercifully unexpected if clumsily executed.

Compton's viewpoints become confused in the first chapter, which is overloaded with information. We are introduced to 'Margaret (Peggy) Landon' and 'Chief Inspector Alexander (Alec) Duncan', with 'Chief Inspector Duncan, Alec', repeated on the next page in case we have forgotten. Duncan is still in Liverpool at this point of the plot, but Peggy Landon's desk is described in terms of how Alec Duncan will see it when he arrives, at a point when there is no need for any police investigation.

In fact, there is a sense that this is too much of a plot, that despite his neutral position Compton is a presence in the book. We are told: 'Descriptions in books of getting up on a workday morning are boring ... Accordingly this story doesn't join Peggy Landon on Wednesday morning until she's leaving her quarters'. There is no need for this: the chapter could begin with Peggy at work without there being a sense of something, however boring, being missed. Such a postmodern tactic is not necessarily wrong in itself, but this particular grasp at metaliticism is pointless.

Justice City is potentially a good book, with its political relevance signalled by Compton's choice of John Major speaking on punishment to be his epigraph. There is a glimpse of the politics of 'just ten minutes into the future', but the book's twin settings of Liverpool and Justice City form too narrow a canvas to make a satisfactory political thriller. The real wrong-doers in the book are regrettably off-stage in Whitehall and Westminster. At the same time, this political edge means that *Justice City* has pretensions higher than being a simple detective novel.

I write this review in the wake of Frederick West's suicide in his cell being trumpeted as justice in the tabloids and after riots at Everthorpe Prison. Compton's subject matter is certainly timely, and questions of law and order remain relevant. But unfortunately this is not enough to allow *Justice City* to overcome its flaws.

Samuel R. Delany
The Mad Man
Richard Kasak, 1994,
506pp. £10.99
Paul Kincaid

There is a science fiction writer in this novel who is also a philosopher. There is a young black male. There is an erotic obsession not with fingernails but with toenails. There is a writer, who appears briefly to comment upon a collection of SF stories, whose name is a close anagram of Delary's.

In other words this account of obsession, homosexuality and the hovering shadow of AIDS is full of the resonances that have run through all Delary's fiction, and in particular his most recent *Neveryour* tales. But despite a final step one minute into the future, this is not a work of science fiction, still less of fantasy.

John Marr is a black graduate student researching the life and work of Timothy Hasler while working as a temp; living in a small New York apartment in the same building where, coincidentally, Hasler also lived; and engaging in a variety of homosexual adventures with the down and outs who live in Central Park. Hasler was a Korean American who was killed a decade before when on the verge of a brilliant philosophical career. His work was groundbreaking, he wrote acclaimed sf stories, and he was a homosexual who became involved with the down and outs of Central Park. The more Marr discovers about Hasler, the more their lives collide, until his final understanding of the shocking and gruesome circumstances surrounding the murder of Hasler coincides with an almost identical event in his own life.

This part of the book is absolutely fascinating, as two lives entwined within a New York twilight world separated only by the onset of AIDS. But along the way fully two thirds of the book is given over to detailed, repetitive, not to say obsessive descriptions of Marr's sex life as it progresses rapidly from oral sex to drinking urine and beyond. This is not pornographic — it is not gratifying and it is certainly not arousing — and it is essential to the plot, to the

Maureen F. McHugh
China Mountain Zhang
Orbit, 1995, 313pp, £5.99
 Barbara Davies

Why has this book taken so long to reach the UK? It was first published in the USA in 1992, to great acclaim – it won the Locus Award for Best First Novel, the James Tiptree Jr Memorial Award and the Lambda Literary Award as well as being nominated for both a Hugo and a Nebula. Perhaps UK publishers were worried by the absence of 'is this the end of civilisation as we know it?' action, or perhaps they weren't too keen on a gay protagonist. Who knows?

This is an absorbing story of ordinary people leading ordinary lives – people with the same needs as us, who face the same difficulties and make the same mistakes. And in the process of detailing the personal, the author conveys, almost subliminally, a clear and fascinating picture of her future society. This is intentional, to judge by the Carnus quote at the start of the book: 'A simple way to get to know the town is to see how the people work, how they love and how they die.'

McHugh's future is very much like our present, with significant and convincing differences – a Mars colony for one, and the worldwide (excluding Canada and Australia) spread of Maoist Marxism and all things Chinese for another.

Zhong Shan (meaning 'China Mountain') Zhang lives in Brooklyn. He seems to have everything going for him: youth, good looks, an American Born Chinese (ABC) appearance, and he has a good job as an engineering tech. But Zhong also has secrets. His mother was actually Spanish, and he was gene-spliced to look like a pure ABC. He is also gay and still looking for the love of his life.

Zhang spends most of his days working as foreman on a building site, and most of his nights cruising for casual sex under the broadwalks of Coney Island or jacking into the system to share the sensations of the kite flyers racing in the skies above The Swathe. This routine is overturned when Zhang's status-conscious boss decides he would make the perfect son-in-law. Refusal to marry the boss's daughter gets

him the sack; jobs are scarce so he has no choice but to work at a research centre on Baffin Island in the Arctic Circle. But what looks like a dead end proves to be an opportunity, because hazardous postings carry a special bonus: the chance to receive education in mainland China itself.

Zhang's ambitions to learn organics (Daoist) engineering involve him in travel and new experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, including an encounter with near fatal disease. Eventually he returns to Brooklyn, older and a little wiser, and with the real possibility of at last finding love and fulfilment in his life.

This is primarily China Mountain Zhang's story, but the novel also throws a light on others whose lives have touched his, some only marginally. McHugh shows the reader their dilemmas and their attempts, some more successful than others, to deal with them. There's ugly San-xiang, who could have had a new face in her teens if only her proud father hadn't spent the money trying to get back to China instead. When she can finally afford the necessary gene therapy, her new prettiness causes people to react differently, and the reactions are sometimes confusing and hard to cope with. There's Angel, the has-been flier whose kite seems like an extension of herself: can she somehow get back into the big time without killing herself in the process? Then there's Martine Jansch, ex-army officer now expert bee keeper, goat farmer and detector of oxygen leaks, whose solitary life in a commune on Mars looks likely to be changed by Alexi Dormov and his daughter, newly arrived from a resettlement camp in Nevada.

China Mountain Zhang is a chronological sequence of present tense episodes, each told by a different character. Most can be read perfectly well on their own – the author subtly recaps any previous information where needed – but they also blend into a satisfying whole. I was impressed with McHugh's prose, which is as lucid as anything I have read, yet moves pacily and informatively along. Her characters are real and sympathetic, and it was with reluctance that I had to leave them at the end.

A thoroughly enjoyable and convincing book.

characterisation and especially to the stunning climax (if you'll pardon the word) of the book. Nevertheless, the balance is awry, too often the enigma of Hasler seems to have been forgotten and the driving force of the plot is lost. The sex scenes feel as if they are too long, and certainly too repetitive, to carry the narrative weight they are given, and they do not compensate for the weakening of the central plot.

Moreover, there is a moral thrust to the book which makes me uneasy. Delary quotes in its entirety a 1987 paper on the vectors of HIV infection which suggests that there is no indication that oral sex leads to infection. If, as Delary suggests, this is the only research on the subject to have been conducted, or at least published, then it is an appalling reflection on the state and nature of AIDS research throughout the world. Even so, to build upon this as both the author and the narrator appear to do, the conclusion that oral sex is hence safe sex seems to me to be not only logically flawed but also morally outrageous.

David Gemmell
Bloodstone
Legend, 1994, 298pp, £15.99
 Andy Mills

This is the fifth novel in the Sipstrassi series (the book cover proclaims it as being 'the new Jon Shannon novel'). The fourth in the sequence, *The Last Guardian*, came out in 1989; the appearance of this book would appear to be the result of demands from Gemmell's fans.

It was interesting to investigate a work by this popular fantasy author, but not being familiar with the series does make any detailing of the somewhat tortuous plot, with its large cast of characters and links and references to previous works, pretty well impossible, at least in a form which it would make it comprehensible. Suffice to say that the legendary 'Jerusalem Man', Jon Shannon, who had slipped out of the world's view by renouncing violence and becoming a preacher, is forced to take up arms again. First of all he battles evil zealots, then a more fantastical enemy, culminating in a show-down with the Bloodstone, a creature which sucks men's lives and souls.

The story is highly referential to previous titles in the series, but it is perfectly possible to read this as a stand-alone (though no doubt much of the sense of the thing is lost). This is because the book is essentially a western with fantasy trimmings and we all recognise, and feel comfortable with, the stock situations and characters Gemmell portrays. Like most westerns, action is to the forefront; I lost count of the shoot-outs in the novel, let alone the vast numbers of people killed. Arms manufacturers don't struggle for orders on Gemmell's world.

Great literature *Bloodstone* certainly ain't – but doubtless it was never meant to be. It's an undemanding, exciting (but violent) read. If you can survive being seen in public with the garish cover, you may find it suitable for the old train journey, where there's no need to give a book your full attention.

Phillip Mann
A Land Fit for Heroes 2:
Stand Alone Stan
Gollancz, 1994, 288pp,
£15.99
 Ian Sales

Alternate history has always been a staple of SF and in recent years has seen something of a revival: Christopher Evans won the BSFA Award for *Aztec Century*; *Alternate Worlds*, a magazine dealing exclusively with alternate history, was launched; not to mention the mainstream success of Robert Harris's *Fatherland*. Despite all this, it still came as a bit of a surprise to see Phillip Mann leaping on to the bandwagon with *A Land Fit for Heroes*. Mann has hardly carved out a career as a writer with a finger sensitively poised over the pulse of the SF community.

In this series, Mann has followed the British tradition of alternate history: pick a point some time in the dim and distant past then extrapolate like mad to the present. (For some reason, most American alternate history is either based around an event in the recent past or set immediately after the point of change.) Mann's chosen historical fulcrum is the end of the Roman Empire in Britain. In the universe of *A Land Fit for Heroes* the Romans never left Britannia, rather they conquered the rest of the world and are still in place two thousand years later. It's not the

most esoteric attempt at rewriting history by any means, but Mann's Celts, who live in the interstices of Roman rule in Britain, possess a certain interesting originality.

Stand Alone Stan, the second volume in the series, is like most mid-series books: it doesn't do much or go anywhere in particular. Our three heroes, Coll (Viti as was), Angus and Miranda, have made their way from the events of *Escape to the Wild Wood* to this volume's eponymous town, a Celtic learning centre and magical place named for the dirty great dolmen around which it is sited. Once there, Angus goes to learn at the feet of a disaffected Roman who runs a nearby thinktank, Miranda becomes a mystic, and Coll becomes a hermit.

The narrative follows four strands: Coll survives his first winter as a hermit, Angus picks up the rudiments of dialectical materialism, and Miranda goes on mystical meanderings in another dimension. Woven neatly into these three strands, we have Marcus Ulysses, Coll's father, searching for his son and taking up with Lucius Prometheus as the latter seizes the Roman throne.

There is something curiously old-fashioned about *A Land Fit for Heroes*. A mildly pedagogical authorial voice makes it very clear from the beginning that this is not our world, leading us through a narrative which strolls along at a sedate pace (well, covering the same ground three times, from the viewpoint of each of the main characters, does not make for a hard and fast read). However, there is an impressive level of consistency in Mann's Britannia – a spell that is broken on occasion, unfortunately, by such jarring flights of fancy as Miranda's trip to Sulla and Lem's world.

The whole concept of an alternate universe in which the Roman Empire did not fall is so blunt an instrument, so tied a conceit that, coupled with the gentle gait of the narrative and the didactic voice of the author, the book reads like nothing so much as juvenile SF. This is no bad thing: one of the best fantasy trilogies ever written, Ann Halam's *The Daymaker* and its sequels, is juvenile fiction; and *A Land Fit for Heroes* has much in common with Halam's trilogy.

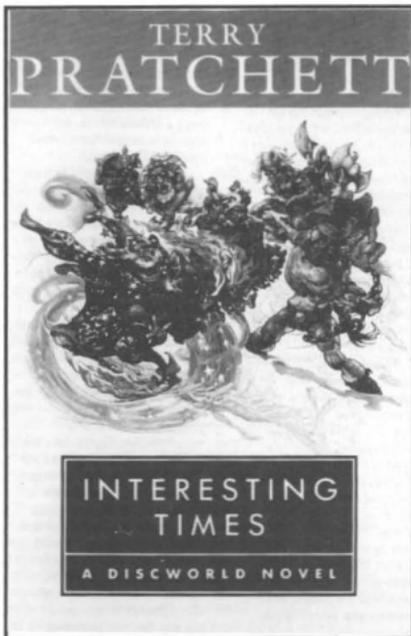
Judging by the pace of events in *Stand Alone Stan*, I would guess that *A Land Fit for Heroes* is going to finish up at around five volumes – certainly not less, possibly more. It is well written, an attractive read, and in no way sullies Mann's reputation as a writer of thoughtful, intelligent SF. *A Land Fit for Heroes* is building up to being an excellent (juvenile) SF series.

Terry Pratchett
Interesting Times
Gollancz, 1994, 283pp,
£14.99
L.J. Hurst

Eisenberg's Uncertainty Principle says that any experiment with an observer will change the observer, though in practice how much he is changed depends on the magistrate or whether the judge went to a good Public School and is understanding. *Interesting Times* begins in the Unseen University with an uncertainty principal – when no-one wants to admit to being a Great Wizard and consequently loaned to the Counterweight Continent, which is being torn apart by clan wars.

Rather against his will, Rincewind the Wizard (a spelling usually attributed to his ignorance, but possibly due to an unacknowledged taste for the music of Roy Wood) gets sent and his luggage follows him. The luggage always gets through, of course; if only we could live by the same condition: 'Breakfast in London, Dinner in New York, luggage eating Lord King and Sir Colin Marshall'. We can just sit and hope. Meanwhile, Rincewind reaches the Agatean Empire to find that he has no idea what is going on – but that is no disadvantage since no other group of plotters has much idea either.

Re-enter Cohen the Barbarian and his gang of senile delinquents from volumes past, who have gained a member trying to tame them (this is just as difficult as Twoflower trying to teach the laws of economics back in *The Colour of Magic* – when he tells them to just act normally they point out that by their standards this should be psychopathic slaughter rather than a walk through the streets). The barbarians are preparing to take the throne from their refuge in the hills (free Cohens in the mountains, as you might say).



There is also a home grown gang of polite revolutionaries with a motto of 'Unpleasantness to Oppressors When Convenient', whose lack of militant zeal means that the country is not going to the dogs at a rate of knots, or knot of rats since people use pictograms here in the Aurient. This is inconvenient for Lord Hong, the Grand Vizier of the palace, who wants a palace revolution but feels it inappropriate to do anything himself to reach the position which is his by Divine Right, or Divine Wrong. (Why are rotarians never revolutionaries?)

Meanwhile the luggage has been getting on with things, back in his homeland – rather like Mr Spock going back to Vulcan except that you cannot imagine the Sapient Pearwood from which the luggage was carved going into rust. In fact it is difficult to imagine two trees fighting over anything.

There then follow a lot of battles, vaguely in the line of epic slaughter, involving unusual allies and armies being brought out of nowhere (or an old sort of sewer, whichever is the more epic). And there is a lot of dying without Death coming into it – until he pops in for a

moment eight pages from the end: IF YOU WOULD CARE TO STEP THIS WAY? (Did anyone notice that Death spoke in CAPITALS but not in quotes in *The Colour of Magic*, but gained them in *The Light Fantastic*?)

The final intercontinental magic sends Rincewind to islands on the other side of the world. (Rincewind remains a traveller who can be surprised by what happens to him – and Aarghlonaut, in fact). He is having an unfortunate experience with a bent stick – and could have a worse one yet when he meets the lizards of Oz – and he is without his luggage.

Interesting Times must be one of the longest of the Discworld novels. Terry Pratchett has found that using words is a good way to lengthen a book, which is why he used so many of them, I imagine. I may have borrowed some of them, but what I have not borrowed are the jokes, because the book could not afford to lose those. Unfortunately, there are not enough to go around.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch
Alien Influences
Milenium, 1994, 424pp,
£15.99
 Carol Ann Green

The Dancers are an enigmatic alien race who share the planet Bountiful and the manufacture of the non-addictive drug Salt Juice with humans. The Dancers have no concept of the past, they live their lives in the present and the future, using elaborate rituals to create their society over and over again.

The Dancer Eight is a group of human children who are charged with the murder of six of their friends by a Dancer ritual, a ritual which enables alien children to become adults.

John, the leader of the Eight, is fascinated by the Dancer and witnesses a puberty ritual in which the adolescent Dancer's hands, heart and lungs are removed to make way for new ones to grow. The only way for human children to leave Bountiful and their parents' indifference is to become adults, and in the Dancer ritual John believes he has found a way for human children to grow up quickly. So the children try the ritual themselves, unaware of the repercussions their actions are to have on their lives and the lives of those around them.

Justin Shchafer, a psychologist specialising in human and alien psychology, is brought in by the Colony authorities to investigate the murders and prove the Dancers responsible. But Shchafer discovers that the children, not the aliens, mutilated their playmates. He goes on to discover the terrible truth about Salt Juice and the cover-up by the Colony authorities; but he cannot save the Eight from being sent to a prison planet, though they should at least have been given the opportunity to be tried under the Alien Influences Act.

Then one of the children dies in mysterious circumstances, and the rest are whisked off Lina Base and into separate confinement. Years later, after his release, John tries to find the others. The trail takes him from base to base, back to Bountiful and away again. Along the way he finds that the Dancers have an agenda of their own, an agenda which involves persuading the human children to believe they were

useless. And when John does manage to track down the other members of the Dancer Eight they are all dead ... yet not totally gone.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch weaves a magical tale that explores the relationship between humans and aliens, and ponders whether humans can be so influenced by aliens that they become alien themselves. But Rusch provides no hard and fast answers. Instead she brings her characters to life, presents memorable situations, and fills her book with enough suspense and plot twists to keep you turning the pages to find out what happens next.

William Shatner
with Chris Kreski
Star Trek Movie Memories
HarperCollins, 1994, 358pp,
£9.99

Phil Farrand
The Nitpicker's Guide for Classic Trekkers
Titan, 1994, 393pp, £7.99
 Lynne Bispham

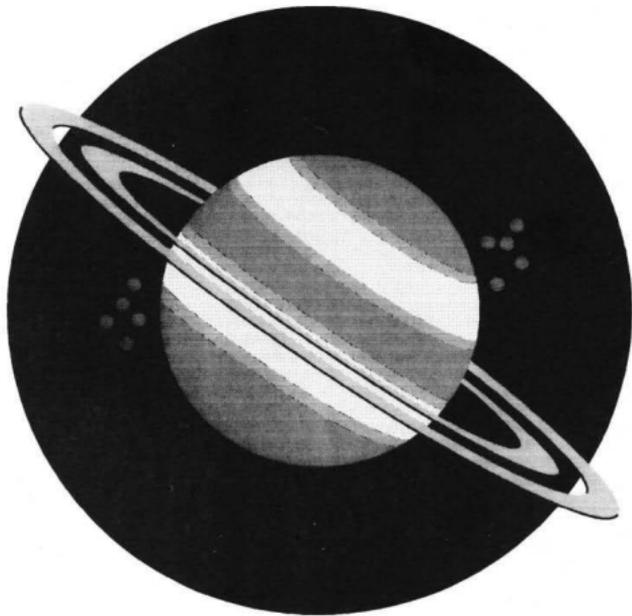
With *Star Trek VII: Generations* just about to beam down to a Cinema Near You, and *TNG* available twice daily on cable, *Star Trek Movie Memories* contains a salutary

reminder for the complacent fan that what was destined to become one of the most successful SF series of all time was originally pulled off air after three seasons and no-one expected it to return to TV, let alone in a new cinematic incarnation. Having read this book, it seems even more incredible that the *Star Trek* films did get made, for the 'no holds barred power struggles' amongst the production team, particularly between Gene Roddenberry and everyone else, the havoc wrought by the clash of creative temperaments and the necessity for directors and stars to massage the egos of the omnipotent money-men-in-suits, would make anyone unaccustomed to the unique atmosphere of a Hollywood film set transport themselves to the far side of the galaxy.

William Shatner (with Chris Kreski) has written an immensely readable, amusing and fascinating account of movie making in a world inhabited by beings every bit as exotic as those encountered by the crew of the Enterprise as they boldly go etc etc. These people really do 'have lunch', get 'really excited about this project' and talk it all through with their analysts. They also

have tremendous enthusiasm for all that goes into the making of a film: the initial brainstorming sessions to produce a script that does justice to the whole concept of *Star Trek*, the setting up of difficult shots to achieve just the right FX and, in the case of the actors, the portrayal of characters for whom they have developed real affection. The death of Spock was apparently almost as traumatic for Leonard Nimoy as for the fans who watched it. Shatner is disarmingly candid about Kirk's expanding waistline and the problems faced by middle-aged actors who are still called upon to save the galaxy in a suitably energetic fashion. This book is a 'must-read' for Trekkers, and anyone with a passing interest in the *Star Trek* universe or film-making will find it well worth the purchase.

The Nitpicker's Guide for Classic Trekkers, on the other hand, is more for the dedicated Trekker than the casual viewer/reader and is packed with information about the original *Star Trek*. It contains plot synopses for each of the 79 episodes, the pilot and the first six movies. The author records his own thoughts about each episode, the lines and scenes



he considers the best, details of syndication cuts and of the stalls that are the background for the closing credits, as well as 'trivia questions'. Also included, of course, are the 'nits', the 'Plot Oversights', the 'Equipment Oddities' and continuity errors or, as the cover puts it, the 'Bloopers, Impossibilities and Screw-Ups' when costumes change colour mid-scene and tricorners acquire a mind of their own. All is reported with such obvious affection for the series and with such humour that not even a Klingon could take offence. This is a book to browse through to rediscover your own favourite lines and scenes – and it is great fun.

Bruce Sterling
Heavy Weather
Millenium, 1994, 280pp,
£15.99
Paul Kincaid

They do this in America. Where the great plains stretch in the shadow of the Rockies Mountains, from north Texas through Kansas and Oklahoma and north as far as the Dakotas, is storm country. And people chase storms. Researchers trying to find out

about the most powerful natural force known to man, photographers after that perfect shot of a jagged bolt of lightning or a wild twister, broadcasters sending out warnings to the towns and homesteads that lie in the path of a tornado, and fans just seeking the thrill of it all. You can read about them in books as varied as *Storm Country* by Pete Davies and *Prairyerth* by William Least Heat Moon. The only surprise is that it has taken so long for science fiction to catch up with the drama and spectacle.

Although for a good part of Bruce Sterling's novel about storm chasers in the environmental catastrophe that is north Texas a quarter of the way into the next century, you could be excused for forgetting that this is science fiction at all. Sterling gives his Storm Troupers a bunch of futuristic hi-tech paraphernalia (though for the fairground barker of cyberpunk he is unusually and sharply ironic about the unreality of virtual reality), but this is no more than window dressing on a story that could as well be set now. Sickly Alex, scion of a

wealthy family, has fallen in with bad company and has ended up in a dubious Mexican hospital. Jane, his sister, rescues him and introduces him into the circle of storm chasers she runs with. You get the familiar tensions between brother and sister, between spoilt brat and self-sufficient outdoor types, all tricked out with the genuine excitement of a massive storm front.

Only when he has got this out of his system does Sterling remember that he has an sf tale to tell. Gradually he introduces the notion that the environmental depredations that have changed the ecology of this part of the world have also changed the weather. The big storm is coming, and it could be big enough to render huge chunks of the USA uninhabitable, perhaps even end life on Earth.

What Sterling is setting up is a catastrophe novel, a form of science fiction generally considered inimical to the optimistic, problem-solving tradition of American SF. Catastrophe fiction is typically written by people losing confidence, by people coming to terms with national loss of place, of authority. As it was when Britain's loss of Empire and catastrophe fiction went hand in hand, it is the fiction of uncertainty. And Sterling does it well. The characters are drawn with bold strokes, the descriptions of storms must rank among Sterling's best writing, the disaster is set up with genuine storytelling skill.

Then he cops out.

As the mother of all storms rips the sky apart and settles ominously above Oklahoma City, Sterling suddenly shifts gear and shifts focus. Just as the storm is about to become the huge, brutal and earth-shattering creature that has been promised, we leave the weather behind. All at once there is an interlude in an underground bunker in which a secondary character becomes the centre of attention and the novel explores a conspiracy by various criminals to escape the storm. This whole scene has nothing whatsoever to do with what has gone before, but by the time it is over, so is the storm. Then Sterling wimps out even more by tacking on a sentimental ending in which Alex is made better and it turns

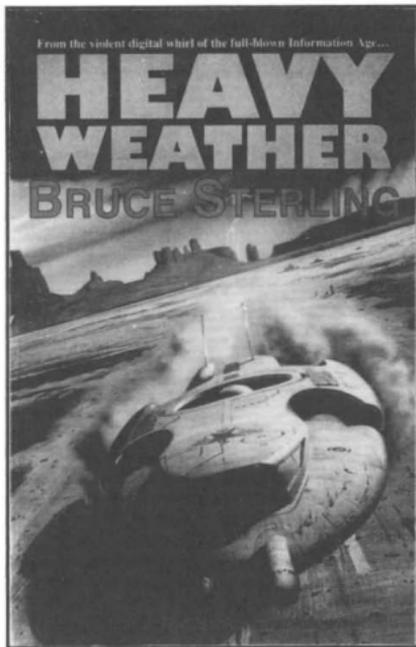
out the storm wasn't as bad as all that after all.

Whether this whole last section of the book is a sop to an America which can't handle the psychological implications of a true catastrophe novel, or a failure of nerve on Sterling's part, it spoils what could have been his best book to date.

Ian Watson
The Fallen Moon
Gollancz, 1994, 546pp,
£16.99
K.V. Bailey

Story-telling and gossip, the latter distributed by titerant talking cuckoos (more shriek-like or hawk-like than Spenser's 'merry messenger'), are constant ingredients of Watson's new SF/fantasy hybrid – as they were of the preceding *Lucky's Harvest*. We are still on the planet Kaleva, colonised by humans transported there by a sentient Ukko asteroid (the price being the telling of a tale), but new home also to huge serpentine lsi, each symbiotically linked to its humanoid but equally alien slave, a Jutterhat. The main narrative strand of *The Fallen Moon* tells what the bereaved and half-deranged Lucky Sariola, Queen of Kaleva, reaps from her 'harvest' of daughters – and from two of them in particular, Eva and Minnow.

The sisters at first are in conflict with each other then become allied, Minnow having usurped for herself the title Queen of Kaleva (an archetypal King Lear motif). A fantastical dynastic war of successive fortress investments results: one waged with wooden soldiers, missiles and muties, jump-bike, sky-boat and shuttle-sled, Jaeger troopers and Juttahats. It drives the rebellious daughters and their husbands to the Kip'an'keep palace of Edith, another of Lucky's covey of daughters. As wished by Lucky, the moon/asteroid entity known as the Ukko-child (in which Lucky's sought-for doppelganger and sundry other ambiguous 'echo' characters dwell) rises from its lacustrine hiding place and, looming over Kip'an'keep, creates a plutonic crater into which it and palace and town descend. This second and concluding novel's ending is both chaotic and integrative. An up-beat tidying-up Epilogue is added by the Chronicle of Kaleva, whose recapping Prologue had set the scene. A character guide of 165 names



helps things along when the episodic plotting makes demands on memory.

That brief outline conveys little of the pleasures to be encountered. There is wit and humour. Most importantly, Watson is master of the kind of magic which is actually an analogue of what psychologically (and at varying levels of consciousness) is commonly and universally experienced. His characters, especially his determining characters who are 'proclaimers', bring conditions about by 'bespeaking' them; individuals may be put under a 'sway'; that which underlies all being is 'mana', an ultimate and cosmic energy. The magical guise so bestowed shifts familiar concepts of action, power and influence towards the mysterious end of the phenomenological spectrum, achieving estrangement while avoiding any completely severing divorce from consensus reality. Thus Goldi, the golden seductive 'girlern' (compare golem) created by the Isi, is 'the chantress who almost swayed (Lord and Proclaimer) Osmo with her harping'. Her harp remains a continuing symbol and instrument of such power, but without it she is in turn bespoken by Osmo and put under a sway until she should find fulfilment in the arms of a golden human - which happens when she meets Lucky's grand-daughter, Tilly. Then 'the insistent sway that had ruled her ... was succeeded by an overwhelming certainty of recognition' which 'washed away illusion'. There, and at countless points through the story, we find that same correspondence between 'magic' and experience which is a hallmark of authentic fantasy, fairy tale and myth.

This particular mode of Ian Watson's multi-aspected imagination (it also informs such works as the *Book Trilogy* and *Queen Magic, King Magic*) is here reinforced by some of the flavour and imagery of those poetic Finnish folk narratives which constitute the Kalevala. Lucky herself is of Finnish descent and the planet she comes to rule, wonderfully described by Watson, is partly an emanation of that epic. Partly, because there is no element of pastiche in the work, except perhaps for the verse which, as song or fragmentary epic, is occasionally introduced, and which often intentionally

matches the Finnish poem's metrical closeness to the trochaic tetrameter:

Till the Donners in their wisdom

Fenced their fields with words and palings

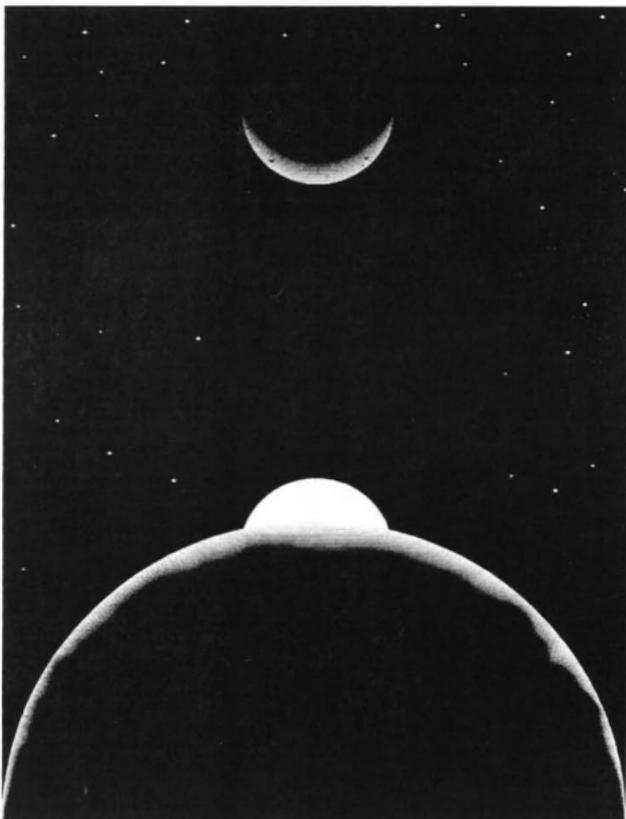
To exclude the savage raiders

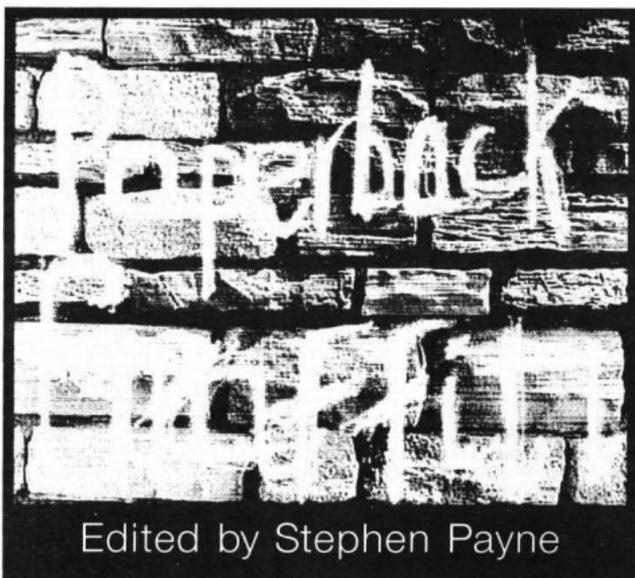
In Watson's prose narrative, then, no pastiche but a bravura transmuting into 'Kalevan' magic of 'Kalevalan' themes and incidents, such as the summoning of the cuckoo, the elemental craftsman-shamans and the descent of solar and lunar fire into earth and water. 'Majestic and Mating', Part One of *The Fallen Moon*, contains a progression of erotic fantasies, variously performed, but directed chiefly to the bedding of Lucky's daughters. If this is rightly done the husband's reward is preternatural longlife. The Kalevalan earthy, punitive buttock-birching of a Finnish

bride becomes in Sariola ritual a foreplay veering between the sensual and the anticlimactic. Again, Jack Frost's chilling into rigidity of the Kalevalan Northland and his taming by 'wanton Lemminkäinen' with threats to 'banish [him]/... to the Devil's hearth', has its Watsonian Kalevan echo in the sudden freezing of the Northland by the 'demon fastboy', Jack Pakkerk, and its cataclysmic melting by the mad Ukko on its way to the 'hell-pit'.

Those accounts, in the last chapters, of a landscape of ice and snow reflecting mana-light, of the lake unfreezing, of spouting geysers and volcanic lava, are Watson at his most descriptively accomplished. He mixes the naturalism of seasonal change with the violence of a magical Ragnarok. Generally, bizarre fantasy is enacted amidst beautiful and meticulously

depicted pastoral settings. Where green-scaled, big-eared cuckoos cackle of and threaten warfare, 'the mid-morning was grey and misty. Thin wool lazed on the reaches of the lake. Tiny tree-studded islands could be vague vessels, imposters.' Although the prose needs no pictorial aid, an appreciative word must be added for Jim Burns's cover illustrations. For the *Lucky's Harvest* jacket he created the monstrous Isi; here he breaks the jacket-surface into panels, each representing some scene or person. Among other things he gives us a credible/incredible cuckoo and a marvellously realised image of the 'girlern', Goldie, with her miniature magical harp. They beckon us into a novel which, as I intimated at the outset, is a genuine (and compelling) SF/fantasy hybrid.





Edited by Stephen Payne

Signposts

Christopher Fowler Spanky

"Christopher Fowler is a very English writer... He writes tight, fast paced novels which are novels, not film scripts with adjectives. He is very enjoyable, so enjoy."
Martyn Taylor

Charles De Lint Spiritwalk

"Spiritwalk is well thought-out and well-written, an unusually convincing blend of mythologies which thoroughly enjoyed reading."
Sue Thomason

Alexander Jablakov Nimbus

"Its dense use of neologisms and uncompromising scatter of technical camouflage make it unwise to recommend Nimbus to new SF readers, but those who survive the pace will find these traits among the many virtues of this literate and thought-provoking novel."
Andy Sawyer

Jane Lindskold Brother to Dragons, Companion to Owls

"This novel combines SF and fantasy with a perceptive portrait of society today. This is truly a remarkable book."
Martin H. Brice

Paul J. McAuley Red Dust

"The story charges along energetically... it's an invigorating addition to the subgenre."
Colin Bird

Maureen McHugh China Mountain Zhang

"McHugh's eloquent portrayal of a 'normal' existence makes for compelling reading: one is truly in sympathy with Zhang and the other narrators such that one is left both satisfied yet at the same time wondering what happens next." Benedict S. Cullum

Jeff Noon Vurt

"Vurt is a book that is difficult to read quickly because of its complex plotting, but give it time and it will grow on you, and justly deserves the critical

praise that has been heaped upon it."
Max Sexton

Joan Slonczewski Daughter of Elysium

"Many SF novels describe a technologically advanced future — this novel takes into account the effects of technology; it is thoughtful SF and recommended."
Lynne Bispham

Roger Taylor Whistler

"Taylor has the rare gift of being able to balance tension and levity, without ever losing his grip on the dire predicaments of his characters. In Whistler, He delivers an object lesson in just how good fantasy can be." Vikki Lee

Timothy Zahn Conqueror's Pride

"Zahn has a feel for dialogue and the trappings of space opera (including some very silly acronyms). The plot is compelling and the characters do come alive, add this to sleek descriptions of the milieu, and you have a fun, swift read. This is not the last we will see of these characters — watch this space."
Chris Hart

Reviews

Roger MacBride Allen
Star Wars: Ambush at Corellia
Bantam, 9/3/95, 309pp,
£4.99
Max Sexton

Ambush at Corellia is a well plotted space opera with the usual Star Wars characters now in middle-age. Han Solo is married to Leia and has a family. Leia is economically the more successful, but Han still wears the pants. Han is invited by the New Republic intelligence to go on a mission to the planet Corellia with the rest of his family, but only with the solemn assurance that his family will be safe. The planet is inhabited by three races of creatures, humans, Seleonians and Drallan and their peaceful co-existence is threatened by an unknown source. Han must discover the source, but at the same time protect his family when the planet explodes into violence and they become cut off from outside help.

The custom of the two alien races for symbiotic marriage is compared to the human custom of marrying for money. The book takes the theme of marrying for security and comfort to its logical absurdity in its description of the Seleonian life-with. We are invited to recoil from her and value the family values based on love, rather than material gain represented by Han and Leia.

The book's apple pie family values are at the core of this space opera but are not too sugary and remain entertaining, making it much more bearable to read than comparative Star Trek novels.

Kevin J. Anderson
Star Wars: Champions of The Force
Bantam, 1994, 324pp,
£3.99
Sue Badham

The trouble with writing a book based on a major series is that your world is not your own. The fact that it says Star Wars (TM) on the cover of this novel will undoubtedly help its sales and I'm sure that Kevin J. Anderson is a fan of the series and enjoyed writing

about Luke, Leia and the rest. However it does mean that he is not free to (say) kill off anybody important, introduce surprising plot twists that will change the way the characters relate to each other in the future, or do anything else that will mess up the cohesive mythology that George Lucas and his collaborators have designed.

As Alan Dean Foster showed in *Splinter of The Mind's Eye* (admittedly at a time when the mythology of the *Star Wars* universe was still developing), all these restrictions do not necessarily mean that you have to write a dull book. Unfortunately Anderson is just not as good a writer as Foster. He writes like a movie scriptwriter, not like an author, rushing from set piece scene to set piece scene without allowing time for characterisation or description. His work is very derivative of the film background and he doesn't introduce any particular original concepts. The characters are restricted to the kind of synthesized emotions you get in American mainstream television and as a result don't really come to life.

In short this book is like a movie in words. If you're happy to be reading this tour through the *Star Wars* universe you could have done with a better conductor. If not, you probably won't enjoy this book at all.

Poul Anderson
Harvest of Stars
Tor, 23/9/94, 531pp,
£4.99
Carol Ann Green

I am always wary of a novel that has quotes on the cover, claiming it to be "Vivid!", "A Masterpiece!" or "The Finest". But, to my surprise, I found myself enjoying *Harvest* and even agree that, to an extent, the quotes are deserved.

The novel is split into three parts. The first two of these follow Space Pilot, Kyra Davies, as she battles to free the computer download Guthrie, master of Fireball Enterprises, from his enemies, The North American Union. The third and final part is more spread out as Anderson goes into 'future history' mode and follows the colonists on the planet Demeter over several hundred years.

Guthrie and Kyra flee from Earth to L5 in an attempt to outwit the government of the North American Union. The Union has sequestered Fireball's assets in an attempt to destroy them. They have revived the second copy of Guthrie, reprogramming it to their way of thinking. Kyra and the jefe (Guthrie's download) have to think hard and fast in order to outwit the doppelganger, who knows every move they might make. This makes for a tense and action packed plot line, which kept me turning over the pages to find out how they would finally outwit the Union.

Imagine my disappointment when I got to the third part of the novel and the action left this solar system for Alpha Centauri and the planet Demeter. The pace slowed down, but time sped up. The first two parts were fast paced and took place in no more than a couple of weeks. In contrast, the last part drags along and spans several hundreds of years. My enjoyment of the novel definitely waned at this point.

There are many rich details in the third part, but I believe Anderson would have been better to leave this to a sequel, or scrap it all together. The dichotomy was too noticeable. I enjoyed the novel, though, and was intrigued by Anderson's future society.

Iain M. Banks
Against A Dark
Background
Orbit, 12/1/95, 487pp,
£6.99
Julie Atkin

Sharrow is the potential victim of a generation-old feud with a religious cult, the Huhzs, who must assassinate the final female before the fast-approaching decamillennium. Since she is ex-Navy, Sharrow is not lacking resources and together with members of her one-time, close-knit crew, she acquires a commission to locate a uniquely powerful weapon called a Lazy Gun. Banks intertwines episodes from Sharrow's past with the ongoing narrative, beginning with an exciting prologue, which draws one into the novel immediately. To prove to Sharrow that "it" knows who she is, he

relates her entire history, thus saving Banks from having to show it in a more interesting way. My feelings on this book varied as I was reading it. I started off enjoying it, and liked the characters, but found that while the main female characters are distinct, the three or four leading male characters are pretty interchangeable until well into the book. I lost interest altogether around the middle, but persevered and found things picking up again - Banks being unafraid to kill off a major character - and on the whole enjoyed it.

Martin Burnell
Freak
NEL, 16/3/95, 306pp,
£4.99
Colin Bird

This is a first novel which uses the Dean Koontz method - take a science fiction or supernatural concept and work it into a conventional thriller narrative. Don't waste any time explaining your central idea because the constant action will divert the readers attention.

In this case the protagonist, commodity broker Christian Floyd, finds he has the power to heal when he helps the female victim of a vicious attack. After this talent is witnessed, when he cures a blind man, the tabloid press goes into a frenzy, plastering his picture on the front pages and offering cash incentives to discover his whereabouts.

Meanwhile the Church of the Divine Science has decided Christian's gift is a manifestation of demonic powers and sends out several inefficient thugs to kill him. Instead of indulging his powers with messianic fervour, Christian (spotted the clever irony in his name?) goes into hiding with Gabriella, the first recipient of his beneficence.

As a first effort it's not bad, Burnell targets his lean prose at the airport novel audience, making for a highly readable book. The implausibility that dogs every turn of the plot would not matter if Burnell had fully embraced the pulp idiom, but he seems to want to keep a tentative hold on the philosophical ideas raised by his story. This results in long (very

long) discussions that fail to tackle any of the issues satisfactorily, particularly the lack of any religious dimension to Christian's experiences, despite the stigmata he develops when he heals. The satirical portrait of media hysteria shows that Burnell thinks about what he writes and may go on to write better novels. This book, however, is fatally flawed

Arthur C. Clarke
Rama Revealed
Orbit, 17/11/94, 477pp,
£9.99
Sue Badham

The good news is that Arthur C. Clarke didn't just write this book to supplement his retirement fund. He obviously wrote it because he was fascinated by the various societies and species which he had created within the giant imaginary spaceship, Rama. The story gives him the chance to fully explore their interactions and work out some of his ideas about human society, as well as exploring the physics and astronomy of such a construct.

Unfortunately, while Clarke is obviously an ideas junkie who is having a lot of fun describing the environment of the ship, his writing remains fairly stuck in the fifties before concepts like characterisation and believable protagonists had become widespread in SF. Reading an Arthur C. Clarke book means that you will focus on the incomprehensible alien artefacts, whether you're interested or not.

Clarke has overcome this in earlier books, like *Childhood's End*, but he doesn't manage it in this novel. His characters seem curiously lifeless and tend to think in very abstract terms. The only convincing emotional episode in the book is when someone reacts to the death of their spouse; for the rest of the time the humans act rather as if they've been turned down. Emotion is felt and described but it's all rather unconvincing. Clarke is always keen to get on to the next social or engineering wonder and is only interested in the humans when they're part of this.

All of this makes it a struggle to get through this book unless you're interested in Clarke exploring his ideas, which he does with great originality. However there is no doubt the man has a one track mind, at least in his writing.

Peter Crowther (ed)
Touch Wood: Narrow
Houses Volume 2
Warner, 1994, 373pp,
£5.99
John D. Owen

This collection of mildly horrific stories centres around superstitions, and contains twenty-six offerings ranging from the sublimely good ('Dead Man's Shoes' by Charles De Lint), to the ridiculously short ('Splints' by D. F. Lewis). Other stories of varying quality are by authors as diverse as Charles L. Grant, Colin Greenland, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, John Brunner, Spider Robinson, Karl Edward Wagner, Bentley Little, Simon Ings, Neil Gaiman, Garry Kilworth and Christopher Evans.

Few of the stories in this book rise far above the mundane: fewer still evoke any genuine sense of horror. Of the best, Greenland's 'Lodgings' puts a different spin on vampires, Fusch's 'Heart Flesh' details a strange romance, Brunner's 'Eight Limbs' fleshes out arachnophobia with a strange basis, Wagner's 'Little Lessons in Gardening' gives an obnoxious neighbour her comeuppance, Stan Nicholl's 'Spoil' puts AIDS in the shade with a tale about a religious disease, while William Relling Jr's 'The Ghost and the Soldier' tells an effective story of Indian ghostdancers.

As a collection, *Touch Wood* is at its best when the authors are departing well away from the brief. Those authors sticking close to the "superstitions" theme have produced the most predictable stories. Split about fifty-fifty between the good and the indifferent, the anthology just about has enough to justify its cover price. But not a one for hardcore horror fans, who will find most of the stories too tame for their jaded appetites.

John DeChancie
MagicNet
AvoNova, 12/94, 234 pp,
\$4.99
Tanya Brown

Like many an American fantasy before it, *MagicNet* begins in the enchanted groves of academe. Schuyler King, professor of English at a New England college, has just settled down for the evening with a volume of Keats when he receives a disturbing phone call from an old friend. Grant turns out to have been torn apart by a demon — but not before he's mailed King a set of computer disks. The disks contain a program which is, effectively, Grant's ghost. Apparently he's been messing about on the Net and upset a few people too many — but this isn't your normal everyday infobahn. This is *MagicNet*, based on rationalised magic, where demons roam dataspaces and the response time is instantaneous. "It's not like any other computer network you've experienced".

Now a hacker called Merlin is going for world domination through the Net, and he must (of course) be stopped. King, armed only with a new laptop and accompanied by a lesbian witch, sets off for San Francisco where the bad guys hang out. King swiftly realises that a virtual San Francisco is even weirder than the real thing. Fortunately Jill has a non-Net friend with whom they'll be safe — one Harlan Ellison...

MagicNet is an extremely entertaining book, although there are enough loose ends to weave a very tangled web. Elements of assorted Eastern mythology creep in, and together with DeChancie's witty, fast-paced prose style, create an ambience not a million miles from Zelazny's later works. Fantasy's answer to *Nearmancer*? The lighter side of *Snow Crash*? Decide for yourself.

Alan Dean Foster
Greenthieves
Orbit, 8/12/94, 248pp,
£4.99
Jim Steel

Imagine if you'd made a television series based on

Bladerunner. No character development, weak scripting, hard-boiled clichés. *Greenthieves* would probably be a typical episode.

Manz is an insurance adjuster (or private eye, for what his work involves) and he is set to investigate the theft of pharmaceutical shipments that are due to delivered off-world. From there, it is a steady plod to the solution, with not as much as a single red herring in sight. The suspects are narrowed down pretty quickly to the guilty party, who is naturally destroyed in the shoot-out and chase at the end. Foster seems to have little respect for his readers; the three suspected companies are called Fond du Lac, Troy and Borgia. Guess which one is responsible.

We also run across the old flame (who also becomes the mismatched buddy), the mysterious seductress (doomed, of course), the bar room brawl, the thick but honest cops, the innocent sources of information (murdered before they give the plot away), the assassination attempts (foiled by luck or skill), the loyal and loving secretary, the long suffering boss, and the hero's trap for the villains.

Being an SF novel, of course, means that Foster is not merely restricted to detective clichés. There are aliens who turn out to be sentient plants with no sense of individuality, and who communicate by telepathy. Beings with such a different perspective would not think like naive Americans.

Most of the novel is told from the omniscient viewpoint (sort of), but there are bursts of present tense dialogue where Manz's sentient automatic recorder addresses you, the reader. This is signalled by nothing more than a change in typeface that make you think that your eyes are playing up. It may be intended as humorous, but it merely comes across as bitter and misanthropic, and, aside from padding, plays no part in the novel.

To sum up, *Greenthieves* is a slap in the face for the reader.

Gordon Eklund
Star Trek Adventures:
Devil World
Titan, 13/10/94, 153pp,
£3.99
Jon Wallace

In this classic *Trek* novel, Captain Kirk is once more smitten by a beautiful girl. He takes her (and the Enterprise, of course) to the planet Heartland to find her father, the traitor Kell. But Heartland has a terrible secret which drove its original colonists mad, and once more it is up to Kirk and the crew of the USS Enterprise to find the secret and live happily ever after.

What can you say about a *Star Trek* novel? Everybody knows the characters (except for the transients — Kirk's girlfriend and the security guards) and they're all here Chekov, Uhuru, Sulu. They're all the same as the characters we've grown to know from telly. Ah but the plot...

Actually, the plot could have been lifted from the telly too. Which, I suppose, is how some people think it should be. Me, I was expecting a little innovation, either in the storyline, or in the other characters, the aliens, their world or something. I was disappointed. Even little throwaway snippets, like the security guard who is generally better than he should be at poker seemed to me to have been set up as a psi sensitive, especially as he was the one that went mad first, but the explanation, when it comes, is much more prosaic... If this had been adapted from a screenplay, then perhaps this would be acceptable, but as an original novel... I expected more from Nebula-award winning author Gordon Eklund.

So I found no surprises in this novel, and if that's what you want, Kirk and Co. preserved in amber, then maybe you'll enjoy this book.

Raymond E. Feist
Shadow of A Dark Queen
HarperCollins, 7/11/94,
382pp, £8.99
Lynne Bispham

Shadow of A Dark Queen is designed to appeal to the reader of epic fantasy who enjoys tales of battles against evil magicians and is not too bothered about the logic behind the magic

or the social or economic viability of the imaginary lands in which the battles take place! The novel is volume one of *The Serpentwar Saga*, and has all the usual traits associated with its particular sub-genre, including a juvenile hero co-opted onto a dangerous mission, and elves. On this unassuming level it works well enough, being readable, if unexceptional. Unsurprisingly, the action takes place in the usual low-tech, hierarchical society in the same universe, apparently, as the author's earlier *Riftwar Saga*. In *Shadow of A Dark Queen*, the setting is only sketchily described, but avid epic fantasy readers can probably fill in the details for themselves.

The hero, Erik, is a fifteen-year-old apprentice blacksmith whose mother claims that he is the son of the Baron Otto von Darkmoor, and that she and the Baron were secretly married before the Baron wed his acknowledged wife. This makes Eric a threat to his half-brother's inheritance. Eric's friend Roo's statement that one day Eric will be forced to kill his sadistic half-brother, Stefan, turns out to be prophetic. Accused of Stefan's murder, Eric and Roo can only escape the hangman's noose if they agree to join a band of mercenaries attempting to infiltrate the armies of the Emerald Queen who threatens to destroy the world. The mercenaries must discover how the Queen's serpent-mages and lizard-men-warriors can be defeated. Meanwhile, the mysterious, magic-wielding Miranda is searching for the magician Pug of Stardock whose powers are needed for the coming war. Eric, an ordinary man, is caught up in this heroic struggle that presumably will be concluded in future volumes.

An irritating aspect of this book is the character's names. We have Macros the Black and Calis the Elf, and then we have John and Rupert, everyday names that jar in this context. Every time the mercenary de Loungville appeared I wondered what this French person was doing there. Mere trifles, you might argue, but surely attention

to such details, along with the depiction of a fully-realised background, are some of the reasons why one epic fantasy novel will stand out from the rest.

An eager devourer of this sort of fantasy will find *Shadow of A Dark Queen* to their taste, but the book is not going to win new adherents to the epic fantasy field.

Christopher Fowler
Spanky
Warner, 6/10/94, 338pp,
£6.99
Martyn Taylor

Martyn Ross isn't quite an anorak, but he's close. Look around you next time you're browsing the genre shelves, he's bound to be nearby. Now making your readers the hero of your novel isn't exactly a new idea, but Christopher Fowler carries it off with aplomb and considerable skill. After all, an anorak is an anorak, because he's an anorak. The qualities necessary to frustrate a demon aren't exactly common among such folk. If they were they wouldn't be what they are. Fowler manages to suspend that reality for the length of the novel, which is quite an achievement.

Spanky is a daemon who gives Martyn entry to the milieu of sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll and power in return for... what? That would be telling, but it isn't his soul. He doesn't have one according to Spanky. Not many of us do. Needless to say, when Martyn has had the bimbos and tasted the champagne he doesn't much fancy keeping his side of the bargain. Hey, he's one of Maggie's Children and even if he's not a signally successful one, paying the bill is something someone else does. Equally needless to say, when this worm turns Spanky starts cutting up rough, turning Martyn's brave new world into dust and ashes in his mouth. Then the race is on. Can Martyn hold out against chaos and catastrophe long enough to frustrate the daemon?

By the standards of Stephen King *Spanky* is a slim volume and the story breezes along at a good rate of knots, fast enough to cover a whacking great hole in the plot. I thought there was something odd

Neil Gaiman & Dave
McKean
Mr Punch
Gollancz, 17/11/94, u/p,
£8.99
Julie Atkin

This is a tale of boyhood memories of times spent at the seaside staying with grandparents. The narrator's grandfather owned an amusement arcade that included among the old machines and ghost train, a fortune teller and a singing mermaid. A Punch and Judy show sets up in the amusement arcade, but this cannot stave off the waning fortunes of the place, and it eventually closes down.

This book is built on the atmosphere rather than story, which on the surface is slight. However the tale is on several levels - the story of the Punch and Judy showmen - the "professors" and the "bottlers"; and the story of the secrets within the narrator's family. The events in real life reflect those in the Punch and Judy show. A woman is battered to death, a deformed uncle turns out to have been thrown out for a window as a child - or was he? Nothing is one hundred percent clear, as everything is seen from a child's view, or told to the now-adult narrator from the recollections of older, more distant family members.

Although the accompanying blurb describes this as "the most stunningly beautiful graphic novel ever to be published in this country", I would disagree. Indeed, the overall impression of the art is sombre, dull colours, but hey, I'm not an art critic. These colours reflect the darkness and violence of the story, and McKean uses a variety of techniques and styles, with all the events in the "real" world being drawn, while all the puppet scenes are photographs of puppets. There are also sections of sepia-toned photographs of people running around fields in huge masks - this for me was the least successful image.

When I read it but the story compelled me onwards and it was only at my later leisure I tried adding two and two and kept on getting an answer that was anything but four. This is not typical Fowler. Everything of his I've read

has been absolutely true to its logic, however arch, so maybe it's just me misreading something. Not that it matters very much.

Christopher Fowler is a very English writer, and all the better for not trying to be transatlantic. He writes tight, fast paced novels which are novels, not film scripts with adjectives. He is very enjoyable, so enjoy.

David Garnett
Stargonauts
Orbit, 17/11/94, 314pp,
£4.99
John D. Owen

New Worlds editor David Garnett has come up with a most peculiar SF novel in *Stargonauts*. The main character, William Ewart, is a future version of Rupert Murdoch, who gets his early commencement in true *Dynasty* style before fleeing Earth for outer space. The whole book seems to be written in emulation of late-period Robert Heinlein (except Ewart's obsession is food rather than sex - here it is Ewart's taste buds that go "spung", rather than his female companion's nipples), with added 'Doc' Smith *deus ex machina* plot twists.

Stargonauts is mildly amusing without actually being funny. It is faintly interesting in its plotting, without ever being exciting. As an exercise in comic space opera it suffers by comparison with other recent takes on the genre. Garnett hasn't the affection for space opera that made Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty* such a delight, or the wit to stand the genre on its head in the way that Douglas Adams or Harry Harrison have done with their respective series.

The book's main problem is the distance between reader and Garnett's creation: there is not one person that the reader can identify with, mainly because most of the characters are flimsy and unlikeable constructs of the constituency of cereal box cardboard. Garnett's viewpoint is too detached, the authorial tweaking too obvious, to give the reader any chance of being charmed by *Stargonauts*. A sequel is in the works.

naturally. If it stays there, it will not be missed.

William Gibson
Virtual Light
Penguin, 6/10/94, 296pp,
£5.99
Andy Mills

Young messenger Chevette Washington has made her delivery when she finds herself in a party. Accosted by one of the guests, she leaves, but not before nicking the drunken slob's sunglasses.

Uh oh. Bad move, Chevette. These are Virtual Light glasses, and the bad guys want them back, 'cos they contain information they don't want making public. Chevette quickly regrets her capricious action when she finds herself hunted by a psychotic killer who casually wastes her friends when they attempt to come to her aid.

Enter Berry Rydell. Things aren't going too well for Berry either. His short police career of eighteen days was followed by a spell with a private security firm, but again he loses his job. Now he's employed by Mr Warbaby, who has a contract to recover the glasses.

Virtual Light is an SF thriller set in a future which looks for the most part a feasible vision. Surprisingly, perhaps, Gibson's leading players are neither computing whizz kids nor cool dudes. Chevette and Berry are both ordinary, likeable people struggling to make their way in the world. They are surrounded by an outrageous supporting cast, including a refugee from *The Man in the High Castle*, a private policeman who is hyperallergic, bent Russian cops working for the San Francisco police, Mr Warbaby and Loveless, the aforementioned killer. Gibson's world is, as you would expect, carefully realised, with some classy touches (for instance, the police computer programme used to trace missing persons which compares the subject to the celebrities they most resemble).

It has to be said that the VL glasses are pure McGuffin, and when their secret is revealed you do wonder at what the fuss was about. Nevertheless, this is an accomplished

novel, fast-moving and exciting, which is well worth adding to your shelves.

Ed Gorman
Blood Red Moon
Headline, 12/1/95, 372pp,
£4.99
Stephen Payne

Robert Payne (no relation) is an ex-FBI criminologist, a hero-for-hire. Nora Connors turns up, rather dramatically, one day to hire Payne to track down the killer of her daughter. Simple enough you might think, but the story soon relocates to a place called New Hope to trace its convoluted course, and all manner of complications follow.

New Hope is (from here) typical small town America, containing the usual wife beaters, incestuous relationships, bent religious zealots and, perhaps to complement each other, a serial killer and a precocious, local policewoman. Here, Payne unravels the granny knots of the plot to the story's ultimate conclusion — the identity of the killer who is described throughout in the first person.

More thriller than horror, the horror, when it does come, seems to have been tacked on the end to add bite to the climax — and bite it certainly does (heh, heh).

Lee Grimes
Dinosaur Nexus
AvoNova, 10/94, 215pp,
£4.99
L. J. Hurst

This will give you more than your money's worth, combining time travel, the theory of evolution, FTL travel, and sexual politics as it does, but it won't give them to you very well. I am not sure about the purpose of the AvoNova imprint — does it mean that the authors are new, or that its titles are intended for new readers? *Dinosaur Nexus* reads like a juvenile in the way it squashes so much in. Rather tellingly, when the Earth crew return from the time of the dinosaurs the one thing they have not learned is a political system to replace the USA, so you get bizarre sentences like, "Congress, although aware that the conduct of foreign affairs was a presidential

prerogative... The House Budget Committee hastily called hearings" when the dinosaur-derived Heesh arrive from a parallel dimension of evolution, where females are dominant.

The nexus in question is the time sixty-five million years ago, when most of life on Earth was destroyed by a comet strike. Going back, a scientific crew discover a team have arrived at the same time from a parallel dimension when dinosaurs survived and went out to evolve into sentient reptiles. What Lee Grimes forgets is that while matriarchal rule means you have to keep your bedroom tidy, at least you get your dinner on time and your clothes washed. His Heesh matriarchs whipping up a triceratops to run you down might make you forget this.

Edward Gross & Mark A. Altman
Great Birds of The Galaxy
Boxtree, 27/10/94, 143pp,
£9.99
Cherith Baldry

This book is made up of a series of interviews with people who were influential in the making of *Star Trek*, including Gene Roddenbury, William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy, as well as less well known figures who have worked on the show's more recent incarnations. As such, it will be essential reading for all fans, but I'm not sure it has much to offer to anyone else.

Perhaps because most of the book is the directly reproduced speech of the interviewees, the style is personal and anecdotal. Ideas and theories about the show appear but are never discussed in any depth. There is no clear authorial 'voice' and no apparent sense of direction. However, as a series of portraits the book works reasonably well. Although it covers ground which has been covered elsewhere, particularly in relation to the original series, it also includes new material, and the attitude is not as profoundly and irritatingly worshipful as some earlier fan writing.

The book is well produced and looks attractive, with masses of photographs. I found the large number of spelling

and grammatical errors annoying; a pity that as much attention wasn't given to the text as to the appearance.

I should like to see a more serious study of *Star Trek*, either from a historical point of view as a cultural phenomenon, or a literary analysis of the scripts, to find out what it is about this apparently unpromising material that has given so much pleasure to so many people. This isn't the book I want; to be fair, it was never intended to be. As I said before, fans will love it.

Wendy Haley
This Dark Paradise
Headline, 8/12/94, 342pp,
£4.99
Andy Mills

This Dark Paradise, presumably a first novel by Wendy Haley, starts promisingly enough. Alex Danilov, a thousand year old vampire, returns to the place he thinks of as home, a mansion in the southern United States. Danilov is a wealthy, handsome sophisticate and is immediately engaged in a power struggle for his family's fortunes with Barron Danilov.

So far, so good. The novel's a mildly interesting cross between an Anne Rice creation and Dallas; Haley's vampire is definitely the good guy - he resists the urge to kill to survive - even if he irritates by being chased by every female in the book! But then the author loses her control and the story begins its spiral into sheer silliness. Alex is hunted by Lord Suldris, an evil sorcerer he thought he'd despatched centuries ago. In the course of their contest so many daft things happen it's impossible to list them all; my favourite absurdity is when Alex calls upon "the Ancient One" of the marshes to protect a child and an enormous alligator with glowing yellow eyes appears and acts just like a guard dog. There are also demons from hell, magic crystals, journeys to heaven, and that irritating trick vampires have of transforming when clothed into their living creatures...

A book, then, which is reminiscent of films incoherent horror flicks which are only released on video. A pity really, because

surely with decent guidance from an editor Haley could have done something with her heroic vampire.

Andrew Harman
101 *Damnation's Legend*, 19/1/95, 293pp, £4.99
Norman Beswick

I'm sorry. Three times I threw this book at the wall in exasperation. After getting through most of it, I gave up, examining the remaining pages, but avoiding close detail.

The story, if that's the word, is set among the thaumaturgical magicians of Los Llamas, who create virtual creatures. Chreiro Mancini, Alchemist and Virtual Ecology Technician, is employed to produce a virtual dragon. Buried in the text are quite a few good comic ideas. They are surrounded by a dense undergrowth of entangling juvenilia which sadly impedes progress.

The prevailing tone is frantic, the standard emotion is panic, characters never speak but shriek or shout, and the plot has so many strands you are unable to distinguish between them. There is no room to develop sympathy or interest in any of the idiots portrayed; they are entirely there to be ridiculed and enable Mr Harman to be (as he believes) clever. For nearly three hundred pages, with no variety or relief.

This is the author's fourth book. There must be readers, more patient or tolerant than myself, who will put a different viewpoint. To test whether you are one, read as many consecutive pages as you can stomach, carefully and critically, before you buy.

Harry Harrison
The Stainless Steel Rat Sings The Blues
Bantam, 9/2/95, 230 pp, £4.99
Steve Jeffery

The Stainless Steel Rat Sings The Blues is the latest in Harry Harrison's adventures of master criminal Slippery Jim diGriz. Actually, he seems curiously incompetent as a master criminal, since he is captured almost immediately in an aborted theft from the Paskonjak

Mint and sentenced to death.

At the very last minute our hero is offered reprieve by a government attorney, in return for locating something that has gone missing in a quarantined prison colony. Just to make sure, he is dosed with a thirty day delayed poison, with the antidote promised for his return.

Since only criminals get in (and nobody gets out) diGriz decides for some odd reason to slip in with a misfit bunch of undercover agents posing as an overhyped pop group. Laydeez and Genn'I'men, I give you (you guessed it...) *The Stainless Steel Rats*.

They arrive, to huge adulation, at a strangely divided city, with a wall running straight through it and extending for miles either side. Men live on one side, ruled over by the imposing figure of Iron John. Hidden away on the other side are the women, in a rather more civilised and technologically advanced setup. Which is where the artefact turns up, until it is almost immediately stolen again.

Harrison romps, somewhat unevenly, through any number of standard SF scenarios with his tongue firmly stuck in cheek. There are more smiles than outright laughs, and two things don't immediately gel: The band's lyrics, reprinted here, are all pretty dire, and the character tend to talk to each other in the stilted tones reminiscent of much fan fiction. What follows, as Jim's thirty days tick away in the hunt for the lost artefact, involves a lot of fighting, male bonding, chasing around the desert, a brace of particularly naive time travellers and the eventual discovery of the artefact, before the obligatory round of double and triple crossings, unmaskings and revelations.

A book for a few hours distraction, or light reading for a journey. Or'll give it twice.

Gary Haynes
Carrión
Warner, 12/1/95, 406pp, £5.99
Tanya Brown

You can run, but you can never hide proclaims the cover, and this is one of

those horror novels based on the nightmare of running and not escaping. Ten-year-old Timothy has had these dreams before, but he knows he's grown out of them. Then he is an unwilling witness to a horrific murder, and by the time his father (an ageing hippy) has responded to his cry for help, Timothy is locked inside his own head, screaming to get out. None of this, of course, is apparent to his grieving parents; it takes the arrival of reclusive weirdo Nathan Trooper to bring Timothy out of his coma — and to realise that something nasty is loose.

Nathan, psychic since the age of ten (when his axe-wielding father performed an impromptu operation on him) has a reputation for interfering in other people's traumas. He may be a fraud; Inspector Daniels, in charge of the growing number of grisly murders, thinks so at first, but becomes a reluctant convert when Nathan does a few tricks. He begins to accept that the murderer is not entirely human...

Carrión has a certain uncomplicated brashness reminiscent of juvenile scribbles. At times the prose is almost as mangled as the corpses; at others it displays just about as much life and sparkle. If this were a play, the acting would be described as wooden. Despite its stylistic shortcomings, there are some clever ideas, and enough gruesome scenes to content all but the most decadent of horror fans.

Douglas Hill
The Lightless Dome
Pan, 9/9/94, 304pp, £4.99
Douglas Hill
The Leafless Forest
Pan, 9/9/94, 294pp, £8.99
Vikki Lee

The Lightless Dome, the first book in *The Apotheosis Trilogy*, is billed as Douglas Hill's fiftieth book, and also as his first full-length fantasy novel for adults.

Red Cordell, a two-bit actor taking two-bit parts in movies, finds a magnificent sword in the props department and as a result is whisked off to a completely different world. The city he arrives in is called Quamarr, and his summoner is an extremely attractive enchantress by

the name of Aurillia. Quamarr, of course, is under threat from the usual "incalculably evil, immeasurably old" stirring something or other. The sword used to belong to a hero of the past named, coincidentally, Corodel, and Red finds himself not only falling in love with, but fighting beside Aurillia, against said evil.

This plot is an old chestnut in fantasy writing, and Hill does very little with this story that has not been done before, and better. It starts very slowly, and even familiarly, getting very slowly better towards the end. The evil that threatens never really gets off the ground until the closing sequences when Hill does finally encourage the reader to take sides and actually believe there is some evil to be defeated. Before the ending of the story, I couldn't really have cared less, whether the good guy won or not. Add to this weak mixture, a love story that really is suitable for juveniles only, and you are left wondering what really is the difference between juvenile and adult fiction — if this is adult.

It's a very light read and a disappointment for a book that is the first in the series. It ought to be the one that makes your tongue hang out wanting more. I think that Hill needs to step up another gear or two if he wants the next two books to put him up there with the best.

So it was a pleasant surprise, on reading *The Leafless Forest*, to find that Hill has done just that.

Having disposed of Talonimal (the bad guy) in the first book, the real villain of the piece now comes to the fore. Lebaran Magister gathers the remainder of the *Order of the Apotheosis* in his impenetrable stronghold in a petrified forest defended by dire magics. Awaiting Lebaran's call to action is the monstrous "Unformed", a demonic evil which even Lebaran himself is unsure he can control.

Red Cordell, Aurillia, and their misfit bunch of friends set off for the petrified forest to end the threat to Quamarr forever. The mysterious Halfort again pops up regularly to heal Red whenever his woefully lacking skills in swordmanship leave him

on the brink of death. More is learned of Halfort in this volume, and it seems he will be a key player in whatever the final outcome of this trilogy is.

This is much better, and perhaps Hill is beginning to find his feet a little more in adult fantasy. The pace is faster, jealousy is introduced to the love affair making it less romantic, less ideal, and the evil in the background has now taken on a more relatable horror. It's a much better read, though I do wonder about placing a "beforehand" at the start of the second book, three pages that relate the whole of the story so far. This paints *The Lightless Dorne* as a much more exciting book than I found it to be, and perhaps does away with the need to read it at all.

Alexander Jablkov
Nimbus
AvoNova, 1/95, 376pp,
\$4.99
Andy Sawyer

When created memories can be backed up by artificial intelligence what price any sense of reality? At times this sets up a peculiar resonance in *Nimbus*, which is not the easiest of novels to follow despite its relatively simple murder-mystery structure. Someone is killing off the members of an elite group whose work on the "Nimbus" project partly led to this dislocating future where a personality transplant is as easy as removing tonsils, and the narrator is trying to get the killer before he himself becomes next on the list. But the question of who is actually whom is constantly undermined when even the narrator was once (almost) literally someone else.

Inserted throughout the novel are both frightening extrapolations of the crumbling certainties of our own present and some memorable creations hidden in the background: the shadowy Sons of Glen Canyon, a militant deep-environment group who are helping the earth revert to its natural ecology, and the alternative history created by one character where rock and roll never became more than a minor aberration and the mainstream 20th Century popular music was jazz.

The resolution arises neatly out of the story's deep structure to make it a fascinating combination of virtual-reality theory and crime novel — almost metaphysical in the final kaleidoscope of cause-and-effect networks. Its dense use of neologisms and uncompromising scatter of technical camouflage make it unwise to recommend *Nimbus* to new SF readers, but those who survive the pace will find these traits among the many virtues of this literate and thought-provoking novel. In fact, Jablkov may well appeal beyond the traditional SF readership to the post-cyberpunk neturfers for whom literature began with William Gibson — less traditional SF as we know it, perhaps, than the techno-thriller of tomorrow.

Brian Jacques
Mattimeo
Legend, 19/1/95, 446pp,
£4.99
Chris Hart

As a kid I was always discouraged from reading books about speaking animals by my mother. She is a trained nursery nurse who had been taught not to call children 'kids' after baby goats and that speaking animals would confuse children. Beatrix Potter and Kenneth Grahame were never on my bookshelf. Thankfully, I have never been one to listen to my mother's advice, otherwise I would never have read *Maus* or *Animal Farm*.

Although Jacques's *Redwall* Trilogy does not compare with Spiegelman or Orwell it was tremendously successful in the eighties in revitalising the tired swords and sorcery genre. At the time it was saturated with game oriented trilogies which had pedestrian plots and card board characters. They were fine if you required a template for role-playing games but not very stimulating for anything else. In much the same way as Pratchett's *DiscWorld* manages to eschew the trappings and motifs of the genre in a humorous way, Jacques seems to inject real magic and fantasy into the world of *Redwall* by arming badgers with axes.

Mattimeo is populated with stoats, foxes, badgers and more rats than a dozen

Pied Pipers could handle; all of them well characterised and armed to the teeth. They are motivated by a human need for revenge and power but pursue it with an animal's instinctive violence. Children will find Slagar a compelling villain and Matthias a wily hero; kids will love this book because they can eat the pages.

Marvin Kaye (ed)
A Classic Collection of
Haunting Ghost Stories
Warner, 20/10/94, 381pp,
£5.99
Andy Sawyer

Skip the introduction which puzzlingly refers to the rarity of purely ghostly tales in the 1940s ("puzzlingly" until you realise that it is written from an American viewpoint) and refers to appendices not present in this edition, and enjoy a selection of tales written by authors ranging from our old friend "Anonymous" to Asimov and Pohl, Dickens, Wells, Stoker and Leiber.

Some of the contents are anecdotes, others stories. The difference? "Smee" is a story because of Burrage's adoption of a narrative voice and the sense of pacing and narrative he brings. Donald A. Wolheim's "Doorslammer" is likewise a story because of the character with which his ghost is invested. Berhardt J. Hurwood's 'Quartet of Strange Things' merely relates macabre events, as does the anonymous 'Monk of Horror' (a contemporary imitation of the Gothicky of M. G. Lewis's *The Monk*) or the equally anonymous retelling of the old folk motif 'The Spectre Bride'. This has a period charm in the 19th Century contributions, which are well-represented, but tend to woodenness in the more modern ones. Of 'Classic' ghost stories, M. R. James is conspicuous by his absence — more evidence that this was compiled on the other side of the Atlantic? Certainly there seems little justification for the inclusions of such as Craig Shaw Gardner instead, other than the fact that Gardner sent in a contribution and James *didn't* (Now, that would make a good story!).

Our old friend 'The Bagman's Uncle' make an

appearance to remind us that few can write with tongue in cheek as well as Dickens. Fritz Leiber's 'Four Ghosts in Hamlet' is excellent, Al Sarantonio's haunted-computer tale predictable, and Bram Stoker's 'The Castle of The King' fascinating in its High-Victorian awfulness. I was most amused by Dick Baldwin's suggestion of what it really takes to get rid of a vampire in this materialistic day and age, and found H. R. Wakefield's 'Blind Man's Ruff' creepiest despite its unnecessary coda, while Frank R. Stockton's 'The Philosophy of Relative Existence' is probably the most unsettling tale if you accept its implications. In general, this is the kind of anthology where you will find material which has been neglected by many other compilers, resting among the well-known entries. I could quarrel with the balance of the compilation, but if you are interested in the ghost story as a form as well as a quick supernatural fix, you will find Marvin Kaye's labours rewarding.

William H. Keith, Jr
Warstriders: Jackers
AvoNova, 11/94, 342pp,
\$4.99
Colin Bird

Before you ask — Warstriders are smaller, more nimble versions of the Imperial Walkers from *Star Wars* and Jackers are their drivers / pilots. You can probably figure out that this is from a series of military SF, beloved of spotty boys and right-wing American authors. This one features lovingly, almost sensually, described weapons and the havoc that they wreak. There is almost no moral subtext or sense of the true impact the raging battles and destruction has on the humans involved. Most of the characters are just extensions of the huge automated war machines that they operate.

Space opera can be fun, and this book is well written and well paced, but the attention lavished on tactics and strategy do little to aid understanding of the bigger issues. The novel reads like an account of a wargame until its clichéd ending — the cavalry arrive in the form of an all-powerful alien. The political undercurrents, such as they

are, feature New America (guess who?) versus the Earth (now ruled by the Japs). Jap-bashing is a popular sport in America at the moment. This book is ruined by too much attention to the serial numbers on the weapons and not enough on the characters.

Jack Ketchum
Road Kill
Headline, 19/1/95, 245pp,
£4.99
Stephen Payne

Hey, listen, two wrongs don't make a right. When Carole and her lover, Lee, murder her violent and abusive ex-husband by tossing him over a cliff, they hope that that's the end of the matter. Not a chance. Wayne, who in addition to being just as violent and abusive, is also a psychopath to boot (in the best tradition of modern horror), has viewed the whole thing. He is so enamoured by the murderous pair he decides to kidnap them and go on a killing spree, *Natural Born Killers* style, in a pathetic attempt to impress them. They are not impressed. In fact, *extreme fear*, might better describe their state of mind. The plot then follows the trio from one tense situation to the next, across an America characterised by casual murder and unthinking violence. Maybe that's what is going on here, I thought, as the novel drench to it's inevitable *Wild Bunch* conclusion. Maybe this book is attempting to contribute to that very emotive debate concerned with the psychological effects of observing acts of violence. Maybe: I remain unconvinced though. I don't think horror is ever much concerned with the motive, except to excuse all this *behaviour* as 'evil'. There's a lesson in there somewhere.

Stephen Lawhead
Pendragon
Lion, 30/9/94, 384pp,
£4.99
Martin H. Brice

In this cycle of books about the Dark Ages, Stephen Lawhead links the tales of the Mabinogion with the legends and facts of King Arthur. The title of this volume, *Pendragon*, is the Celtic word for 'High

King', equivalent to the 'Bretwalda' of the Saecens.

All the Arthurian names are there, but transposed into Celtic. Say them aloud, and they are recognizable. Caius (shortened to Cai) and Bedwyr are obvious, but not quite so Llenlleawg, the warrior from Lerne. Equally proficient in belligerent practicalities, is Gwenthwyvar. Together with Artor, they form a powerful political triumvirate, with Myrddin Emrys as their *eminence grise*.

There is a map, although not all the places are shown. Again, say them aloud, use a little logical imagination, and you can locate them. Caer Edyn with its great mountain where the High King must be proclaimed, can only be Edinburgh and Arthur's seat.

This book is well-researched, well-written and a memorable read. There is some magic — or rather miracle-working to demonstrate the supremacy of Christ, and of a practical nature that appealed to the Dark Age mind. For example, there is a never-emptying barrel of ale — the Christianisation of the Cauldron of the Dagda. Nevertheless, this is an epic in the Celtic tradition rather than a fantasy novel.

It left me feeling vaguely disturbed. It doesn't seem to be simply a tale of brooding hero, the clash of mighty armies and sinister forces in an Age which is not just Dark, but Grim... An age of uncertain fact and nebulous belief. I couldn't help wondering whether the author, coming from America to bring a fresh mind to bear on an archetypal British legend, has also seen and may be trying to point out parallels between the attitudes of the Dark Ages and of modern Britain; the divisions between factions and localities... Yet all unanimous in their contempt for Londinium... And all solidly united in their mistrust — their fear — of overseas... A situation ripe for exploitation by characters like Arthur and Merlin, their fealty not to the people, but to themselves alone.

Stephen R. Lawhead
The Endless Knot
AvoNova, 11/94, 416pp,
£4.99
Alan Fraser

I wasn't looking forward to reading this book, but am happy to say it got me through a 4+ hour enforced stay at Brussels Airport in December. *The Endless Knot* is the final part of the Celtic fantasy trilogy by American Lawhead, now resident in Oxford, that started with *The Paradise War* and continued with *The Silver Hand*, neither of which I have previously read. *The Endless Knot* completes the story of Scotsman Lewis Gillies, a bachelor Oxford don, who has been transported to the Celtic "otherworld" of Albion, acquired a magical living silver hand to replace his own severed limb, and finally defeated the evil Meldron to become Llew Silver Hand, King of Albion. Unfortunately Goewyn and Tangwyn, the beautiful new brides of Llew and his friend Cynan, are kidnapped and taken across the sea to the Foul Land of Tir Afan. At the same time, the Endless Knot, the spell that defines the relationship between our world and that of Albion, is breaking up. Unless it is renewed by a hero, both worlds will be eventually destroyed.

Breaking a geas that the King of Albion may never leave its shores, Llew and his warband cross to Tir Afan to find and rescue the kidnapped wives. Here Llew is forced to confront old enemies, as well as a new avatar of evil, the Brazen Man, and also perform the Hero Feat that will retie the Endless Knot and heal the worlds, fulfilling the prophecy of the Song of Albion.

The Endless Knot could never said to be a story of stunning originality in setting or plotting, but Lawhead has a good handle on the feel of Celtic mythology, and so makes his book a good read for fans of the genre. And it has the outstanding bonus that it conclusively ends the story of Llew Silver Hand in Albion, thus apparently ruling out any sequel-series!

Richard Laymon
Beware!
Headline, 8/12/94, 279pp,
£4.99
Andy Mills

The scene: a telephone conversation between an author and his editor, ten years ago.

"Zack? Dick Laymon here."

"Dick! Great to hear from you! What've you got for me this time, pal?"

"A good one, Zack. It's about this invisible man."

"Hold on there, buddy!

Hasn't that been done before? And I kind of remember that it's scientifically impossible to be invisible."

"Zack, you know me! This invisible guy's a total nutcase — a psychopath who loves rapping and then killing women. This loony's after the heroine, an ace reporter. She eventually escapes him, and with the help of a writer and his private eye pal she traps the invisible man."

"And that's it. They hand him over to the authorities?"

"Zack, are you ill or something? Of course not! The writer wants to make movie outta the invisible guy's story. So they keep hold of him, which leads to more sex and violence."

"Sounds good, Dick. And the invisibility?"

"That's no problem — it's all done by magic. Kinda like voodoo."

"That's okay then. You say there's lots of sex and violence?"

"You got it. Mostly violent sex. No redeeming features here, Zack."

"Great. We'll buy it, Dick. Have a nice day."

This novel was first published in 1985. Beware buying it.

Ben Leech
The Bidden
Pan, 11/11/94, 314pp,
£4.99
Steve Jeffery

Something nasty is being smuggled into Britain from Greece, hidden in shipments of antiquities. Something equally nasty is happening to cops in Calverton, whose bodies are turning up with their faces ripped away. Enter Jim Parco, Private Investigator with the obligatory heart of gold, hard-drinking cynicism and

weakness for classy women (including his super efficient Girl Friday, Theo Vines). Parco takes on a case from Eleanor Van Allen, who believes her husband, Director of the Calverton Museum, is no longer the same man. He finds himself caught in a strange case that links to a bloody and disastrous robbery of a Calverton freight yard, a smuggled Codex stone and an ancient horror. It has all the ingredients of a typical horror novel, so why did I find it so hard to like?

Several reasons. One: it plays on almost every stereotype in the book, from the hard-bitten PI and his classy secretary / girlfriend; the suave, rich master criminal and his fawning homosexual assistant; the insane, psychotic killer and the distraught, vengeful cop. Then there's a forensic pathologist who appears to have seen too many SF / horror movies. He turns out to be right, of course, but even within the context of the book, it's a pretty unbelievable leap of faith to posit an entire race of face-eating monsters from a handful of mutilated corpses and some scraps of unidentified DNA, and carry everybody along with it so readily.

The writing is almost irritatingly laboured. It purports to be in some near future Federal Britain — hence the odd, seemingly mid-Atlantic references to "state cops". But Leech, through his assorted, and sometimes incongruous, mouthpiece characters, spends large parts of the first half of the book bemoaning the destruction of community, the legacy of Tory monetarism, yuppie culture, moral degeneration. After a while, this heart-on-sleeve pontificating becomes both intrusive and irritating. Some of the science is incredibly sloppy; How do you transmit anything, let alone a computer virus, down a phone line at light speed?

When the action does finally kick into gear, almost two thirds into the book, it turns into an fairly entertaining shoot 'em-up climax in the bug infested house. If it had been a film, I'd probably be reaching for comparisons to *Aliens* or *The Thing*. In fact it reads

more like a novelisation than a novel, with its reliance on stock characters and scenarios.

I won't spoil the ending unduly, but you've all seen *Carrie*...

Mark Leon
Mind-Surfer
Avonova, 1/95, 262pp,
\$4.99
Jon Wallace

How best to describe this book? Well, I'll start with that old stand-by, the plot synopsis. A computer programmer with an attitude problem hits a mid-life crisis. He is shaken out of it by the sudden reappearance of an old friend and by a crystal handed to him by a white-haired old man in the street. What follows is strange beyond belief, for the crystal is...

"Crystallised thought, pure nous, the philosophers' stone!"

And there is where this novel left me, because what follows is a long journey through mysticism and unreality which I found totally unbelievable. All fiction requires the suspension of disbelief to a greater or lesser degree, the author's job is to make that easy to achieve. For me, Mark Leon failed.

It could be because I don't believe in the book's premise: (I know that eastern meditation techniques can allow the body to do amazing things, but I believe that they always stay within their own limitations) or that the characters don't stay in character (mild mannered Lew Slack suddenly becomes a power-crazed egomaniac when he is given the power), but I think that these things are just symptoms of the internal inconsistencies which spoil the book. Alan had suddenly upped sticks and headed to Tibet to study the ultimate mysteries, then we find him using his meditation exercises to enter a spiritual library to read the dirty books! Come on!

At one point, one of the characters makes fun of the work of Carlos Castaneda. "Wasn't it all a hoax?" he says. This book was almost as difficult to read as one of Castaneda's, but it made less sense.

Steven Levy
Insanely Great
Penguin, 23/2/95, 312pp,
£7.99
Stephen Payne

Before the Apple Macintosh computer there was nothing but a black void headed by the cryptic annotation that is 'C:\>.'. People who operated computer were egg-heads who wore white coats and carried clipboards. The computers they operated were supported by banks of electromagnetically flashing lights.

Then came the light: the Macintosh was born. The screen looked like a sheet of paper on a desktop and had windows and menus and icons and a mouse (a sort of hand in cyberspace) to control it all. It was something we could all relate to. It was portable, easy to set up and easy to use. And the people behind the Mac, punk entrepreneurs Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, were on a mission; a mission to build a computer for the rest of us; to build a computer where the interface didn't get in the way of actually using the thing; to build a computer that empowered the individual. Phew.

This is the story of the Apple Macintosh and the people who designed and built it. It's a story of hippy corporate politics (the rise and fall of same) and the creative energy generated when a group of very intelligent people sit down together and attempt to conceptualize a dream. In truth, the realisation of that dream is probably a cross between *The Powerbook* and *The World Wide Web*, for, of course, the Macintosh is as much a design philosophy as a computer — and it's still evolving.

Now all this is slightly one-sided, you don't hear much about IBM or (reach for your crucifix) Microsoft Windows™ here, but it's a compulsive tale, and I read it all in a couple of days. Great fun.

Sam Lewis (ed)
Earthdawn: Talisman
Roc, 1/12/94, 282pp,
£4.99
Lynne Bispham

If poetry is what is lost in translation, then a similar process occurs when a role playing game is turned into fantasy fiction. *Earthdawn* is apparently an RPG; in its other incarnation it is a series of books set in a mythical "age of myth and legend". When horrors from the astral plane enter the world, the mages of the Theran Empire instruct the people to hide themselves in underground kaers, warded by magic against the horrors. Only after many generations are the people able to re-emerge. *Talisman* is a book of short stories all featuring an amber amulet in which a winding (small, winged humanoid) has been magically imprisoned in order to make a spell that will warn against the presence of Horrors or the Horror-tainted. Unfortunately, none of the stories are particularly memorable, and the world in which they take place is never fully realised. References to "light-moss" or "farmlands" in underground kaers does not a credible environment make. As sword and sorcery stories go, these are sub-sub-sub-sub Tolkien. And why, the Age of Earthdawn being "before history", does *Talisman* have a picture of a pair of modern spectacles and a postage stamp on its cover?

Jane Lindskold
Brother to Dragons,
Companion to Owls
Avonova, 12/94, 220pp,
\$4.99
Martin H. Brice

The cover suggests fantasy, but I got no such clue from the opening pages, which read more like a novel of social comment.

Thirty-year old Sarah is autistic, illiterate, but with an incredible ability to memorise The Bible, Shakespeare, The Jungle Book, and other works of literature which have been read to her, later reciting relevant passages at appropriate moments — including during her three-way conversations with her schizophrenic toy dragon.



Native American myth and archetype. It consists of four linked episodes, all originally published separately by PulpHouse.

Spiritwalk is closely related to another book by De Lint, *Moonheart*, though each can be read without previous knowledge of the other.

Central to *Spiritwalk* are two locations: Tamson House and the Mondream Wood. Tamson House appears to be a city block in downtown Ottawa. In reality it is a single house embodying the archetype of Community, a community of artists and dreamers, shamans and scholars. It's also a repository of magical and spiritual power, particularly the archetypal power of the garden / wood it encloses, Mondream Wood.

'Merlin Dreams in the Mondream House' (14pp) describes Sara Kendall's meeting with the avatar of Mondream Wood, which is Merlin and the Green Man. In 'Ascan In Rose' (71pp), Blue, a biker, rescues a damsel in distress. She's been mugged by Faeries, who have stolen her shadow and her memories. After consulting Jamie, the recently deceased guardian of Tamson House, Blue battles the Faeries for his protégé, who wins back her name, Emma, and the faery gift of the Autumn Heart. 'Westlin Wind' (62pp) explores the friendship between Emma and Esmeralda. Esmeralda treasures her gift of the Westlin Wind, but Emma finds the Autumn Heart a dangerous burden. After another faery attempt to steal it, Esmeralda makes a Native American spirit journey to rescue Emma from the Land of the Dead. Finally, in 'Ghostwood' (27pp), the archetype of the Forest invades Tamson House, as a self-centered

magician attempts to possess its power to ensure his own immortality.

Spiritwalk is well thought-out and well-written, an unusually convincing blend of mythologies which thoroughly enjoyed reading.

**Bentley Little
Evil Deeds**

**Headline, 19/1/95, 436pp,
£5.99
Max Sexton**

Evil Deeds is a competently written horror thriller novel on the theme of a serial killer. The book offers several red herrings to the killer's identity. For example, suspicion falls on the lead character, Cathy, because of her sexual hang-ups that follow a bizarre childhood experience and which recur in her dreams. She lives with her clinging and dependant father, shades of Norman Bates, and is incapable of dating because she is frightened of sex or else resentful of men because of her father. The cop investigating the killings however, falls in love with her and until the identity of the killer is revealed about two-thirds of the way through, the suspense is well maintained.

The novel, however, is too slick to be very dramatically gripping. We have the standard cute kid, Jimmy, terrorised by two young yobs. Jimmy is too sugary to swallow and two yobs are predictably dispatched to a horrific penalty by the killer. Cathy is also too trite a character to be really convincing. Nevertheless, the book's tight plotting does keep the reader guessing as to the killer's identity.

Where the book does come unstuck is in the last third. The explanation for the killer is far-fetched and not properly thought out, although the surprise ending is an original. It would have worked better if the moment of revelation didn't suffer from so much unintentional humour; the handling of the sex by this time didn't so much shock as make me scoff at the thought of any man enjoying an erection all day.

**Brian Lumley
The Second Wish and
Other Exhalations
NEL, 19/1/95, 350pp,
£4.99
Chris Amies**

This is a new collection; the stories in it date from a fifteen-year period since 1980. These are stories written in a fairly modern style but with an atmosphere that suggests the grand old era of Poe and Lovecraft, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. As a fan of Lovecraftiana - to the point where my e-mail address is named after one of Lovecraft's dark and forbidden places - I can take plenty of obscene gubbings and words that have far too few vowels in them to be pronounced by human mouths. So can Brian Lumley; for all he seems from his story introductions to be a wholesome, outdoor sort of chap, he has a truly chthonic imagination. Sometimes the themes may seem a bit hoary; the title story is an example of the 'young-couple-go-to-strange-deserted-castle' bit, complete with succubus (usually played by Caroline Munro in the film versions) who seduces the hero, and crabbled old women who say "You don't want to go up there, m'dear. Nobody wants to go up there..." Then again, Lumley never denies it's that old story again. 'The Sun, the Sea and the Silent Scream', however, is a contrary example: contemporary setting, contrasting with the blasphemous horrors, etcetera. 'Rising with Surtsey' is one of several stories to bring in the forbidden books, such as the *Necronomicon* and the *Uhnassprachlichen Kultan*. 'Snarker's Son' on the other hand (or nameless paw) is a SFnal parallel-world story; but there are still those eldritch things...
If you like your fiction eldritch, squamous, rugose, and dripping with blasphemous ichor, read this.

**Paul J. McAuley
Red Dust
AvoNova, 11/94, 392pp,
\$20.00
Colin Bird**

Already out in paperback in this country, this US import is one of a brace of Mars books doing the

The

institution where Sarah lives is run down because of financial cutbacks and she is forcibly released into the community. She is soon adopted by a gang of streetwise outcasts, who follow the rules of Mowgli's wolves, and live in a peculiarly-adapted, empty, oil storage tank... Although I'm never quite sure how much of this is actual construction and organisation, and how much is due to Sarah's Kipling-prompted imaginings. Indeed, it was not until page 46, that I realised from the science fiction road vehicles, that this novel is set in the future.

It eventually becomes evident to Sarah's friends, that the authorities have regretted their decision to release her. Not that they are concerned about her well-being. They have belatedly learned that she not only has exceptional memory, but also the very real ability to converse with inanimate objects. For example, safes tell her their combinations. The authorities therefore plan to hunt her down and tame her skills.

This novel combines SF and fantasy with a perceptive portrait of society today. This is truly a remarkable book.

**Charles De Lint
Spiritwalk
Macmillan, 7/10/94,
380pp, £9.99
Sue Thomason**

Spiritwalk explores, with competence and conviction, a Canadian Otherworld, which blends elements of Celtic and

rounds at the moment. *Red Dust* has several interesting features to distinguish it from the rest, not least it's author's fertile imagination. Unlike in other books the terraforming of Mars is well advanced but the processes have been neglected leaving the planet to return to its barren, inhospitable state.

Wei Lee is a lowly Contract Agronomist Technician, but his great-grandfather is a member of the ruling Ten Thousand Years and soon Wei Lee is inveigled into a mission. He must take the recently captured Sky Roader pilot away so that she cannot be interrogated. But he is really a pawn in the struggle between the anarchist Sky Roaders, who want the terraforming to be completed, and his corrupt great-grandfather. He is also encouraged by the words and music of the King of Cats, a reconstructed hologrammatic Elvis Presley, formed by a hive mind of self-replicating robot probes on Jupiter. He's also aided by a benevolent virus passed into his body when he kissed the anarchist pilot, which begins to alter his body at a genetic level.

What we have here is a western with cowboys riding the trail and our hero tracked by a ruthless desperado across the dusty plains of Mars. It's Arthur C. Clarke via Zane Grey. Wei Lee moves from episode to episode, being captured, escaping and then the same again. It's a conventional tale, despite all the Hard Science background, and none the worse for that. The story charges along energetically and my only criticism is that it loses steam towards the end. This book doesn't make you feel that you're standing on the Red Planet, like Kim Stanley Robinson's books, but it's an invigorating addition to the subgenre.

Anne McCaffrey
The Chronicles of Pern:
First Fall
Corgi, 8/12/94, 284pp,
£4.99
Norman Beswick

We've all read at least some McCaffrey, haven't we? Some of us detected a certain sameness after a while, and

dropped out; other flocked back for more of the same; and some became cultists and completists, and who shall say they are wrong?

It is to the last two groups that this collection of five short stories is addressed. Each describes an episode in the early years of the discovery of Pern and its human settlement. The first survey recommends colonization, and gives it its name. Next, a mass evacuation from the southern continent is led by a team (or flotilla) of engaging Earth dolphins.

There follows the establishment of Ruatha Hold, and we see the pressures that led to expansion and three other Weyrs. Finally a Mayday message from Pern is picked by a ship of the Federation fleet, who discovers one family of human survivors but... well, I mustn't spoil it.

The stories are bland and pleasant enough, and those who enjoy tabulating Pern's history will need this book. But only the last story has any real tension about it. The others are, well, chronicles, well suited to reading tucked up in a warm bed in the last minute before dropping off to sleee-e-p.

Vonda N. McIntyre
Star Wars: The Crystal
Star
Bantam, 8/12/94, 310pp
£10.99
Alan Fraser

Now where I have seen this plot before? Some years after our hero and heroine vanquish their foes and settle down to live happily ever after, their children are kidnapped, sending them off on a new quest (or in some well-known cases, a new series). Book Four in Bantam's series of *Star Wars* novels starts with Leia, no longer a Princess, but President of the New Republic, visiting the world of Mundo Codru, where her and Han Solo's three children are kidnapped. Leia once again assumes the disguise of a bounty hunter (as she did in *The Return of the Jedi* to rescue Han), and sets off with Chewbacca to find her children. They have in fact been kidnapped by Hethrir, a former Imperial hierarch looking to establish a new troop of warriors turned to the Dark

Side of the Force, and bring back the Empire.

Meanwhile, Han and Luke, looking for a lost enclave of Jedi knights, travel to Crsieh, an Imperial research station in a system consisting of a black hole and a white dwarf star with mysterious properties (the eponymous crystal star). Here they find a strange being called Waru, who has immense powers rivaling that of any Jedi Knight. However, Hethrir and his captives also head for Crsieh, followed by Leia. In the end our heroes must join together to work out the secrets behind Crsieh Station and Waru, and rescue the children before the crystal star falls into the black hole and the station is engulfed.

Although a new-comer to the *Star Wars* programme, Vonda N. McIntyre is, of course, author of the award-winning *Dreamsnake*, so she brings good writing and story-telling skills to her tale, making the most of her brief from an unoriginal starting point within a very strictly defined framework and character set. If you like the *Star Wars* characters, and want to read more and more about them, this attractively-priced hardback must be as good as it gets. If the whole idea of mining the *Star Wars* universe for every last nugget appalls you, leave this on the shop or library shelf!

Victor Milan
Battletech: Close Quarter
Roc, 27/10/94, 390pp,
£3.99
Max Sexton

Battletech: Close Quarter by Victor Milan is published by Roc, who have a reputation for (mainly) publishing sci-fi for the teenmarket. This is a very commendable example of an updated adventure story. The lead character is Scout Lieutenant Cossie Suthorn. She is ruthless, resourceful and beautiful, need I say more? She lives to hunt the giant BattleMechs. Then she is signed-on to guard Coordinator Kurita's corporate-mogul cousin in the heart of the Draconis Combine. However, she becomes aware that all is not what it appears and suspects danger among the bronze towers of Hachiman. When an

organisation known as the yakuza and the dread ISF form an alliance to bring down Chandra Sekhar Kurita, Cassie enters the breach to save the day.

Fast-paced with plenty of detail and a well-drawn background, plus characters, albeit limited by their good and bad guy personas, this book was entertaining and fun.

Maureen McHugh
China Mountain Zhang
Orbit, 12/1/95, 313pp,
£5.99
Benedict S. Cullum

Since its 1992 US publication this first novel has won many awards and near universal acclaim. The first-person narrative largely concerns itself with the day-to-day life of tech engineer Zhang, the eponymous anti-hero. This, together with the ellipses and occasional repetitions, serves to give an air almost of a verbal tale. Interposed with Zhang's point of view are short episodes in the lives of several other citizens in the sinocentric world he inhabits. This expands on the necessarily limited picture that can be drawn by focusing on an individual and, simultaneously, shows the particular influence that Zhang has on the lives of those with whom he interacts.

McHugh is an American who learned Mandarin Chinese in New York and later spent some time teaching in China. Neither Chinese dominated future nor female writers portraying gay male protagonists can these days be considered to be unique but McHugh handles her material sensitively, giving the impression that she knows whereof she speaks. It might be argued that the political dimension is underdeveloped, or simply naive, but to this I would say that developing the skeleton of a halfway credible world is difficult enough without the critical insistence that all aspects comply with this or that world view. Similarly, the apparent authorial glossing over of the unlikely US shift from capitalist democracy to communist state allows the reader immerse himself Zhang's mundane world.

As well as his sexual orientation, Zhang has to keep secret the fact that his

mother is Hispanic and so he is not a "more equal than others" 100% Chinese. Although this sets up a few tensions one feels that he is not extraordinary in this milieu, we all have our secrets after all. McHugh's eloquent portrayal of a "normal" existence makes for compelling reading: one is truly in sympathy with Zhang and the other narrators such that one is left both satisfied yet at the same time wondering what happens next.

Simon Maginn
Virgins and Martyrs
Corgi, 9/2/95, 316pp,
£4.99
Martyn Taylor

The horror genre, almost more than any other, is dependent upon character. Oh, to be sure, the author's ingenuity in creating ghosts and ghoules and things that go 'Aaargh' in the night is important, but the inherent parameters of the genre are all but inescapable. We know ghastly things will be inflicted on characters created by the author. Some will escape, some will not, but what is of inescapable significance is that we - the readers - must care what happens to those characters. If we don't care then all authorial ingenuity goes to waste. We aren't interested in the monsters, but in the people.

This is, of course, the first law of all story telling, but there are arenas where a lack of reader empathy with the characters is not fatal - SF is notoriously one such.

Now Simon Maginn's horrors are well crafted, logical and distinctly unpleasant in the 'house of horrors' sub genre. He certainly knows how to structure a story and keep a reader turning the page. He also has an attractive facility with the language. Why, then, did I find *Virgins and Martyrs* such a labour to complete?

That's right. All the skill couldn't make me give a damn about the fate of Daniel. He isn't a character to me, a human being, but an assemblage of characteristics necessary for the author to install him into the house in Brighton where he will be tortured. This excluded me from the story. I couldn't even be a

voyeur of Daniel's exhortation. After all, how can you care for an auctorial construct? Feelings are for real people, something Simon Maginn didn't give me in this book. Maybe you'll find them where I couldn't.

Jim Murdoch
Rise of The Robots
ROC, 1995, 310pp, £4.99
Colin Bird

Murdoch usually writes (or translates) those little stories you get in computer game boxes, giving the background behind the game scenario. Here he gives us a whole damn novel telling you why your character, in the smash hit game, is trying to beat the crap out of your opponent. Does any one computer gamer really care?

The story couldn't be simpler. Coton's smashed body is rescued from a crashed lander and used to create the planet T1 Creda's first cyborg. Meanwhile the powerful robot supervisor at the Electrocorp tower has broken her programming and is starting a revolt amongst the droids. Coton is enlisted to battle past the security droids and take on the supervisor.

Perfunctory characters, unconvincing scientific jargon and a surprise ending given away by the blurb. Just terrible. I understand it's a great game though.

Steve Perry
Stellar Ranger: Lone Star
AvoNova, 1/95, 262pp,
£4.99
Jon Wallace

Cinch Carston is a Stellar Ranger and Stellar Rangers take trouble in their stride. When villages are raided on the jungle world of Mtizito, the governor sends for a Stellar Ranger to round up the rebel leaders.

Yes, this is Cowboys and Indians in space! The hero carries a sixgun for goodness sake!

"Cinch pulled his hat off, a wide-brimmed, low-crowned affair, and wiped at his forehead with the sweatband around his right wrist."

Actually, barring a few tracking devices and flying

machines, there is nothing really SF about this novel. The plot is a straight 'corrupt local politician wanting to throw the natives off their land' job. The action could just as well have happened in the old west... in fact if westerns were still the vogue, this novel would be being reviewed in 'RangeRider' instead of *Vector*. Still, like I always say, good writing is good writing, no matter where you find it. Unfortunately...

The action sequences are not very well presented, the corrupt politician is really too much of a cliché these days, and the token sex scenes really do seem to have been added later to add spice.

It used to be said, 'This book is a pot-bolter, buy it to read on the train'. This one isn't. If you can't borrow it, don't read it.

Tony Richards
Night Feast
Pan, 13/1/95, 537pp,
£5.99
Chris Hart

At the time of writing this review there is all the furore over the pros and cons of Neil Jordan's film adaptation of *An Interview With The Vampire*. There are many similarities between this book and Rice's; it is an epoch spanning tale about the human embodiment of an immortal evil that has a thirst for blood, writ large and bold with a sharp cinematic style.

However, it is perhaps a little disingenuous to make the comparison. Richard's protagonist, Tharman - the human embodiment of the Egyptian god Thoth - does not have time for the navel gazing that Louis 'the vampire' engages in. He wanders from town to town, age to age, killing indiscriminately, releasing the latent sexual powers of his victims through a powerful hypnotic stare. Small town communities and power crazed cops begin to implode with rottenness that is eating at the core of their soul. The descriptions of the murders are sharp and brutal: Richard employs a laconic cinematic short-hand that is sometimes a little too hasty, but effective in the main. It is this style which is the strength of the book.

The plot is not particularly engaging; and the sexual angst theme will not be new to anyone who has read Stephen King; but the sparse sentences and suspenseful pacing creates an atmosphere that is genuinely creepy.

This is only Richards second novel, we should look forward to him employing his talent for horror writing on something more substantial in the future.

Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle & Michael Flynn
Fallen Angels
Pan, 2/12/94, 394pp,
£4.99
Joseph Nicholas

A new ice age begins the next century, sparking conflicts for resources around the world. The USA is ruled by Greens who have barred technologies considered "inappropriate". In orbit, the space habitats put up by the former US and Russian space programmes struggle to keep going. A spacecraft is shot down over the USA, and its two crew rescued by an underground of science fiction fans. Pursued by government forces, the fans resurrect a mothballed spacecraft and pull the spacemen back into orbit with a cargo of seeds to replenish the habitat.

There are several common-sense objections to this. The current weight of evidence points to global warming rather than cooling, so isn't it rather rash to predict a new ice age so soon? Since any government wants to perpetuate itself, wouldn't even a Green one use any technology it thought necessary to do so? If the government is as repressive as the fans claim, why has it allowed them so much freedom for so long? Is it likely that a group of fans could repair and launch a spacecraft?

To properly understand this novel, however, it's authors politics should be taken as an implicit part of its message. For US conservatives such as

they, the Environmental Menace has replaced the Communist Menace as the principle threat, and environmentalists are therefore in a conspiracy to thwart Progress (here equated with the conquest of space). Thus campaigns to save a rare species or protect an area of wilderness are merely the respectable front for a programme which aims to return humanity to a pre-technological hunter-gatherer existence.

There are some Greens for whom this would be referable — but to equate them with all environmentalists is syllogistic. Similarly, the authors assume that because some SF fans are also space fans, then all of them are — and have dedicated the novel "to science fiction fandom", without whose guiding spirit, it is implied, the human spirit will be humbled.

Promoting the innate superiority of SF fans to everyone else is nothing new. But it's no less silly.

Jeff Noon

Vurt

Pan, 21/10/94, 344pp, £4.99

Max Sexton

Vurt by Jeff Noon is one of those well known books that I suspect will be more talked about than actually read. Which isn't to say that it's opaque, far from it. The prose is lucid although, stylistically it is difficult to follow, and for someone still trying to come to grips with this cyberpunk, I found that this slowed me down.

Nevertheless, this is an important book at the cutting-edge of sci-fi. Its main themes are related to the dissolving of absolutes and the increasing cross-breeding of different realities; themes and images that cyberpunk has captured ever since *Neuromancer*.

Briefly, the plot stems when the main character, Scribble discovers The-Thing-From-Outer-Space. The thing is from an invented universe in which if you take something, you have to leave something behind. Scribble's sister is left behind. The Thing is devoured and we enter the different realities of the Vurt.

The Vurt is a metaphor for the present explosion in alternate virtual realities and in the book it is, more literally, a feather; a feather which is the actual means of transporting the taker into an alternate reality. The feather comes in different colours, each colour corresponding to the change that it can engineer, for instance Pornovurt, etc.. The chapters break down into the consequences of taking the Vurt. The most dangerous Vurt, Curious Yellow, is according to Jeff Noon, the worst possible version of the past that you can't escape from until you can cope with it. Should you fail to cope, you die.

Vurt is a book that is difficult to read quickly because of its complex plotting, but give it time and it will grow on you, and justly deserves the critical praise that has been heaped upon it.

Andre Norton
Brother to Shadows
AvoNova, 10/94, 311 pp,
\$6.50
Graham Andrews

Brother to Shadows by Andre Norton. Andre Norton! What titles / memories that name evokes for me: *The Beast Master*, *Catseye*, *Huon of The Horn*, *Judgement on Janus*, *Storm Over Warlock*, *The Time Traders*, *Witch World*. To name but a few.

Although the 'juvenile' label has been slapped on Norton's work, by niche-marketing types, this is because her protagonists are mostly between twelve and twenty-five. I'd call it rite-of-passage fiction rather than juvenile — which conjures up Toms Corbett and Swift. It's been some time since I last read a Norton novel, the titles listed above hail from the fifties / sixties. But... praise be! — the "Grande Dame of Science Fiction" (*Life*) has not lost her literary cunning.

The plot 'springboard' is a cross between *The Shadow of The Torturer* (brotherhood of assassins) and *Nine Princes in Amber* (exile to the Shattered Lands):

"Outlander — misborn — no-blood — Out with you where you will — you are not of the Oath and by the

Will of TransGar you never shall be. You are an abomination, a stain. No doubt the Master's forced death has come through you. You will take no weapons — for those are of the Brotherhood, and henceforth you will go your own way!" (p.3).

But Norton gives much more than she's borrowed — as per usual. Daniel Horne's lucid cover painting would look even better on a (long-overdue) **issue of Catseye**. I echo these sentiments:

"...*Brother to Shadows* delivers enough exotic action and old-fashioned storytelling virtues to keep the reader turning pages" (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

Terry Pratchett
Men at Arms
Corgi, 10/11/94, 381pp,
£4.99
Martyn Taylor

Why review a Terry Pratchett book? You've already read it, and if you haven't then nothing I say is going to convert you. What you expect is what you get — a pointillist, logical, funny story packed with jokes and peopled by friends old and new from the mean streets of Ankh-Morpork.

Mind, the first few pages felt a little familiar — someone thinks Ankh needs a king and the Night Watch are involved. There are many authors only too willing to recycle their greatest hits, but not Terry Pratchett. Very soon, we're navigating the arcanities of the guilds, led by Carrot and his new improved, ethically correct Watch, heading at breakneck pace to the inevitable, satisfying, funny conclusion.

Oh, there's some new stuff too. There's an examination of trolldom, which is at once screamingly funny and achingly sad. Carrot gets laid by... well, you can read that for yourself. There is a death which is in no way funny, just necessary and maybe heroic. Is the adult world of Pratchett's young people's books invading the Discworld? Perhaps, and no bad thing.

Read this book, for the good of your soul — if you've got one.

Robert Rankin
Raiders of the Lost Car
Park
Corgi, 6/10/94, 350pp,
£4.99
Tanya Brown

Robert Rankin's previous novels didn't make that much of an impression on me; competently written, ingeniously plotted and occasionally very funny, but something didn't quite click. Despite this I tried to keep an open mind about *Raiders of the Lost Car Park*, and was pleasantly surprised. My knowledge has been broadened no end. I now know what really turns Prince Charles on (and the current royal revelations do little to disprove Mr. Rankin's allegations); I've also discovered where travellers really come from, and the names of the people who are responsible for corn circles. And that's not the half of it...

Rankin has a gift for describing people and places: from the opening scene in Minn's Music Mine, where the astrays are overflowing with ancient stubs, to the grand finale in the King of the World's throne room (located, unsurprisingly, somewhere under West London) there is an attention to detail which demonstrates a keen eye and a keener imagination. Cornelius Murphy (the Stuff of Epics) and his minuscule friend Tuppe make endearing heroes; matched with an equally appealing set of blacker-than-black villains and assorted helpers and hinderers. Throw in a suitable mixture of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, and a few traditions and old charters, and you have a hugely enjoyable book — much shorter than *illuminatus!*, and even funnier. The humour isn't as heavy-handed as Pratchett's can be, and the self-referential mockery of Rankin's style makes the text itself part of the joke, which should keep the post-modernists among us happy as well.

Leah Rewolinski
Star Wreck: The Series
Boxtree, 20/10/94, 597pp,
£8.99
Norman Beswick

This book is roughly 9"x 6"x 2" and weighs two

pounds. Its clear black typeface will be a boon for the visually challenged. Sadly, it does not open flat; reading it requires strong wrists and hands. There are line drawings by Harry Trumbore. A title-page blurb reads: "The spacey spooks who boldly dare to go where nobody wanted to go before". I suppose you want to know about the text. It consists of five stories, previously published separately in the USA, each featuring two generations of the crew of USS Endocrine, mostly inhabiting the same ship except where a duplicate is worked out of time from a wormhole.

Yes, you guessed it. These are parodies of *Star Trek* and have characters named Captain Smirk, Mr Smock, Dacron the Android, the curvaceous Dee Troit and so on. They live on yoghurt and Earl Grape tea and battle against the Cellulites, the Jargonites, and other terrors. The menfolk are heavily preoccupied with finding classy dames.

At first I smiled. Later I yawned. Later still I set my teeth, determined to force my way through to the end. Of you are a Trekkie addict you will perhaps like this book. Others will find it an excellent doorstop.

Robert J. Sawyer *The Quintaglio Ascension: 1*
Far-Seer
NEL, 19/1/95, 277pp,
£4.99
Benedict S. Cullum

First part of a trilogy, saurian on the cover do I really want to read this? Given that the copyright details suggest that it was written before THAT film I decide to persevere... and am pleasantly surprised!

Afsan's protagonist is an apprentice astrologer who would rather be a full-blooded astronomer. Indeed, 16th Century Europe being the template for the Quintaglio society Afsan is a hardly disguised Galileo-figure, albeit with potential Da Vinci tendencies.

The Far-Seer of the title is both the newly developed telescope and also a reference to Afsan's own scientific genius although there is a certain irony to this which cannot be disclosed here. The bulk of the tale concerns

Afsan's gradual realisation of the truth behind the myths and rituals that govern the "dino-society". Scholar and hunter, he undergoes several rites of passage and learns bitter lessons concerning politics and religion which are partly balanced by the respect afforded him by an ancient order that regards him as something of a saviour.

I rather suspect that the necessary helter-skelter development of saurian technology in later volumes might appear a little ludicrous. However, aside from a few grating moments at the beginning where Sawyer rather overemphasised the reptilian nature of his characters, the biological "otherness" of the Quintagliosaurs was refreshingly handled and served to put a new spin on the old world in peril motif.

David B. Silva *The Presence*
Headline, 19/1/95, 472pp,
£5.99
L. J. Hurst

The sadness of children is immense, and is not affected by the slightness of its cause. This is not an original idea, but people still try to describe and account for it. With two or three children to feel sad, guilty and desiring of expiation there would be plenty of material for a novel. That's what David B. Silva has done. Why he had to look for telepathy and an inhuman horror as well, I'm not sure: the lives of the kids he describes are bad enough even before. The Presence starts to make itself felt.

Allie Turner has been deserted and left with two boys in a town on the California / Oregon border, where the shops have followed the mill in closing. One son and two others go into the mill basement, where one boy dies and Sean, before he is badly burned, sees his missing father walk through the fire with his head covered in green slime. From his hospital bed he sets his brother off on a hunt through the green slime covered animal life of the country.

Fortunately for Darrell, the local fire investigator is a little concerned, too, and

in the final graveyard they discover that the source of the slime is literally a colour out of space.

Anyone who knew the town of Kingstons Mills would love songs of Morrissey, and they would sing "This is the town they fought to close down". The horror of a place like this is in the town itself and the people who have to live there, not in its strange visitors. In the end I felt that David B. Silva confused horror with despair. It is horrible to have to go on, not to have the chance to struggle.

John Slonczewski *Daughter of Elysium*
AvoNova, 12/94, 512pp,
\$5.99
Lynne Bispham

Raincloud and Blackbear Windclan and their young children have travelled from their relatively technologically backward planet to a technologically advanced Eysium city which floats on the ocean of the water-world, Shora. Raincloud, an interpreter, has been recruited by Elysian Foreign Affairs to translate signals from satellites spying on Urulan, an aggressive planet whose interstellar missiles threaten both Shora and the planet Valedon where most of Elysium's servos - intelligent machines - are manufactured. Blackbear has a job as a medical researcher on an Elysian fertility project, for the process that makes the Elysian's ageless also makes them infertile - the price for immortality being sterility, a price few non-Elysians are willing to pay.

An intricate plot involving a revolt of servomachines that have acquired sentience and the machinations of governments and financial institutions is also the vehicle for a complex interplay of ideas about biotechnology and the clash when very different cultures meet. Whether or not the biological processes described in the book are feasible (and this biotechnologically-illiterate reviewer is not qualified to judge), they feel credible, and the concerns of the characters in the book as to whether what is scientifically possible is also desirable is resonant of the concerns of our own place

and time. Coming from a culture which values family life and elevates women to the status of "goddesses" the Windclans are in a unique position in both Elysium, where reproduction is a function of the state, and on Urulan, where women are subservient to men. The Windclan's situation, together with Raincloud's perceptions of different world-views through her abilities as an interpreter, make the family natural mediators in the crises that erupts between the Elysians, Urulans, servos and Shora's native inhabitants, the Sharers, whose views on biotechnology are different again. Many SF novels describe a technologically advanced future - this novel takes into account the effects of technology; it is thoughtful SF and recommended.

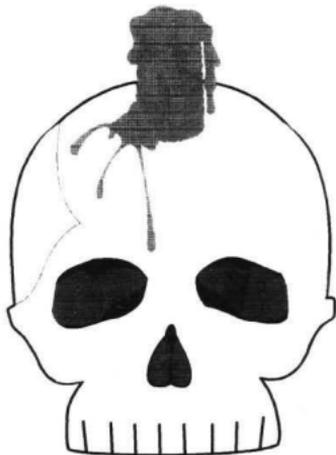
Michele Slung (ed) *I Shudder at Your Touch*
ROC, 27/10/94, 379pp,
£4.99
Jon Wallace

On the front of the book it says "22 Tales of Sex and Horror" and I suppose that's what's in this collection. It's not exactly true. Oh there is sex in all of these stories, some of them are horror, but tales of sex and horror? I think not.

And while I'm griping, I have to complain about the introductory notes. I found the first few stories a bit predictable. The denouement was not a surprise. Then I realised that that was because the intros were giving away the plot. Why do editors do this? If they want to show off their deep understanding of the story and its implications they should include an afterword not one of these "I'm so clever, I got the point, and here it is" style introductions like the one that this is a bit of...

"Unhappily for Red, his 45-year-old hero, Middleton also intends (with a nod to Freud) that there can be, really, only one logical stopping place on any backward journey." (from the introduction to 'Psychopomp' by Haydn Middleton.)

So how do you think that the story is going to end? When I stopped



readings by interstays
 have been as obvious? You
 read a tale of mystery
 stories and you find a mix
 of science fiction and
 knowledge of the past
 and the future. What is
 really quite predictable.
 The Rendell story fits
 exactly into this mould, and
 should never have been
 included, as the horror (if
 horror there is) is
 telegraphed early on, and
 the sex is minimal and
 certainly not erotic.

So, in the end what
 have we here? A thematic
 collection of stories of
 mixed quality, the well-
 known writers usually
 delivering, the less well-
 known wavering a bit. On
 the whole it tries hard to
 stick to its theme but, in the
 end it doesn't always
 succeed. There are too
 many stories like the
 Rendell, not enough gems
 like Stephen King's.

John E. Stith
 Manhattan Transfer
 Tor, 10/94, 387pp, \$4.99
 Steve Palmer

This is the seventh book
 by American author
 John E. Stith. In essence it

is an
 exercise in problem-solving
 SF, with the accent weirdly
 on feats of engineering; the
 blurb goes on about "old
 school" SF and doing
 things "the hard way".

One day in 2014
 Manhattan is laser-beamed
 off the Earth and trans-
 ported via a black -
 hole-using alien space ship
 to a vast plain. A bubble
 covers it. Bubbles cover lots
 of other places, presumably
 wrenched from the home
 planets, creating a zoo
 environment. The main
 characters - clean-cut Matt
 the military man, computer
 wizard Bobby Joe, Abby
 the English journalist -
 spend the first third of their
 novel coping with their
 essential supplies, such as
 electricity, water and food;
 led by black woman Mayor
 Dorine Underwood. Later
 they escape their bubble,
 find aliens in other bubbles;
 meet them, and then...

Well I'm afraid I can't
 tell you how it turns out
 because I just couldn't
 finish it. It's not that it is a
 bad novel, rather it is
 entirely without soul. It is
 blank. With ruthless

attention to detail the
 precise mechanics of how
 the characters cut through
 such-and-such obstacle, or
 surmount such-and-such
 problem are described. At
 length, what I suppose are
 meant to be character
 deepening expositions are
 made about the character's
 pasts, but these arrive in
 chunks bearing no relation
 to the plot or the feel of the
 book, and emerge as
 artificial and contrived.
 Some of the aliens are
 interesting, but the
 humans, bizarrely, find
 themselves able to make
 decisions about alien
 biology and psychology on
 practically no evidence,
 implying an author who can
 think of no other way to
 present such information,
 and who anyway does not
 wish to in depth. These
 human characters are not
 cardboard, but they radiate
 an extraordinary anonymity,
 as if they have been
 devised by a computer
 program called 'Character'.
 You just know, for example,
 without any doubt, that
 Matt and Abby will fall in
 love. Two characters doing
 this is not a bad thing, of
 course, but it is the
 predictability that is so
 dreadful. If only they had
 found one another
 incompatible. If only bloody
 Bobby Joe (aargh! That
 name) was not a computer
 wizard able to answer and
 overcome plot details with
 only mild effort.

If you like books by
 authors such as Larry Niven
 and Hal Clement, if you are
 a graduate of mechanical
 engineering, or if you are
 into SF by Americans (for
 this novel radiates the
 American psyche like no
 other that I have read), then
 buy it. Otherwise,
 contemplate the idea that
 John E. Stith suddenly
 thought what a great thing
 it would be to rip
 Manhattan Island off the
 Earth, thereby isolating it
 and thus subliminally
 implying what a great,
 special, fantastic place it is.

Roger Taylor
 Whistler
 Headline, 12/1/95, 570pp,
 £5.99
 Vikki Lee

Set in a fantasy world
 called Gyorlandt,
 Whistler is the story of two
 lifelong friends, Cassraw
 and Vredch, who are
 preaching brothers in the

Church of Ishrythan. Both
 are dedicated to the words
 of the Santyth, which, like
 our own Bible, is very much
 open to interpretation.
 Cassraw's interpretations
 have often led him into
 dispute with the Church
 hierarchy, and it is after
 another heated theological
 debate that the angry
 Cassraw stomps off up the
 slopes of the Evrin Mallos,
 the highest peak in Canol
 Madreth with Vredch in
 pursuit. This happens on a
 day when dark and
 ominous clouds have
 settled menacingly around
 the peak.

Although Vredch
 initially does not follow
 Cassraw all the way up, he
 becomes worried when his
 friend fails to return and
 leads a rescue party to
 fetch him back. Both men
 are 'touched' by something
 in the cloud. Cassraw
 believes this to be a
 revelation from Ishrythan
 himself, and Vredch
 eventually believes it to be
 Ahmral, alias Satan.

Now that he has seen
 the light and become the
 Chosen of Ishrythan,
 Cassraw's powerful
 oratories begin to unite
 Madren society against the
 forthcoming doom and
 destruction that his vision
 has revealed is coming.
 Vredch can see the evil
 coming, and also what's
 causing it.

The book abounds with
 wonderful characters: Privv
 the Sheeter (newsman) and
 his telepathic cat, Leck;
 Vredch's adopted
 physician sister, Nertha;
 Skyner, the Sarjeant of the
 city guard, and of course
 Whistler himself, an
 enigmatic guide through
 the world of dreams for
 Vredch.

Having read all of
 Taylor's books to date, he
 just gets better and better
 for me. His tales are getting
 much darker, and yet they
 are still peppered with
 incidents that make you
 smile, if not laugh out loud.
 He has the rare gift of
 being able to balance
 tension and levity, without
 ever losing his grip on the
 dire predicaments of his
 characters. In Whistler,
 Taylor delivers an object
 lesson in just how good
 fantasy can be.

Melanie Tem
Revenant
Headline, 8/12/94, 374pp,
£4.99
Mat Coward

Revenant is a ghost town in the Colorado Rockies, inhabited by real ghosts, and by Mother Grief - the mother of all grievers, so to speak - who take her sustenance from the refusal of bereaved people to release the people they love and get on with their own lives. In Revenant, to which they are summoned by trapped ghosts of their lost ones, they get a last chance to "let go".

I didn't find this a particularly compelling read. All but 7 of the first 214 pages are taken up with what is essentially an unconnecting series of short stories, describing how the various characters come to Revenant; and, of course, having read the introductory chapter and the first story, we know how all the others are going to end.

So there are no surprises and no tension in the overall plot, which belongs more to the romance than the horror genre. Instead, there is a lot of good, readable, unostentatious sincere writing, unusual and even amusing insights, and a very interesting idea of what constitutes "loss": not only death but, for instance, a little girl lost to her incestuous brother simply because she grew up.

This is a book so fundamentally American that you can almost smell the burger fat. For most of the world's peoples, I suspect, bereavement is just something terrible that happens to everyone at least once in their lives; but the USA is a country founded - politically, culturally and psychologically (albeit illusory) - on a refusal to accept things "just happening" to you. Everything, including grief (or grieving, as they say in verb-mad America), has to be turned into some sort of People Business. If Revenant really existed it would be a kind of tears 'n' hugs Disneyland.

Ian Watson
Harlequin
Boxtree, 27/10/94, 246pp,
£15.99
L. J. Hurst

This is Ian Watson's third novel for Games Workshop's *Warhammer 40,000* series and is a sequel to *Inquisitor*, inheriting the same protagonist, Jaq Draco.

The publisher's flyer quotes the description from *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, which says Watson is "The most impressive synthesizer of modern SF", but I don't think they realise how cleverly he does it. This book reads like nothing else of Watson's that I've read, but reads fast - he has succeeded in moving into the domain of gratuitous violence and amorality that is the world of all these parallel texts to RPGing.

So, Ian Watson is an ideas man - just think of one his early books like *Deathhunter*, which is actually a conceit (an elaborate literary game), based on the refusal to distinguish between death and dying, like a poem, by John Donne written on a vaster scale. Yet even that at the time was criticized as a thriller, but now Harlequin contains line like "Nothing could extinguish the fire which ate into his flesh and his nerves - consuming ever so slowly, like lingering sticky acid" and "Sergeant," ordered Lex, "use your las-scalpel above the elbow. Slice through the humerus." and the heroine Meh'lindi gets a complete operation without anaesthetics.

In a world of ritual barbarism what could offer some hope of something else? Firstly, some sense of religion, so an objection can be met "I grieve for the loss of Goethe's progenoids, sir." "Use your scalpel for this lesser purpose". Far away the emperor is suffering even more, however, there is doubt about the nature of that pain. In fact the whole book is riddled with doubt and on some pages several paragraphs in a row consist of nothing but questions, mostly never to be answered. This is not just Descartes' world, he would be proud of this universe. And lastly, with a character called Zephro Carnelian,

this is a universe in which other author's worlds are colliding - Moorcock, Wolfe, probably more.

I wonder how many wargamers will see all that in these pages of interstellar conflict.

Howard Weinstein
/ Rod Whigham
& Gordon Purcell
& Arne Starr
& Carlos Garzon
Star Trek:
Tests of Courage
Titan, 13/10/94, 150pp,
£9.99
Tanya Brown

Tests of *Courage* begins when Sulu finally takes command of his own ship, the 'Excelsior'. Captain Kirk and his old shipmates from the 'Enterprise' are there to mark this auspicious occasion - and to accompany Sulu on his first mission as Captain, to investigate a crisis in the Tabukans system. The Tabukans "devoted so much effort to building more and more powerful weapons that they never developed interstellar flight" - now, however, the warring planets have joined forces to destroy their stockpile of Extremely Dangerous Weapons. Unfortunately, the Romulans - with their now-found allies, the Maroans - have discovered the plan and seem to regard it as a prime opportunity to increase their own megatonnage. It's up to Captain Sulu and his crew to stop them; Sulu must also prove that he's worthy of the responsibility, while cementing old friendships and earning the respect of his new crew.

In among the space battles and lurid aliens, there's a strong undercurrent of morality and psychology - simple enough, for the most part, but not thrown in just for the sake of it. Basic comic fare, which works well at several levels.

Simon Welfare
& John Fairley
Arthur C. Clarke's
A-Z of Mysterics
HarperCollins, 24/11/94,
250pp, £12.99
Steve Palmer

From Atlantis to Zombies, says the blurb, giving the impression that this is the worst kind of sensationalism, when in fact it is a hotch-potch of the realistic (Blue Moons, Hail, The Great Wall of China) and the completely silly (crop circles, Bigfoot, Spiritualism, Life after Death). At thirteen pounds I suppose it is a diverting read that can be left on the coffee table, for those who such articles of furniture, but, reading through, the impression is gained that this book is aimed at the intelligent credulous reader, those who want to believe so much in Atlantis and the Bermuda Triangle.

Some of the articles are excellent, particularly those devoted to historical or archaeological events, but the silly ones stand out; and you know that they are daft and that there is little of fact to be said because of the number of rhetorical questions that emerge: "Was there, then, an unscientific explanation?", "Was the hotel's west wing haunted?", "Could it have been (the) ghost that the airmen sensed in their rooms?"

This book is recommended to those people who think Michael Aspel's paranormal show is interesting, to those who go out at night UFO hunting and actually think they might see something, to those who buy *The Cereologist*, and to those who, with their friends down the pub, dreamily wonder whether they will be reincarnated as a mole or an elephant.



Robert Charles Wilson
 Mysterium
 NEL, 19/1/95, 345pp,
 £4.99
 Chris Amies

The small town of Two Rivers, in the Pacific Northwest of the USA (Wilson's usual locale for his novels: halfway between his native California, and Canada where he now lives) wakes up one morning to find that it has slipped from the familiar 20th-century world into a parallel world where technology is about 50 years behind and America is under the rule of a despotic Gnostic Church, a theocracy reminiscent of that in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel follows a small number of the town's inhabitants as they adjust to the new order and in some cases attempt to challenge it; and, commendably, presents the view of the colonists also. Given its concerns and the chosen residence of its author, the novel is perhaps a fable of Canadian wariness regarding the USA, faced with all that religious fundamentalism backed up with the world's best-equipped armed forces just over the border.

Although *Mysterium* is very straight-forwardly a SF novel, there is an air of some of Stephen King's novels and stories about it, especially *The Stand* or *The Mist* – the strange and violent events that at first cannot be explained, the atmosphere of isolated terror, and the feeling that some kind of meddling with things humans should not meddle with, is behind it all. There is a tendency to assume American SF concerns itself almost entirely with megacities like NY or LA, the same way that most American films and television series do; but with its propensity to be cut off from the outside world, and the smaller population meaning the scale of the drama is easier grasped, the small town is a more suitable background for SF and dark fantasy than we may think.

Leonard Wolf (ed)
 The Essential
 Frankenstein
 Plume, 1983, 357pp,
 £8.99
 K. V. Bailey

Three-quarters of the book comprises the complete 1818 text of Mary Shelley's novel; this in preference to the usually seen more polished but less spontaneous text of the 1831 edition. The remainder contains, first, an Introduction devoted to the literary background, to contemporary science and its popular manifestations, and to the intellectual, domestic and romantic circumstances surrounding the Wollstoncroft-Godwin-Shelley-Byron complex; then there is a substantial batch of Appendices, including a bibliography, a filmography, a chronology of the action of the novel, examples of the kind of "terror stories" read by the Shelley-Byron circle, and several reviews of the period, one of which, by Sir Walter Scott, discusses "the class of marvellous romances" and its "subdivisions" – and early foray into definition of genre.

Leonard Wolf is an American academic, novelist and literary historian who has specialised in horror and the supernatural. As would be expected, his ample footnoted annotations trace years in which Mary Shelley's reading in those areas is reflected in her characters and their actions. Thus Victor Frankenstein's fascinated discovery of the writings of Cornelius Agrippa is related to Mary Wollstoncroft's interest in Agrippa's defence of women. Imagery drawn from Coleridge, Milton, (frequently), Dante and many classical authors and myths (that of Narcissus, for example) is well documented. To assist the American readership, explicit indications accompany Victor's British travels, sometimes seeming oddly redundant to English readers, Oxford being "the famous university city to the west of London on the banks of the Thames". The mention of Oxford's Civil War associations calls for a résumé of Clarendon's *History* which Mary's

Journal shows her to have been reading.

Interspersed among text and footnotes are solicited brief or longer recollections and appreciations of the novel and its influence by modern authors; and at chapter headings and elsewhere are relevant illustrations. To some these mini-essays may appear a distraction, but they may welcome the variation in type, layout and content. Among the contributors are Brian Aldiss, John Brunner and David Brin. Most of the illustrations, sombrely atmospheric (but brilliant), are by Christopher Bing; others from contemporary publications illuminate locales (e.g. the Alps, Ingolstadt, Edinburgh) and there are reproductions of anatomical engravings and of paintings by Fuseli. All in all, then, a welcome *vade mecum*, both for the general reader and for any researching the subject.

Bridget Wood
 Sorceress
 Headline, 15/9/94, 600pp,
 £5.99
 Chris Hart

As with previous Wood novels, stability is on the verge of chaos in this her fourth novel in the Dark Ireland sequence. This time, Nechtan, the sorcerer of the House of Araranth (to give him his full title) is about to snuff it, threatening the tenuous *status quo* which is woven in the Chamber of the Looms. Without his nurturing influence spells may become corrupted by the influence of Dark Realm of the Necromancers. The search is on for his successor, but the only worthy candidate is overlooked because of her youth. Plucky Theo is kidnapped by the Lord of Chaos and taken hostage to the very gates of Dark Ireland before anyone realises her true destiny.

Wood is adept at spinning a compelling yarn with all the trappings of the fantasy genre. Her real skill is her ability to beguile the reader into a false sense of hunky dory before plunging them into the depths of horror. It is possible to see her development as a storyteller throughout these novels as her ability to

rewrite pagan, Celtic myths in a rigorous and, at times, painfully vivid manner is becoming more and more sharply focused. She dispenses quickly with the tiresome exposition that dogged some of her earlier work and plunges headlong into a fast paced narrative – a difficult task in a novel of this length, but she manages to sustain the momentum.

William F. Wu
 Isaac Asimov's
 Robots in Time: Invader
 Avon, 9/94, 245pp, \$4.99
 Martin H. Brice

Way back in the Heroic Age of Science Fiction, Isaac Asimov considered the possibility of time-travelling androids, inanimate and subject to the Three Laws of Robotics, they could neither create human life nor destroy it; they could only observe history without altering it.

Thus was conceived the idea of the *Robots in Time* series, given literary life by William F. Wu.

In previous volumes, five out of six time-roving robots have already been recovered from periods of pirates and panzers, centurions, Chinese Emperors and dinosaurs. The last one has to be brought back from Dark Age Cadbury Castle, the hillfort stronghold of a local chief who will become known to posterity as King Arthur. There are two rival teams robot hunters.

The book is definitely science fiction; a centrepiece of Matt Elson drawings never let you forget that. Yet *Invader* is also an historical novel which gives a sympathetic impression of that age. It deals, not with heroes and epic events, but with ordinary people trying to live ordinary lives in circumstances which will cause them to be hailed as heroes in centuries to come.

There is Gaius the wagonmaster, trying to cope with the problems of heroes and camp-followers; Bodwyr the practical, universal soldier; Emrys looking for a good price for his sheep and firewood. Gwenhyvaer is a rather empty-headed, spoilt young girl, whose sole ambition is

to marry the up-and-coming Chief Artorius.

I enjoyed this book. It had a cheerfulness about it; the characters have hope in the future.

Jack Yeovil
Beasts in Velvet
Boxtree, 27/10/94, 269pp,
£4.99
Graham Andrews

I am rather bored... It becomes harder and harder to read the whole of any modern novel. One reads a bit, and knows the rest; or else one doesn't want to know any more (D. H. Lawrence).

I've been keeping that quotation for just such an occasion as this review of *Beasts in Velvet* by Jack (Now / Always Known To Be Kim Newman) Yeovil. I didn't expect much, if anything, from a noveloid based upon the *Warhammer*® game — © Games Workshop Ltd. — so I wasn't disappointed. Just slightly cheesed off. "Tell me the old, old story" sums it all up.

Nevertheless, I sensed auctorial tee-hees behind many otherwise blah scenes. For example:

"He tried to remember the night before, but could not.

"Water was dripping somewhere, and the floor was shifting. He wondered if he were on a boat.

"There were questions he would have to answer. Where was Trudi? Where was he? What had he done last night?

"And why was he covered in blood?" (p.155).

Warhammer® fans, in their undoubted dozens, will buy this latest marketing ploy, no matter what anyone says. But I can't see it appealing to most people who've read Howard / Leiber / Moorcock. Or — even — Robert Jordan.

Timothy Zahn
Conqueror's Pride
Bantam, 6/10/94, 389pp,
£4.99
Chris Hart

Zahn is a prolific author of space opera science fiction, most famously, the recent best-selling *Star Wars* trilogy. In this novel he is on familiar ground, but he has created his own interstellar back-drop for a story of family loyalty. The stability

of the utopian Commonwealth is threatened by an impending invasion from aliens, The Conquerors. In an opening salvo against the humans, the aliens attack a task force of Commonwealth fighters, destroying all the hardware and apparently killing Commander Pheylan Cavanagh and his crew. However, the Commander's father is a commonwealth big-wig who hears intelligence that

his son is alive and well and in the hands of the aliens. He is prepared to move hell and high water to prove that his son was not killed and to launch a posse to ensure his safe return.

The action really begins when he assembles his more passive younger son, and Adam Quinn, a former member of the elite Copperheads (fighter pilots who are mentally linked to their machines.) They adopt a high risk strategy to implement the rescue

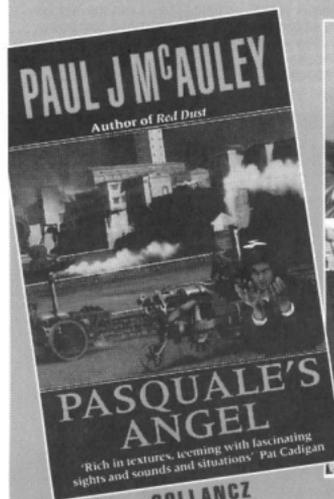
which involves stepping on a few toes and breaking rules.

Zahn has a feel for dialogue and the trappings of space opera (including some very silly acronyms). The plot is compelling and the characters do come alive, add this to sleek descriptions of the milieu, and you have a fun, swift read. This is not the last we will see of these characters — watch this space.

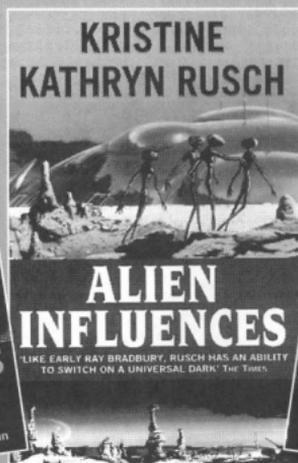


THE
Arthur C Clarke
AWARD

SHORTLIST FOR THE BEST SF NOVEL PUBLISHED IN THE UK



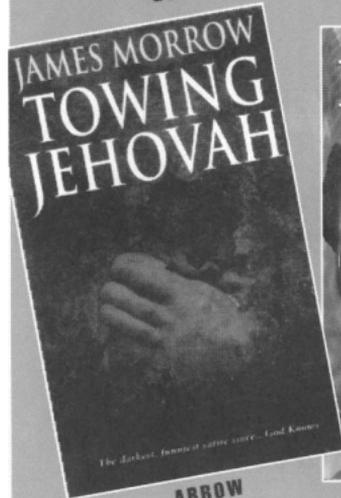
GOLLANCZ



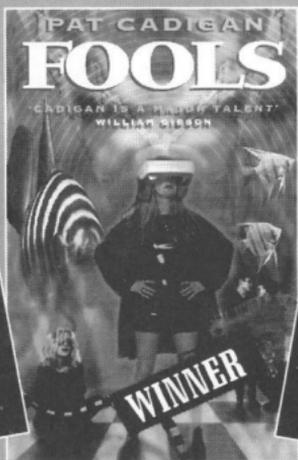
MILLENNIUM



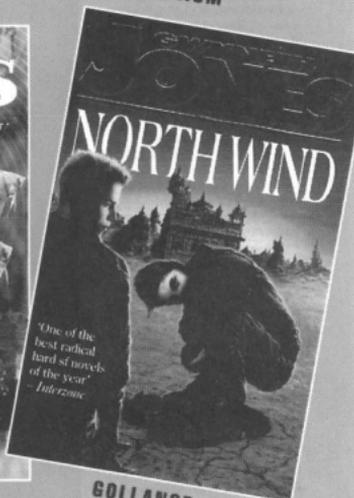
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ARROW



HARPERCOLLINS



GOLLANCZ

The winner will be announced on April 20th