The Critical Journal of the BSFA

- Stephen Baxter on Apollo 13
- Ben Jeapes on Jules Verne
- Roger Zelazny
- Reviews & Letters

CAN SF BE PC?
Contents

3 Front Line Dispatches
Readers' Letters

4 This Immortal: Roger Zelazny
Tanya Brown

8 Apollo 13
Stephen Baxter

10 Jules Verne
Ben Jeapes

13 First Impressions
Reviews edited by Paul Kincaid

26 Paperback Graffiti
Reviews edited by Stephen Payne

35 Can SF be PC?
Verity di Staff & Ernest Newman

Nuts & Bolts

Gentle readers, this is goodbye. This is my last issue of Vector, and despite the interest and enjoyment it has brought to me, I confess that I pass on the mantle with a sigh of relief. It's four years now since this magazine took over what normal people tend to refer to as their spare time. I took the job over with high hopes and plenty of enthusiasm: for me, Vector has always been a labour of love.

However the demands of my (paid) working life have grown gradually over the years, leaving me less and less time available for Vector. For the last two and a half years I have worked away from home; returning only at weekends. Recent months have also seen many of my weekends swallowed up by work commitments. I have a family, who deserve, I think, a little of my time and attention, additionally I like to have a little time available just for myself - to socialise, perhaps, to read or even just to sleep. The border of sanity was crossed a long time ago in trying to combine Vector with the rest of my life. Additionally, I've had an increasing yen to concentrate on my own writing rather than editing and producing the work of other people. It is necessary, therefore, to pass the job on to people who will have the time and energy to do justice to the job.

A team is being assembled to take the job over; the names will soon be announced. In the meantime correspondence for future editions of Vector should be sent to Maureen Speller. I'm looking forward to seeing the Brave New Vector that will be with us soon. You can expect to see me continuing to appear in its pages with interviews, reviews and maybe some of the articles, I've had no time yet to do more than plan!

I'm going to miss you all. I'm very grateful for the encouragement and support I've received over the years, which I hope you will also extend to my replacements. There are many people to whom I owe thanks - but in time-honoured fashion I'd like to single a few names out:


But most of all, I (and you) have to thank Alan Johnson who managed to live with the foul-mouthed, sleep-deprived hag who dedicates to him with love her very last Vector.
With regard to Steve Jeffrey’s review of Left To His Own Devices in #181, if anyone has any information about whether mirrorshade contact lenses are available or not, I should be very grateful to receive it...

As to the Architects of Mars - don’t tempt me.

From Mary Gentle
(Not Valantine at all really...)

Insulting

I now have a bijou problemette with trusting the reviews in Vector, one which could be obviated although it probably won’t be what with one thing and another like lack of volunteers and time and all the rest.

Nevertheless for what it’s worth I should like to proffer a suggestion: if you are going to publish a thoroughly unfavourable review, you might ask someone else who has read the book in question to check the review for factual accuracy. Fairness is a very subjective matter; so long as a reviewer states that he or she doesn’t enjoy a particular sort of fiction (but in which case, why make him or her read it, poor blighter?), then a dislike of a book which is of this type may be discounted; but it casts grave doubt on the competence of an individual slacking off a book if that individual has made an error of fact in the review. The implication that the book has been read with rather less than the reviewer’s full attention rather springs to the fore. It hurts to be trashed; to be trashed by someone who hasn’t bothered to read your work carefully enough to sort out which is which of the two entirely different major characters in it is both hurtful and downright insulting.

I’m talking about Max Sexton’s review of Tom Holt’s book Overtime in Vector 176. I will declare an interest, of course: I like Tom Holt personally, I hope that he never sees this issue of Vector, and being a “fan of its particular brand of humour” I enjoyed the book. I like to hope that I’d be equally peevish if a reviewer stated that Jubal Harshaw was a man from Mars who was able to perform “miracles”, whatever my lack of friendship with Robert Heinlein, but I suppose I should admit that I’d probably leave correcting the error to somebody else, and confine myself to saying “What a wally” about the reviewer without bothering to waste a stamp on him or her.

Come to look at it, maybe you should let poor Max select from a bit higher up the slush pile next issue: he seems to have been unhappy with all three of the books he reviewed for you, I’d love to find out what he is prepared to be civil and accurate about – or to read at all. In his review of Robert Asprin’s Catwoman he says that he could “safely skip pages”; in the case of Overtime I get the feeling that he skipped whole chapters, starting with the one in which the two characters he has muddled up are introduced. The first chapter. Ah well.

From Chris Bell

Congratulations

I greatly enjoyed Paul Kincaid’s thoughtful piece on hard SF, which had me diving back through my shelves confirming hunches. Graham Joyce was amusing on a familiar theme, and I was interested to read Martin Webb’s interview with Peter James, of whom I knew nothing: then a feast of reviews to guide our steps to the specialist shops.

The issue looked good, too, except for page 44 (what happened?) but I don’t imagine you’ll be able to afford the space for full-page titles every time.

So long as everyone continues to send you the articles and reviews – which (oh hell) reminds me...

From Norman Beswick
(Sometimes the more subtle shades of grey are lost in the printing process – sorry! Catie)

Sierra Heaven, a fantasy, horror and science fiction magazine for the 90s, is coming!

We’re currently on the hunt for quality fantasy, horror, and science fiction mss, all lengths up to 20,000 words considered. We’re particularly interested in submissions for our “Short Shorts” column. If you think you can spin a decent yarn in any of the genres mentioned, in 250 words or less, then we want to hear from you!

For further details, please contact:
Alex Bardy, 29 Harrier Way, Evelyn Mews,
Beckton, London E6 4YP
Roger Zelazny (1937-1995)

THIS IMMORTAL

BY TANYA BROWN
Roger Zelazny's death, on the 14th June this year, prompted mixed reactions. Someone on the Net posted a message to the effect 'at least he won't be writing any more bad books'. The author of the message was promptly flamed, both by dedicated Zelazny fans and by those who thought that it was a tactless thing to say.

In general, the obituary writers have hung fire on the merit of his recent work, preferring to laud the Hugo-winning Lord of Light (1967) and the long-running 'Amber' series (1970 - 1991). He won (they recite) three Nebulas and six Hugos. He published nearly thirty solo novels and at least four collections of short stories. He was a Grand Master of science fiction.

In recent years, it's true, Zelazny's best work has been his short stories - which have appeared at increasingly long intervals, no doubt because of the illness that he hid from the SF community. There have been a number of collaborative novels, most notably Bring Me the Head of Prince Charming (1991, with Robert Sheckley). Zelazny's last solo novel, 1994's A Night in the Lonesome October - a cheery (if occasionally whimsical) fantasy with Lovecraftian overtones, narrated by Jack the Ripper's watchdog Snuff - received enthusiastic reviews. The wit, and the elegance, which had characterised his earlier work were still evident from time to time. As his career progressed, though, Zelazny seemed to be moving towards fantasy, and away from science fiction; and, while his fantasy novels were entertaining enough, they didn't have the originality of his science-fictional work. Dilvish the Damned (1982) even featured elves...

Over the last two decades it became increasingly apparent that Zelazny was no longer the force majeure he had been in the late Sixties and early Seventies.

Back then, when the New Wave was in its infancy, Zelazny's themes were epic; men as gods, life and death, the nature of the mind, parallel worlds...

Zelazny had quite a reputation as a reworker of myth. Creatures of Light and Darkness (1969) shuffled the Egyptian pantheon; Lord of Light (1967) features a colony ruled by men and women who have taken on the attributes of the Hindu gods. There are elements of Greek legend in This Immortal (1966); and, more recently, Eye of Cat (1982) featured Navajo myth. While Zelazny never ignored the psychological aspects of religion and belief systems, he was at pains to assign a hard scientific provenance to his 'gods'. Thus, for example, Osiris and Anubis have animal heads as the result of cosmetic surgery, while the Hindu pantheon of Lord of Light switch from body to body and wait for each new brain to adjust to their individual mutated minds. In This Immortal, a variety of myths and monsters infest post-holocaust Greece, snapping eagerly at the heels of the narrator, who resolutely denies his own mythic qualities.

In his short stories, he sometimes played the trick the other way around. Mythical beings were uprooted from their natural habitat and deposited in mundane times. In Zelazny's Hemingway pastiche, 'The Naked Matador' (1981), a criminal on the run is assisted by a strange woman who wears a headscarf and dark glasses. She turns his pursuers to stone. In a neat, low-key touch, the villains' car is a blue Fury.

Elsewhere we find Morgan le Fay working as a Tarot reader, Jack the Ripper (again) relishing a snuff movie in Los Angeles, and a chess-playing unicorn, Tlingel, with a taste for lager. Whatever else Zelazny lost in later years, his sense of humour was as strong as ever.

Many of Zelazny's heroes are more god than man, whatever their origins. The 'Amber' series (starting with Nine Princes in Amber, 1970) features a family of superhuman near-immortals, who walk through infinite parallel worlds, competing for the crown of Amber - the Immortal City, the reality of which all other worlds (including our own) are mere shadows. The princes and princesses of Amber communicate with one another by what could be called, unkindly, a fantasy mobile phone - Tarot trumps bearing likenesses of each member of the family. Conveniently, these can also be used for teleportation. Amber's royal family behave, at times, like the cast of a Jacobean revenge tragedy (Zelazny was a professor of Renaissance and Jacobean literature for some years). There's a curious blend, which for a time typified Zelazny's style, of hard-bitten prose and poetic imagery. Consider a ride through Shadow, with Corwin - the narrator, and Man Who Would Be King - shifting reality around him as he moves: "We race a great meteor, we touch upon its bulk...speeding across its pitted surface, down, around then up again - it stretches into a great plain, it lightens, it yellows...it is sand, now, beneath my horse's hooves...thudding along the beach beneath a lemon sky, blue clouds scudding - the salt, the wrack, the shells, the smooth anatomy of driftwood...white spray off the lime-coloured sea..." (The Hand of Oberon, 1976).

Zelazny plays with archetypes throughout the 'Amber' series - Amber, after all, is the archetypal city. There are magical messenger birds (which have a habit of shitting on one's cloak), mazes, surreal landscapes strewn with iconic images...since everything exists somewhere in Shadow, it's simply a case of getting to the right - or wrong - place to encounter Lancelot, visit an underwater city or be interrogated by the Sphinx (which doesn't know the answer to 'What's green and turns red at the touch of a button?')

The 'Amber' books encompass an epic tale, but perhaps - even in the first five books - at too great a length. The second part of the series - while featuring computerised shadow-shifting and even more Machiavellian intrigues - doesn't have the same spark as the earlier books, perhaps because its narrator, Merlin, has less godlike arrogance - and
considerably less common sense - than Corwin. The 'Amber' books, however, are perhaps the most popular of Zelazny's work; they've spawned interactive novels, a Tarot set and even a role-playing game on the Net.

Zelazny first explored the 'Amber' theme of Order versus Chaos, with all possible worlds existing in between, in Creatures of Light and Darkness. The earlier book is perhaps the more effective. The thirty thousand 'midworlds' lie between the houses of Life and Death, ranging from medieval societies to worlds which foreshadow some familiar cyberpunk images. (Zelazny was writing about mechanised prostitution, where a human being is wired into a machine, before Gibson had his first typewriter). It's a far more poetic, almost experimental novel, which blends poetry, play scripts and strong imagery - and, among the poetic prose and the vivid characterisations, there's some pretty solid scientific grounding. Black holes and population dynamics mingle with dead cities and shapechangers, and a teleportationist who - like the Amberites - can project himself to anywhere he can imagine. There is also a remarkably funny passage concerning the use of human entrails for prophecy.

The mingling of science fiction and fantasy, which typified his earlier novels, is most blatant in Jack of Shadows (1971). The world has stopped turning; one side, eternally facing the sun, is devoted to science, while the other is governed by magic. The eponymous hero, a creature of twilight, reincarnates again and again, seeking to destroy the machine at the heart of the world - a task which can only be performed with both science and magic - and a generous dose of cynicism. There are some neat metaphysical conceits, not least the World Machine - a Darkside image, which the Daysiders claim is really a fire demon. Both views, of course, are correct. "Each of you colours reality in keeping with your means of controlling it," says Morgenstern, the fallen angel who is waiting for the sun to rise.

Zelazny's gift for evocative philosophical metaphor is also present in Roadmarks (1979). Any point in history - including alternate histories - can be reached from the Road: "Time is a super-highway with many exits... The roads have a habit of reverting to wilderness when there are none to travel them". Like his earlier Doorways in the Sand (1975) this is an entertaining adventure novel with an exotic setting, rather than a serious exploration of a theme. Nevertheless, Zelazny's prose is literary and sprinkled with wit and vivid imagery.

Another theme which Zelazny returned to time and again was that of the mind. His first novel, published in 1966, was The Dream Master (expanded from the novella 'He Who Shapes'). This posit an future branch of psychiatry in which dreams - and nightmares - are lived out under the control of the Shaper. Like any good novel, the setting is only half the story. The Dream Master is a powerful description of a great man with a flaw - too strong a liking for playing God.

I've already mentioned that the characters in the Amber novels use their minds to shape the world around them, adding and taking away elements until they reach the Shadow world they seek; Zelazny has some profound (and also, on occasion, facile) things to say about the attitudes that this power evokes:

"Solipsism is where we have to begin - the notion that nothing exists but the self... I can find, somewhere off in Shadow, anything I can visualise. This, in good faith, does not transcend the limits of the ego. It may be argued... that we create the shadows we visit out of the stuff of our own psyches, that we alone truly exist, that the shadows we traverse are but projections of our own desires. Whatever the merits of this argument, it does go far towards explaining much of the family's attitude towards people, places and things outside Amber. Namely, we are toymakers and they, our playthings - sometimes dangerously animated, to be sure; but this, too, is part
of the game. We are impresarios by temperament, and we treat one another accordingly. While solipsism does tend to leave one slightly embarrassed on questions of etiology, one can easily avoid the embarrassment by refusing to admit the validity of the questions.” (Sign of the Unicorn, 1975)

Zelazny was fascinated with immortality, indeed, if he could be said to have had a major theme, particularly in his earlier works, the concept of living forever— or almost forever— would have been it. He offers a variety of ways in which immortality can be achieved; for instance, in this lecture from Creatures of Light and Darkness:

“By one means or another, certain individuals have achieved a kind of immortality. Perhaps they follow the currents of life and draw upon their force, and they flee from the waves of death. Perhaps they have adjusted their biochemistry, or they keep their bodies in constant repair, or they have many bodies and exchange them, or steal new ones. Perhaps they wear metal bodies, or no bodies at all... they cheat on life, on death, as you can see, and their very existence upsets the balance, inspires others to strive to emulate their legends, causes others to think them gods.”

Elsewhere he has body transfer via computer (Lord of Light); rejuvenation drugs (Isle of the Dead, 1969); and sheer good luck (or, perhaps, mutation) as in the case of Conrad Nomikos, the narrator of This Immortal (1966). Conrad has been alive for at least two hundred years, although this is not generally known. On the other hand, it’s difficult to hide in a computerised society... Conrad never thinks of himself as a god, but eventually godhood is thrust upon him by the Vegans, who bequeath him the Earth: “I feel I have made a good choice in naming you as heir to the property commonly referred to as Earth. Your affection for it cannot be gainsaid... you appear to be the closest thing to an immortal overseer available.”

The flipside of immortality is death. Perhaps Zelazny’s most powerful short story is ‘A Rose for Ecclesiastes’ (1967), in which the poet Gallagher is sent to Mars to translate the holy books of a dying race. His love affair with a Martian girl, Braxa, leads him to fight the doom-laden pronouncements of the Mothers, who have decided that their infertile people should, effectively, give up the will to live. "The dance was good. Now let it end." He preaches to them from the Book of Ecclesiastes, and from his own work, trying to persuade them to accept help from Earth. Gallagher convinces them to choose life; then, finding that Braxa was only doing her duty, he attempts suicide. That’s a glib summary of an immaculately crafted story; deservedly, it won a Hugo.

Zelazny’s own enthusiasm for life showed in much of his work. His was an eclectic range of interests; fencing and wrestling (most of his books contain exquisitely-choreographed fight scenes); philosophy and psychology; computer science; astronomy; literature... He quoted many poets in his work, from Chaucer to Whitman, and was a poet in his own right— although his poetry is not easily obtainable. The influence of Jacobean tragedy has already been noted; reading the ‘Amber’ books is much more fun if you’ve a Dictionary of Quotations to hand! He had an eye for detail— both emotional and physical— that, at its best, was reminiscent of Theodore Sturgeon; and a tendency to philosophise:

“Sipping beer in a mountain lodge on the planet Divbah... I once looked out through a wide window and up at the highest mountain in the known universe. It is called Kaslia, and it has never been climbed... It is one of those crazy things you think about and promise yourself that someday you’re going to try, and then you wake up one morning and realise that it is probably exactly too late; you’ll never do it.” (This Immortal)

In his time Zelazny was one of the great; he co-authored a novel with Philip K. Dick (Deus Irae, 1973), and even appeared as a character in Delany’s story ‘We Who In Some Strange Power’s Employ’. (Zelazny was not averse to basing characters on his friends and colleagues; Fred Cassidy, the hero of Doorways in the Sand, is based on Joe Haldeman.) While little of his recent work had the brilliance of earlier years, one can’t help feeling that there were still some ideas coming to fruition.

Best, then, to let his own words, again from This Immortal, serve as an elegy:

“Had you died young, your passing would have been mourned as the destruction of a great talent before its fulfillment. But you lived and they cannot say that now. Some choose a short and supernal life before the walls of their Troy, others a long and less troubled one. And who is to say which is the better? The gods did keep their promise of immortal fame to Achilles, by inspiring the poet to sing him an immortal paean. But is he the happier for it, being now as dead as yourself? I cannot judge, old friend... May the lords Phoebus and Dionysius, who do love and kill their poets, commend thee to their dark brother Hades.”
I caught *Apollo 13* in a cinema in Houston itself, during my research visit to NASA facilities this summer.

*Apollo 13* gives the story of Jim Lovell's ill-fated moon flight the modern Hollywood sfx treatment. The result is a good and pretty faithful depiction of the mission. Some aspects of the adventure are simplified for our comprehension, reasonably enough, and the plot, switching between the spacecraft, Mission Control, and Lovell's family, reduces the situation to its essentials by focusing on a handful of key characters: Lovell, his wife, flight director Ed Kranz, Ken Mattingley (the guy who shoulda been on that flight). But overall the result is a historical dramadoc which gives us an impression of the mission which is reasonably true to life: a *Countdown* for the 1990s.

As you would expect, the special effects are wonderful. I loved the never-before-seen views of the...
Saturn V launch, and for authenticity Howard filmed zero-G sequences in the ‘Vomit Comet’ NASA's parabolic-trajectory weightlessness trainer. I found it bizarre to reflect, though, on the way that our miraculous but somewhat decadent modern computer technology has been used to recreate the heroic technology of a receding past.

However, the film lacks drama, oddly; perhaps the script sticks a little too literally to Lovell's recently published account of the mission, Lost Moon (with Jeffrey Kluger). Sometimes, in fact, the drama is generated synthetically, with an emphasis on countdowns, the needle quivering at the critical point on the dial of the CO2 meter: fans of Gerry Anderson will recognise the techniques at once. There is humour, to leaven the tension, but sometimes the audience actually laughs too much, as calamity piles on calamity. The most cheesy sequence is Lovell's fantasy of moonwalking; the backdrop is completely unbelievable, the whole sequence gratuitous.

I have to say I couldn't believe Tom Hanks as Jim Lovell! Too boyish, young-lookiing, no weight. But Ed Harris is terrific as Kranz, and you sense the director knows what an asset he has by the way the camera plays on Harris during Kranz's first appearance.

NASA co-operated closely in the making of the film, and in the Johnson Space Centre's visitors centre, in Houston, is an immense Apollo 13 exhibit. A real-life flight director told me he got a buzz of electricity at the point when the 'problem' occurs, and Kranz is put on the spot. Overall the NASA people are thrilled the film has been number one in the US for weeks, beating out Batman Forever and Judge Dredd. They thought kids today would be too conditioned by Star Trek plastic-coated spaceships - which have to bank to manoeuvre and make whooshing noises in the vacuum - to accept the reality. Well, there is some vacuum sound in Apollo 13, but there are also genuinely thrilling moments, much as when the LM fires its booster to blast Apollo around the limb of the moon...

Houston was a hell of a place to watch what is truthfully the best space film for many years. Strongly recommended, even if you can't get to Houston.

(Uneversal; Director Ron Howard; stars Tom Hanks, Ed Harris)
Jules Verne's
Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea
Recommended by Ben Jeapes

Everyone knows this one: the Jules Verne one with the submarine and Captain Nemo, who was played by James Mason (and very well, too) in the Disney version. So why pick it out of all the Verne corpus for a special mention?

For two reasons, and they're both listed above. They combine to make *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, written between 1867 and 1870, both the best of all Verne's science novels and a classic in its own right.

Start by taking a look at *Nautilus*, a vessel that should have an award for Best Supporting machine in a novel. *Nautilus* deserves its place in the hall of fame for two reasons.

First, there's the obvious – the predictive element. Verne was fascinated by technology. He never got metaphysical, unlike the other Great Nineteenth Century SF Writer, HG Wells – the Verne gizmos are firmly grounded in known or slightly extrapolated nineteenth century physics. Sometimes he went a bit far, e.g. the gun shooting men around the Moon, but by and large he had every reason to believe that the machines of the future would roughly match the ones he described. With *Nautilus* he comes damn close to being spot on. Verne's triumph isn't that he invented the submarine – the idea had been around for quite a while – but rather the similarity between *Nautilus* and a modern submarine.

*Nautilus* is cigar shaped and goes up and down by using ballast tanks and inclined planes at the centre of flotation. Cigar shaped? Modern submarines are cigar shaped, but they didn't start getting that way until after World War II. It's the best shape to be for cruising indefinitely under water, but until nuclear power made this possible (*Nautilus* gets unlimited electricity from seawater, by the way), submarines were basically surface based motor vessels that sunk at will, and were shaped accordingly with bows designed to cut through waves. Ballast tanks and inclined planes? Yes, submarine designers did catch on to these at a fairly early stage... but note that these planes are at the centre of flotation. It was only comparatively recently that a discovery was made about hunter/killer submarines – put the planes on the conning tower, roughly amidships, and the sub becomes a lot more manoeuvrable. Jules could have told 'em.

Okay, okay, he slipped up occasionally. *Nautilus*' helmsman, Seaview-like, looks out of a window to see where he is going. It didn't occur to Verne that if you are cruising at fifty fathoms and the bottom of the sea is two miles below you, you are not going to hit anything and there's not much in the way of scenery. It's also interesting that *Nautilus* doesn't have a conning tower, which would seem the most logical thing for when your ship only floats two or three feet above the surface and you don't want to get your feet wet. What really amazes me is that Verne didn't think of the periscope – in hindsight, the most obvious invention in the world for seeing from below to above the surface. And as for *Nautilus*'s pressure-resisting properties, which enable Captain Nemo to talk blithely about visiting the sea bed three leagues (that's six miles) down because the ship's plates "cohere spontaneously"... forget it. But give Verne a break. He did a lot better than Irwin Allen... though I'll admit that's not a very informative statement.

The second appeal of *Nautilus* is its psychological impact. I can't speak for little girls, never having been one, but I think I can safely say that every little boy is wowed at the idea of a powerful travelling entity at his complete disposal. We all want a dragon/ magic carpet/ starship/ TARDIS/ Shogun Warrior/ You Name It at our command. That's what made *Thunderbirds* the most enduring of all Gerry Anderson's creations - International Rescue was a private set-up and little boys across the country could fantasise about being their favourite Tracy brother strapped into their own private Thunderbird. *Nautilus* is the nineteenth century's Thunderbird. I'll end this parallel now, before comparisons are made between Nemo and Scott Tracy.

But mention of Nemo brings us on to *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*'s second point of
attraction – the Good Captain himself. Enigmatic, surly amoral – surely the unlikeliest hero to find in a book by a man to whom all men are basically good, decent chaps. Verne has an unfortunate tendency to have several names sharing one character in his novels: the character, regardless of nominal class and background, is educated, literate and respectable (and male). In fact he needs to be pretty bland to take second place to the main star of each novel – the science.

Nemo is a pure antihero, a depressive driven by the loathing of society and injustice that made him turn his back on the land for good. I've already mentioned the Disney film – James Mason has Nemo down to a T. When Nemo picks up M. Aronax, the narrator of the book, and his friends Ned Land and Conseil from out of the sea, it is quite clear that he is thinking of throwing them back in again; he might well have if (this is my reading, anyway) he hadn't decided Aronax was a man of equal intellect and taken a shine to him. His justification (and remember this is the nineteenth century, when anarchy was the great taboo of the day): “I am not what is called a civilized man. I have done with society entirely for reasons that seem to me good; therefore I do not obey its laws, and I desire you never to allude to them before me again.”

To which Aronax reflects: “He had not only put himself out of the pale of human laws, but he had made himself independent of them, free, in the most rigorous sense of the word, entirely out of their reach. Who, then, would dare to pursue him in the depths of the sea, when on earth he baffled all efforts attempted against him? What armour, however thick, could support the blows of his spur? [um – Aronax means the ram on the prow of Nautilus...] No man could ask him for an account of his works. God, if he believed in him, his conscience, if he had one, were the only judges he could depend upon”.

Nemo is power personified. Despite his rant against the laws of society, he is no anarchist. He is the Nautilus, absolute master of his domain. Interesting for a man who despises despots. Although he claims to be the first amongst equals on board, the crew are mere ciphers, anonymous and speaking their own private language, there in the background to run the ship for him. At only one point does the identity of any of the crew become important – when Aronax learns from the terrified dying scream of a crewman reverting to his native tongue, “Amor”, that there is at least one other Frenchman on board. Otherwise, Verne deliberately keeps the crew secret, and shows he is doing so by having Aronax and his friends actually debate between themselves how many crew there must be: the crew aren't important to the book – it is Nemo that matters.

Nemo's origin is eventually explained in the book's sort-of-sequel, The Mysterious Island. In some ways there is a feeling of let down – did Verne give in to a temptation to asimove and explain everything unnecessarily? Anyway, because the explanation is there, I'll give it: Nemo was an Indian Prince, educated in Europe, who fought in the Indian Mutiny against the British. His family was killed in reprisal. He used his riches to have Nautilus built; assembled an international, polyglot crew of like-minded men (no women – this is Verne); and together they forswore the land forever. (Presumably the warship which Nemo used Nautilus to sink towards the end of Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, in an act of sheer homicidal spite, is therefore a British one. One wonders if Verne wasn't motivated by the Waterloo spirit in writing this. Still, Nemo, with his catholic and indiscriminate loathing of all tyrants everywhere, would have had no
time for Napoleon either. But then, Frenchmen have a tendency not to think of Napoleon as a tyrant...).

Nemo on his own would be a misanthrope; Nemo with Nautilus at his disposal is a downright menace. Nemo, if you stop and think about it, is the most powerful man in the world. With Nautilus he could hold the world's shipping lanes to ransom, if he so chose, dictating his own terms to refashion the world as he feels it should be (and he has very definite views on the subject). As it is, Nemo rarely bothers himself with the surface, except when he can't avoid it, as at the beginning of Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea when the US frigate Abraham Lincoln hounds him around the Pacific. Verne's usual drift in his novels was that Science Would Make Everything All Right (again, unlike Wells, who extrapolated science, matched it with humanity's tendency towards unpleasantness and was appalled by what he saw). To prove his own rule, Verne puts Nautilus both a triumph of technology and a lethal 232-foot submersible battering ram in the hands of a psychotic.

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea was written shortly after the American Civil War, and I can't help wondering if this didn't affect Verne in some way. It was a war with a number of firsts: the first truly technological war; the first use of trains to transport troops; the first machine guns; the first air force (the Confederates had it — yes really); the first modern sea battle between Merrimack and Monitor, the first deliberate targeting of civilian populations. Perhaps it began to sink in, even to Verne's mind, that this technology thing wasn't all it was cracked up to be. It wasn't the great god that would solve everything. Fortunately, Verne didn't then swing to the opposite view, that technology was evil: he steered a middle course instead. The morality of technology depends entirely on who is using it and for what ends. Nautilus which Aronax so fervently believes could be of the greatest service to mankind, is the tool of a man on the edge of madness. Verne uses Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea to play devil's advocate to his own overall optimism.

I think it was Arthur C Clarke — or one of his characters — who said that nothing is as dead as yesterday's science fiction. In fact, I'm pretty sure he said it of Jules Verne. Don't read Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea as a viable hypothesis on how submarines might develop (though be impressed by the number of points that Verne scored). Don't be put off by the anachronistic language (when did you last hear someone say “malediction” as a swear word?). Read it in the context of the time and admire it for its two central complex characters: Nautilus, the faithful marvel of machinery obedient to every whim of her master; and Nemo, the mysterious lunatic propelled entirely by his own internal moral code, and a man I have to admit I wouldn't mind sailing with.
FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Sarah Ash
Moths to a Flame
L.J. Hunt

I had not shown commitment and finished this book I would have said it was rubbish. As it is, I will say it is so incomplete that it should not have been published, though it has a promise. The first half, though, is dire and the other half does not make the book worth buying.

This is a fantasy by someone who has read fantasy and failed to learn the lessons of the genre. However, as she has failed to grasp the elements of English grammar we should expect her to have learned the elements of literary fantasy I don't know. Why her editors have allowed sentences such as "I am not your pet lapdog," said Lai coldly and made for the door" (p.104) or "And then the bosky blurred all senses and he no longer knew where he was or was cared" (p.107) to pass is another matter. (The verbs "said" and 'made' cannot be joined by and; or should have been "nor").

A second case of this failing invention is in the foreign vocabulary; although the setting is Arabic (Byzantine, the jacket calls it, though it is clearly set further south), we have clear old French titles such as 'Haute Zhudicia', and dungeons called donjons (which contain obliettes). Then we have attempts to recreate the scientific terms which come from the Arabic (average and algebra would be examples which are not in this book), so alcohol and liquor is alquer - but the food people eat is egg-plant and okra (p.229): we are only lucky because elsewhere 'salt pork and manassas is all that you get in jail' and I expected that to be served up at any moment.

A sword is 'razhir' and damaels are 'shamanzeis': this is not incredibly exotic: So when I came on the sentence towards the end of the book (after it began to improve, that is to say), "Quaffle'sbrewing on the hob," she said without looking up from her work" (p.242) I realised that nearly everything was lost. Even I could do better than that: Quaffle's brewing on the agha' she could have said, and even that would have been crap.

There is just no consistency to difference: the final ceremonies are to be held at Sh'shamain, but that is the Celtic Samhain, and that is even further away from Arabia and Byzantium than Rome or France.

The underlying plot is a scientific detective story: a slaver gang have visited the distant Ael Lahi and returned with a captive brother and sister who were awaiting initiation into the rites of their island religion. She becomes the king's mistress and he becomes the champion of the arena: this is a considerable change for both of them, previously their only abilities lay in playing the flute. They are doomed to be separated, if only because in six months of training he goes from fingering his instrument to a cold-blooded killing machine, while she will carry the king's son (his wife being childless). Denied the king's caresses, the queen will throw in her lot with the high priest who is disconcerted by the king's apostasy (he wishes to give up the arena as a sacrifice to the gods).

Now, back when the slavers returned with the captive pair, they also unwittingly brought back dust-covered moths in a bundle of rags (as the plague came to Eyam in 1665). The moths bring a plague of drug addiction, economic collapse, riots and humans changing into moths. How can it be explained and how cured? - that is the mystery.

How the disease is transmitted and that some individuals cannot be cured (though that is not such a bad thing) a good doctor discovers at the end, but I am not sure the discovery is so obvious. The doctor's vocabulary certainly is not.

Unfortunately, all these discoveries depend on a reasonable knowledge of entomological reproduction, but Sarah Ash is scientifically illiterate. From page 7, where she confuses a comet with a meteorite, through opposing descriptions of the plague as infectious (p.186) and contagious (p.212), this stands out. It does not require a degree in Physical Education to wonder how a man can change from a would-be James Galway to Conan the Barbarian in a summer. I have been told a fencer may develop from tyro to county standard in about three years; that's still likely to be "Grande Bretagne - nul points" on any international scale in which he had to fight for his life. Yet the first half of the book is given over to the training and swordsman's title fight.

The whole book revolves around the alien ways - the strange moths which are part of the cult of the distant island whose secret the pair have not had the chance to learn, and which is unknown to the people of the city. Unfortunately, when the swordsman goes to a brothel in search of his trainer in the middle of the book 'he was witness to some obscene parody of the moon rituals of the Sacred Grove, designed to stimulate the jaded pelates of the Mhelli audience' (p.173). So not only are the audience familiar with the foreign rituals, they are familiar enough to appreciate a parody: how some they do not.
made this a book that other writers have come back to time and again. In 1976 Christopher Priest revisited the book, along with Wells's The War of the Worlds, in The Space Machine. Now Stephen Baxter has celebrated the centenary of The Time Machine by producing a sequel that starts just at that point where the traveller disappears for the last time. Wells's slim original has grown to a book many times the size of the original, but along the way Baxter manages to pay homage to virtually all of Wells's science fiction while conjuring a vision of time as grand and cold and immense as anything in Olaf Stapledon. All starts reasonably enough. The time traveller himself (still unnamed despite at one point visiting his younger self who is graced with the nickname Moses) has now taken on the role of narrator (and throughout the book Baxter does an excellent job of patching the slow, pedantic approach to words and exposition of the Victorian age). He sets out on his errand of mercy, and Baxter has recaptured the beauty and wonder of that passage where time flicks before his eyes and the sun becomes a flowing loop across the heavens, but then things begin to change: the sun becomes stable, and then an unwinding night falls. By returning to his own present, the traveller had changed the future, and in this world the Morlocks are triumphant, an industrious, technologically advance race who have constructed a Dyson sphere about the Sun just outside the orbit of Venus. Captured by the Morlocks, the traveller must begin the first of the reassessments of himself, of humankind and of the reactor Morlocks which form a recurring theme throughout this book.

Accompanied by Nebogipfel the Morlock, everything that the traveller despises with Wells's The War of the Worlds is more intelligent than himself and essential to explain so many of the arcane scientific theory which litters the book, the traveller now embarks on a dizzying series of adventures in alternate realities. They travel back to visit the traveller's youth, then are captured by a Land Leviathan which takes them to a domed London in 1939 which is locked in a European War nearly as old as the century. Here he meets Barnes Walls and Kurt Gödel (the last a clear hero of Baxter's given the number of times he is referred to in Baxter's fiction), before departing for prehistoric times where he survives a nuclear explosion far outside its normal time, then forward again to an icy cybemetic time of strange nanobeaings. Given it all hangs the presence of a strange tentacled being, a cross between the Martians and the thing that flopped its way across the red beach at the end of time, who haunts the intertemporal spaces of the traveller's journeys. Now this being comes out of the shadow as Baxter's most audacious invention mirrors Wells by taking us to the dawn of time and giving a new shape to the history that springs from it. Finally, the traveller is reunited with his Weena, but the ending of the book is left open as the original.

This is the best novel that Stephen Baxter has so far written, for his cold, mechanistic science fiction is put at the service of a story which benefits from this detachment. It is significant that the most interesting character is the inhuman Nebogipfel, while those attempts to inject humanity into the story, such as the introduction of the time-travelling tank captain who briefly becomes the traveller's love interest, tend to come across as ill-formed and incomplete. And Baxter is still incapable of writing a line of dialogue that isn't a poorly-disguised lecture, but in this pseudo-Victorian that doesn't matter too much. In the end the pace, invention and audacity of the novel carry it through triumphally.

Peter Benchley
White Shark
Hutchinson, 1995, 307pp,
£14.99
Steve Jeffrey

This comes for review as an uncorrected proof. The real thing, I hope, will be rather more legible and with some of the more obvious types taken out. I'm afraid there is little than can be done for the basic story, which needs more than cosmetic attention. This is a standard 'gotcha' novel: a nasty thing is woken from underwater slumber and comes to the surface to eat people, terrorising the small harbour town until our plucky oceanologist hero, his young son and his lady scientist friend deliver a messy coup de grace. I'm not giving too much of the plot away. If you've seen any of Jaws I I'll tell you then you have a fair idea exactly what is going to happen at each point and how it will all turn out. The plot is as simplistic and the action is telegraphed well in advance. You can even hum along 'a bomb born born bom' as our verbally challenged monsterly rises from the deep to cause carnage amongst unwary golfers and skinny-dippers. The twist in this case is that it's not a shark. Simon Chase, who owns and runs the Marine Institute on Osprey Island, is a shark lover. He has a passion for sharks and is convinced that neither the Blues or the Great White swimming offshore can be responsible for the disembowelled body parts floating up onshore. His conviction is not shared by the sceptical authorities or the local fishermen, right up to the point when the thing comes ashore to continue its feeding frenzy. Chase doesn't know what's causing the carnage, but the reader is tipped a clue at the very start of the book when Nazi scientist Ernst Kruger flies the collapse of the Reich in a U boat. The U boat is sunk in the deep Atlantic, taking with it a mysterious sealed bronze casket. Some 50 years later a deep diving survey discovers() the wreck and retrieves the casket. Before they get to shore something awakens: the casket, and the Man of the Sea Geiger-counter, photographer, never make it back to port. Benchley's nod to SF is an unñabil and (to be honest) deeply unconvincing corollation of Jaws, the shark, and Jaws, the steel toothed villain of various James Bond films. Quite why the Nazis would see a microtide underwater eating machine as a super-weapons to rival the V1 and V2 and establish the glory of the Reich is swept overboard with the casket. Perhaps they had visions of re-establishing the lost city of Atlantis (but that's another book entirely). It also seems singularly ill-judged for its role since it keeps leaving its teeth in its victims. There must be a limit to how far you can go with this, retractable steel teeth or otherwise, before you end up having to disable your victims with a nasty suck.
Chase, his son Max, token heroic Native American and Institute assistant Tall Man, and visiting scientist Amanda Macy and her troupe of trained seals (no, really) know none of this. They know there is something out in the water that leaves distinctly unshark-like bites in people. It’s not until they set out on a shark camera safari that they realise that something unexpected is in the water. Of the five camera-toting sea lions, only three make it back, too spooked to venture in the water again. Their recordings of a white ‘something’ causing the attacks are dismissed by the local police, who don’t want to cause alarm on the eve of the town’s carnival celebration. The creature has no such qualms, and the lone of all that milling food proves irresistible. Unfortunately, coming onto land to prey on stragglers triggers an irreversible change. Gills close; lungs empty and take over. A dim recognition flares that it is now neither fully at home or adapted for land or sea. Seeing lights offshore, it makes for Osprey Island.

This is a fairly straightforward thriller. The plot is too simple, the characters too two-dimensional, to grab attention as a novel. It reads like an idea for a film script, but the film has probably already been done to death. SF readers will probably find the central premise unconvincing and hardly original. As for others: I’m not sure if the ubiquitous presence of Benchley’s previous novel, The Deep, in second-hand book stalls indicates that it has been widely read, or just quickly recycled. It’s an underwhelming book that might pass a few hours, it’s up to you whether you want to read it on the beach, though.

James Bibby
Ronan the Barbarian

Phil James
I, Arnold

Andy Mills

Two examples of the comic novel provided by Millennium. They serve to illustrate not only how personal is that thing called humour but also that it’s about time dust-jacket blurbs were called to account under the Trade Descriptions Act. Both books have blurbs proclaiming the novel contained within is the funniest since Adams/Pratchett. Well, neither is accurate, but one comes significantly closer than the other.

James Bibby, a television comedy scriptwriter, makes his debut as a novelist with Ronan the Barbarian. And before you ask: yes, anyone with the remotest knowledge of fantasy can provide the structure of the story. Ronan’s village is wiped out by marauders led by evil wizard, Ronan swears revenge, trains as warrior, picks up sidekicks and has various adventures en route to showdown with wizard, etc, etc, etc. And, yes, the ending does lead to the more-than-distinct possibility of a sequel. Bad puns abound, particularly in the anachronic jokes which make up the chapter introductions, and on occasion Bibby goes to a lot of trouble to set up an awful joke, such as introducing zombies into the story for the sole purpose of skewering one with a spear in a game of oversized darts and having someone shout, ‘One Undead and eighty!’

Yet… it’s actually fairly funny. It’s both rare and welcome to have a black hero, and the carnivorous donkey is a neat touch. If Bibby can put more bite (sorry) into his other characters and concentrate on delivering the humour through their dialogue and the situations they are in (and he does provide this in the interrogation scene), rather than through one-liners, then the follow-up could be well worth a read.

One book I won’t be battering down the bookshop door for is the next volume in the Galaxy Game series. I. Arnold is the third, and Phil James’s motley bunch have another task set for them by god-like aliens who are using them as chess pieces in their life-or-death competition. In this round the team have to stop a renegade robot reducing a parallel Earth to barbarism. Certainly a more promising plot-line than, say, Bibby’s. But, oh dear, this novel has very little else going for it. James’s characters are one dimensional in the extreme: Curtis is stupid, unco-ordinated and has no self-esteem; Gloria is simple, good-natured and has large breasts. And, in case we can’t keep hold of this information. James reminds us of their one dimension virtually every time they make an appearance. I hope he never tries to write a mystery… Moreover, Janes’s prose is more than just pedestrian, it’s opaque and poorly constructed throughout.

First Impressions 15

walls, struggle to survive in a changing world. Youths, high on the drug pyro, set fire to communities to give themselves a kick that is supposed to be better than sex. Any person, or community who look as though they might have something worth taking are in danger of being attacked. When her neighbourhood is torched, Lauren sets off North to find a new world.

In the America of the future, slavery is returning. As the world disintegrates, towns are bought out by Companies offering protection for a price, loyalty. Farm workers are indentured for life, paid in Company scrip and in debt from the word go, for many there is no escape. For one of Lauren’s followers, Emery, escape becomes a necessity after her two sons are taken away from her and sold into prostitution. So, as she searches for somewhere new to settle, Lauren gathers round her the beginnings of a new community. From this beginning she will sow the first seeds of a new religion, Earthseed. All that you touch You Change.

The only lasting truth Is Change.

God is Change. (Earthseed: The Book of the Living)
Lauren’s father is a Baptist minister but over the years, as she grew up in his home safe behind the walls, she found his religion lacking in the things she was looking for. So she writes in her diary the verses that will one day become Earthseed: The Book of the Living.

With this novel Butler returns to many of her earlier themes, dealing again with the fear of the Other, the issue of slavery and expands on her theme of alienation. Lauren is hyperempathic, feeling other people’s pain and pleasure, a legacy of her biological mother’s drug abuse, and like Mary in Mind of My Mind and Anyawu in Wild Seed, she has to learn to control her difference in order to survive and protect her people.

Parable of the Sower is a powerful novel, and Butler doesn’t allow her readers to become complacent. Because of the world they live in, Lauren, her family, her followers and their rivals all carry and use guns. In order to survive in the outside world, Lauren has to kill even though she feels the pain of the person she’s shot. Harry is shocked out of his complacency by Lauren’s determination to survive; having known her all his life, he finds that he didn’t know her all at once.Heroes aren’t black and white characters, but a complicated mixture. Butler shows how both qualities are needed for survival.

A novel that is as rich on the second reading as the first, Parable of the Sower comes closest to Kindred in tone. It is easy to see why this exciting new novel Women’s Press published it as a mainstream novel, but make no mistake, Parable of the Sower is science fiction of the kind Butler writes best, that which makes us think and question.

C.J. Cherryh

Tripoint


T

ripoint is Cherryh in Space Opera mode, though in this case it’s closer to Space Pirate Movie. She has two modes: Fantasy in which she writes very long sentences which go all over the place before reaching a conclusion, and Space Opera. Short sentences. Sometimes no verb. This novel goes seven lines before it reaches a sentence with a proper verb in it. This may be designed to be snappy and convey the and, brutal environment of the men and women who work deep space in Cherryh’s universe, but it takes some getting used to.

Tripoint is a novel in the Merchant series, which included the acclaimed Downbelow Station. It is the story of Tom Hawkins (note the name redolent of Treasure Island), the unwanted son of Merchant officer Marie Hawkins and of Austin Noble, who, if he isn’t quite a pirate, certainly behaves like one. Tom jumps ship and finds that most mothers don’t regularly beat their sons up when they feel like it. He is shanghaied by his equally strange father, and rescued by a few of those lowlifes with hearts of gold who have survived in the chinks of the Merchant space machine. Away from the glazed futility of Noble’s private war (he just didn’t stop fighting when everybody else did, turning pirate for his own ends) humanity endures, with burrowing aliens who centuries ago built statues to watch the stars, looking for a better answer. Life aboard a pirate ship was certainly no bowl of cherries but the motley crew assembles of is almost Pythonesque lunacy and fonniness of violence. It’s as though Cherryh had adopted Chandler’s old dictum of ‘if stuck, have a man come through the door with a gun’ to ‘if nothing else to do, have someone else for no particularly good reasons. Then there’s the odd fondness for using the sentence ‘hard’, usually as in ‘Bow hit Tom Hard.’ As though he might have hit the poor fellow soft. And what does ‘Christian person. Walk like...cold, or walk like...off?’ mean?

Rolf Moyr’s cover art shows, in inexplicable green and purple, orbital space, spiky spaceships. Not a human in sight. A touch of the David A Hardy’s perhaps but I couldn’t see him using those colours; certainly not Jim Burns, who would be looking for people. The cover suggests simply that the machines are more important, and that while more modern writers may see spaceships as being precisely as important to SF as horses are to the Western, no more and no less, the Merchant universe is locked into a hard, metallic void where little grows.

For a gungho pirate novel in space it’s pretty readable. But there isn’t a lot of comfort, nor resolution other than the evanescent possibility of undiscovered space, and no doubt another Merchant novel. Cherryh has, after all, written quite a few space novels, and in this much time there must be some whose natural form is not so much the 400-page to breaker as the small but perfectly formed short story. Robert Reed (to pick a name not entirely at random) does this very well indeed; condensing what might take others novels to present us with a world and its people. In its way this is another riff on the packed Universe Cherryh invented years ago, and those who have read everything else in it will presumably need to read this too. For others who haven’t come across the sequence, it may seem a little oldfashioned with its machineries and stories and horror certainly, even in the case of characters like Tom Hawkins who aren’t certain of anything other than that their present life is a crock and that anything, even jumping ship and running for his life, has to be better. We’re on Valley’s steel beach, no direction home, and all bets are off.

Mary Corran

Fate

Millennium, 1995, £16.99

Tanya Brown

A

shel’s childhood is spent in a small world, like most children: her parents are farmers, her playmates are the other children from the village and the manor house. Then the Grey Men invade the country, and everything changes. Asher grows to adulthood in a land crippled by heavy tributes and the presence of the hated invaders who now rule half of the known lands of Tenebran. Meanwhile, the Oracle says that Valls, Prince Lykon’s infant daughter, will save the realm — but Valls has disappeared.

Fourteen years after the invasion, Asher has fled a repulsive marriage to the city of Venture where she works as a senior clerk at the Treasury. Women have only recently been employed in such important positions, but it’s good political sense; women don’t have to be paid as much or treated as well as men, and anyway many of the men have been sent to internment camps. Asher appreciates her position. It gives her the freedom to hustle money for the women’s underground — which helps women escape the city, and their male oppressors, and head north to freedom in the lands of the alien Saff.

Asher has another advantage; she believes she is immune to destiny. The people of Tenebran are deeply fatalistic: there is no religion, only a strong belief in destiny and the cryptic rhymes of the Oracle.

The death of Asher’s twin brother at birth seems to have cancelled out her own fate; she is free to act as she will immune to the magical wards and hexes which guard warehouses and strong rooms.

Then the Oracle summons Asher. She is horrified to find that it has a predictable for her — and more horrifying to meet her childhood friend Mallory, now a wealthy merchant, in front of the statue of Lady Fortune. Clearly their fates are linked — but Asher has spent too long running from her past, and from destiny, to accept the Oracle’s message graciously. She sets out to tempt fate...

Fate describes a world of real people engaged with real moral dilemmas, asking — and finding answers to — age-old questions. Is gender destiny? Can an individual have free will and yet be destined to perform a particular act? Can men and women be friends in a society which oppresses women? Mary Corran’s City background is evident in the detailed structure of her society; the politics and economy of a country under the thumb of the invader are clearly and comprehensively described without lessening the roles of magic and fate in the lives of the inhabitants. More unusually, Corran manages to write a novel with feminist leanings which neither damns nor apologises for the behaviour of men and women in a strictly patriarchal society. While some of her male characters seem at times to be little more than ciphers, it’s made clear that this is simply Asher’s perception of them. She slowly be
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The book, **Panic**, by Ian Emerson, is set in a California college campus and follows a series of gruesome deaths. At first, the plot builds compulsively, with some striking images — not least the thirty-year-old brain-dead woman in hospital who suddenly utters two words while receiving a routine massage. But then the venue shifts to India. Gowinda Sharma is ordered by his spiritual master to find in the West a five-year-old blind man in a loin cloth across the Atlantic on a scheduled flight. The story slowly builds to a frightening climax, but by that time my credulity had snapped: which was, a pity since the novel contains enough Californian ideas to keep the reader entertained without gratuitous oriental flummery.

Putting the books down, I cannot help reflecting that the most effective passages from each were precisely those where the horrifying event or object remained baffling and mysterious. The more explicit the description, the less our own imaginative forces are engaged, and the least convincing in the long run. As competition among horror writers mounts and commercial pressures multiply, one fears that the virtues of restraint may well get overlooked. **Jane L. Donawerth & Carol A. Koltermann (Eds)**

**Utopian and Science Fiction by Women**

Liverpool, 1994, 260pp, £27.50 pb £15.00

Carol Ann Green

In their introduction, Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Koltermann state that these essays "postulate that utopias and science fiction by women — women's literature of estrangement — constitute a continuous literary tradition in the west from the seventeenth century until the present day." And indeed, the individual authors of the essays all look to reevaluate, reassert and recover many forgotten utopian texts written by women. The book's essays differentiated between them and use the university itself in defense. As an image of the mass hysteria that can grip a large institution, Night School perhaps works horribly enough, but the novel's tone is graphic detail left me feeling cheapened and unclean.

The Cold One, though also set mostly in California, is different again. Journalist Peter Jacobs finds himself sucked into investigating a series of gruesome deaths. At first the plot builds compulsively, with some striking images — not least the thirty-year-old brain-dead woman in hospital who suddenly utters two words while receiving a routine...
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Stephen Grundy
Rhinegold
David V. Barrett

Stephan Grundy
Rhinegold
David V. Barrett

Richard Wagner based
many hours of powerful
but ponderous music on them.
The Victorian genius William
Morris translated some of them
into English. J.R.R. Tolkien got
his influence for probably the
most influential fantasy novel
of the century from them. They
provided the basis for the
splendidly dry humour of the
sadly out-of-print Votan by
John James, who died last
year. But so far as reinterpreting
the Norse myths for the
present day is concerned,
that's about it. For a culture
which has given us the names of
days of the week and
thousands of towns, the Norse
has been sadly neglected. It has
taken an American author to
bring them back to our
attention in this massive novel.
Despite its overly pretty
generic-fantasy cover, Rhinegold
is one of the finest retellings of
myth I've ever read. Grundy
takes the old stories and brings
them convincingly to life
without ever sacrificing the
spirit of the original tellings.
The whole point of myths and
legends is that they grow and
develop to make their points
more relevant to their current
listeners, and Grundy has done
the same. He has fleshed out
characters and incidents so that
they become the real people
modern readers expect, rather
than treating them as figures
from a history book.

The sagas were from
the start a mythologising of history,
and Rhinegold is a history
book and family saga and a
story of gods and heroes, and a
damned good novel. It is a
complete retelling of the myths
themselves, the writing both
simple and majestic, the
characters larger than life yet
showing very real human
failings. In the Norse myths in
particular nothing was ever cut
and dried, there was no simple
black and white; the Norse
gods, perhaps more than any
other, are human heroes writ
large, we can see and identify
with the motivations on both
cesides of a conflict. The villains
of one part of the story become
the heroes of the next, all are
flawed but most are honourable.

In his new version of
the old story, Grundy presents
us with the full glory, pain and
humour of humanity. It is an
outstanding achievement -
even more so as it is, astonish­
ingly, a first novel.

Barbara Hambly
Children of the Jedi
Bantam Press, 1995, 348pp,
£10.99
Vikki Lee

Believe me, I was not happy
when the fickle hand of the
Reviews Editor dealt me this
book to review. However, being
the fair-minded type of person
that I am, I approached it with
all the enthusiasm one musters
when looking forward to an
afternoon of watching paint dry.
Imagine my suprise then, when
after 13 days and nearly 100
pages, I actually started to have my interest tickled.

Having seen the films, I was really looking forward to the story of the Death Star and what that was all about, and of course, also familiar with the book’s main characters, Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Princess Leia, Chewbacca, Artoo and Threepio.

This book is set a few years after the first film. Han and Leia, along with Artoo and Chewie, set off for the planet Belsavis in search of the children of the Jedi. They plan to search the craggy landscape to be below the frozen surface of the planet; crypts, it is also rumoured, no one has returned from alive.

Luke Skywalker and Threepio go in the other direction off Luke’s younger Jedi students, Dr Cray Mingla and his fiancée, Nichos Marr. Led by dreams and a mysterious force, Luke enters an asteroid field over the planet Pob where his ship is attacked by the Eye of Pappatine, a fully automated asteroid (with overtones of Death Star II). Finding himself badly wounded and now on board the ‘Eye’ with his friends, Luke discovers that the ship is controlled by an artificial intelligence, known as the Will, and the spirit of Calista, a young Jedi Knight who had tried to destroy the ship once before. The Will’s mission is to destroy the planet Belsavis (for some reason I quite never figured out, except of course, that the others were on the planet – handy!)

Barbara Hambly is well-known for writing good fantasy, so it is no surprise really to find this book is not only well written, but after a slow and rather sticky start, engaging as well. A sticky start particularly, because Hambly goes through an excruciating cycle of ‘101 ways to spot an android’ in order to make sure the reader knows that Nichos is no longer human. I’ve no idea why she went to such lengths, Nichos was almost totally absent from the action as far as I could tell in the very end of the book. The Eye of Pappatine is full of suitably weird life-forms, the antics of some of these, demonstrating that the author has a wry sense of humour. It’s not hard not to think of the warning Gamorraneans as the ‘Grunts’ in Mary Gentle’s book of that title. She even tips her hat to Neil Gaiman at one point in the book. The relationships between Cray and Nichos, and Luke and Calista are the highlights of this book, and are quite convincing in themselves to keep one eventually turning the pages. It all becomes worthwhile when you read the twist at the end, but not necessarily most believe. So, street-cored out the window, I actually enjoyed this book. I don’t personally want to read another of them, but I can now see the appeal of Star Wars novels and, rather dangerously, wonder what a joys a Star Trek or Dr Who novel holds?

Harry Harrison & John Holm
One King’s Way
Legend, 1995, 426pp, £15.99

It is interesting to note that Tony Harrison’s name appears on the cover of this book. The first book in the series, The Hammer and the Cross was jointly written with John Holm, and this book also credits Holm with joint copyright. One wonders what Holm thinks of this? For the purpose of this review therefore, I am writing as if the book is by both authors.

This book follows directly on from The Hammer and the Cross, following the fortunes of Ship Sigvarthson, the new King of England with Alfred of Wessex, from the year BE1301 onwards.

Shef has realised that the only way to protect his country from the depredations of the marauding vikings is to meet them in battle at sea and prevent them from landing to employ their superior strength and savagery. He builds a fleet which incorporates his war machines, battle-axe and dart throwers, and sets off on a maiden voyage to test his ships against the vikings. After initial success in battle, Shef’s ship becomes separated and quickly becomes hunter, instead of hunter. The Viking flagship, The Frenz Creev, carries the three remaining sons of Ragnar Ragnarsson (called Ragnar Hairy-Breasts): Ubbi the Grizzled, despoiler of women; Harlud the redbeard, fanatical dueller and champion; and Sigurd the Snake-eye, so called for the whites around the pupils in his eyes. These three are bent on the destruction of Shef, who slew their brother Lvar the boneless (apparently named after a problem he had with women before he raped and murdered them).

Needlessly to say, Shef escapes this initial encounter but is left stranded on the Frisian coast where he makes himself a years-long journey into the frozen northern wastelands. His travels finally bring him full circle, and Shef realises that the only way he can return to England is by defeating the Ragnarsson’s at the Braethnaborg, their own stronghold.

The whole story swings along at page-turning pace. Shef’s is by no means the standard ‘young man defeats powerful enemy/unites the nation/becomes king’ tale so often found in fantasy nowadays. The Christian bishops, led by Erkenbert, who fled England at the end of The Hammer and the Cross, have found their way to Germany and are busy trying to track down the spear with which a Roman soldier is said to have pierced the side of Christ whilst he was on the cross. They form an elite band of soldiers, the Lancerenord, and embark on a crusade to find the holy relic. Erkenbert is busy plotting Shef’s downfall, in part for bringing the church low in England, but also because he worships the false God Rig. The Gods themselves – Thor, Frey, Othin and Rig to name but a few – are playing chess with their worshippers, like Gods do. To thicken the plot yet more, the feuding kings of the north, the Danes, the Swedes and Norwegians, all help or hinder Shef in his attempt to return to English soil.

As one would expect, this book builds towards a final climactic showdown between Shef and the murderous Ragnarsson. This was, for me, somewhat of an anti-climax after the long and convoluted tale leading up to it. Of course, one is always sure that Shef is going to win, but should it really have been quite so easily? One would have expected one or two of the Ragnarsson to meet their end, but Harrison and Holm could have kept one up their sleeve for the third book in the trilogy. However, a more powerful enemy is confirmed instead, thus allowing the demise of all three brothers.

One King’s Way is a gripping tale set in a period of history that few fantasy authors seem to tackle. It’s a heady period of battle and slaughter, if not deeds of derring-do. The politics and religions of the time are well handled, and woven throughout to give just the right level of suspense to keep you turning the pages. The characters are well delineated, even though Shef himself is not really believable kingly material. You don’t have to have read The Hammer and the Cross beforehand, and I would highly recommend this book to anyone who enjoys a more ‘based in fact’ approach to their fantasy. I’ll be looking forward to the next volume in this series.

Tom Holt
Odds and Gods
Orbit, 1995, 282pp, £14.99

Cherith Baldry

Odds and Gods begins in the Sunnywoye Rest Home for geriatric delinquents, from where the buses run to Wolverhampton, and ends in the cleansing of the world with washing-up liquid and fabric conditioner. The intervening ramblings are fast-moving and unpredictable.

Readers of Tom Holt’s novels will be familiar with his habit of giving a bit of a spin to legendary or mythic characters, then standing back to watch what happens. At least, that’s how it appears. He may lavish blood, sweat and midnight oil on every word; but the effect is one of slapdash brilliance. You wait for the whole thing to fall apart, but it never does.

In his latest novel, Osiris is retired and suffering from many of his vital bits having been put together in the wrong order or, in some cases, not at all – is threatened by his godson, Julian, who wishes to take over the universe by having Osiris declared insane; Osiris wants to escape from Sunnywoye and deal with Julian. Cheerfully mixing his mythologies, Holt introduces Pan as one of Osiris’s allies, while Thor, Odin and Frey drop in – literally – driving an unreliably restored and airborne traction engine. Further complications are provided by Kurt Lundqvist, supernatural hit man, making a welcome reappearance as a rather equivocal good guy. And I haven’t yet mentioned the prunes in the Vatican, the Cistercian SWAT team, the volcano filled with Seradent or the Australian dragon. The fact that each of these elements appears perfectly logical in its proper place just demonstrates Holt’s skill; art concealing art.

The style has the same happy, random quality. Puns lie
in vain; even while you’re groaning you think you really should have seen it coming, but you didn’t. At the same time there is a variety in the style, a sensitivity to the rhythms of different speaking voices, and a deadly skill in the parody of different types of jargon.

One of the basic requirements of good comic novelists is a deep underlying seriousness. Tom Holt has that. He is a satirist: his favourite targets are lawyers and accountants, the faceless people who run things and are remote and do not care. These he attacks in prose as sharp as Lundquist’s Sykes-Fairbairn fighting knife. But he also has a wide generosity and compassion for human — and godly — failings. His satire ends in the possibility of forgiveness and happy endings.

Tarith Lee


Paul Kincaid

**H**

er father brought death into the castle. He carried it up the stairs. The pale horse.

The literary device is called synecdoche, in which a part (in this case a dead warhorse) is made to stand for the whole (death). But this, the opening line of Tanith Lee’s latest novel, is a peculiarly overwrought and allusive synecdoche. For a start the father, a brute of a man in many senses of the word, literally does perform the superhuman feat of carrying a dead horse from the battlefield into his castle and up the stairs to his room. And of course the fourth horseman of the apocalypse rode a pale horse. We are in a world of symbol and drama and excess: this is the new decadence.

Decadence, the literary mode that achieved its greatest height in Europe at the end of the last century, was a form in which death, sex and cruelty entwined eternally in lush settings and overdressed prose. There is no more apt description of the work of Tanith Lee. The language alone marks it out. It comes as a genuine shock when one character is described as wearing green clothes, for every other colour in the book is white or black or red, usually, in this advertorial prose, bone white, black as night, blood red. We have a story whose constituent parts will be familiar to everyone who has ever read anything by Tanith Lee. There is the brutality of men towards women, and the strength of women granted by a dark (masculine) god and vampirism. There is imprisonment, sexual abuse, the horror of the death of what he himself calls a daughter of Vaddix, a minor warlord who cares more for his horse than his new bride or his daughter. Vivis escapes his cruelty by retreating to a dark, dank secret place where she communes with a lost god. But the horse, left to rot in the master bedroom, really does bring death to the castle, along with madness, sexual abandon, and eventually everyone is killed. Only Vivis, who has entered a compact with her dark god, somehow survives, or perhaps she is already dead but living on.

Enter Zulgaris, another but greater warlord, who finds Vivis and takes her for his mistress and prisoner. Recognising Vivis’s vampirism, he also provides her with a private harem of virgin girls whose blood she can drink at whim. He wants Vivis to take part in his sexual/magical experiments, but his ambition presages a fall and soon he and Vivis are compelled to leave his capital for the desert.

This is life — or living death — as a torture garden, a place of amoral sexual cruelty where excess is the norm simply because of the context. In one scene the author has retained any grip on reality. This is a fevered trip into a fevered imagination.

**Ken MacLeod

The Star Fraction

Legend, 1995, 341pp.* £10.00

Chris Agnew**

Rossa Luxemburg said that humanity’s choice lay between Socialism and Barbarism. In 21st-century England, a patchwork of statelets with varying ideologies, things are a lot less clearly defined. The Green barbarians are outside the walls, while the space programme is exporting human intelligence to the stars in the form of independent AIs.

For Moh Kohn, political streetfighter and armed guard whose allegiance lie in a distinctly libertarian direction, the past is a shifting mass of loyalties and betrayals that are seen in many ways, too big and diverse to come under State control. Information is freedom; a limitless resource does not need to be controlled. The publisher seems to be pushing the similarities with Iain M. Banks, and for once the parallel is justified: Banks’s Culture relies upon near-inexhaustible natural resources for its freedom; money is a sign of rationing and as such of poverty. It’s true that both Banks and MacLeod are Scots, both write meaty SF thrillers from a Left political viewpoint, but parallels can be overcome. For example, Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars novels approach the traditional venues of space opera from a more radical political stance, and unlikely parallels can be drawn with Heinlein over the idea of ‘space for those who want it.’

The cover is truly disappo

nting, a black-grey-and-white affair showing a kind of robot dog with glowing eyes, similar perhaps to the Rat Thing in *Virtual Light*. Given the tone and events of the book, my choice for cover art would be a mock-heroic painting of the scene depicted on page 86: a demonstration and picket line outside the spaceport at Alexandra Port. Although the novel takes place on Earth, space bulks large in the story. It is the next frontier; perhaps the natural environment of mankind, for as Moh tells the libertarian space proselytist (David Brin?) Wilde, ‘like Engels said, Man’s natural environment doesn’t exist yet. I have to create it for myself.’ Presumably, Engels argued that the proto-human apes adopted an upright posture and were able to use tools, and the result of tool use was the development of language and the accelerated evolution of the brain. He also believed that the same development and evolution continues: because humankind is capable of imagining changes to its environment, it is blessedly blessed with the need to go on changing, creating itself as it creates the world around it.
Marc Leeds
The Vonnegut Encyclopedia
Greenwood, 1995, 693pp, £67.50

Leonard Mustazza (Ed)
The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut
Greenwood, 1995, 346pp, £52.95

Brian Stableford

A few days before these two books arrived for review I happened to catch a couple of Kurt Vonnegut soundbytes in the FutureQuest episode entitled 'All in the Global Family' (FutureQuest is a pop futurology show currently going out on Monday nights on the Discovery Channel). I don't know how many hours of interview had been boiled down to the two soundbytes in question, or how representative of his full text the comments in question were (although I do know that my four soundbytes were clipped out of a four hour tape and that one of the sentences was surgically interrupted before a qualifying 'but'). But I was impressed nevertheless by what Vonnegut said, which was that what people really need in order to live happy lives is to be surrounded by lots and lots of other people.

Given that the remark echoes and summarises sentiments expressed in many of Vonnegut's novels I think we can assume that this quote represents his true sentiments, and might perhaps be taken as a key element of his personal faith. It provides an insight into the man, and also helps to explain his great popularity in his native land – which is, of course, a land awash with nostalgic sentimentality of an exceedingly sickly and viciously hypocritical kind. Many Americans love writers like Kurt Vonnegut, who are sincerely cursed with agonising conscience, because they feel – and perhaps even believe – that while they have cultural icons like him they cannot possibly be all bad. It's an argument, therefore, that Americans should install statues like these two volumes on the shelves of their college libraries, where they will long stand as monuments, occasionally being borrowed by graduate students grinding out theses on the theology of Bokononism and the psychopathology of Samaritophoria.

Vonnegut has always found it deeply embarrassing that some people once thought of him as a science fiction writer. His embarrassment seems to have been intensified by an academic critic (The Vonnegut Encyclopedia names the guilty man as Robert Scholes) who dutifully informed him that science fiction was the lowest of all literary forms.

The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut respects this judgment by scrupulously ignoring all responses to Vonnegut's work which appeared in American science fiction magazines and fanzines. Unfortunately, this leaves the section of the book covering the years 1952-69 looking rather thin and anemic by comparison with the part dealing with 1970-93, owing to the fact that all the respectable critics in America were looking the other way at the time. Doris Lessing and Terry Southern are drafted in to help out the home team, and a few papers from the '70s and '80s which happen to deal with the earlier texts are added in, but it remains perfectly obvious that there was, in fact, no substantial critical response to Kurt Vonnegut at all until he became fashionable – except, alas, that which was to be found in the science fiction community. After he became fashionable, of course, academics began to queue up to write something deep about Breakfast of Champions and Slapstick, somehow contriving not to notice that the books in question were utter crap by comparison with The Sirens of Titan and Cat's Cradle.

In all fairness, of course, one ought to remember that books like The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut are an entirely natural by-product of the way American academia works. Like the village which was so poor that everyone had to make a living by taking someone else's washing, the college system in the USA is so burdened by intellectual poverty that there is no way most of its staff can generate publication lists without relentlessly reprinting one another's produce in anthologies of this kind. There would be no point at all in Leonard Mustazza assiduously reprinting the thoughts of people who reviewed books in sf magazines, because they would not be able to return the favour, although a certain tokenism is required for appearances' sake (thus, one article by the Australian fan Russell Blackford is graciously permitted to occupy 16 pp).

The Vonnegut Encyclopedia actually has a three-and-a-half page article on 'science fiction', but that is because the book's format demands that it list every reference in Vonnegut's writings to every subject mentioned therein. The entry thus consists of a catalogue of quotes in which Vonnegut tries to distance himself from sf, by straightfor- ward slander or by poking fun at poor old Kilgore Trout. Marc Leeds' introduction to this broadside simply says 'infamy and adulation - in not so equal measures - will forever be Vonnegut's dual legacy as a result of his forays into the genre'. (Everywhere in the world but America and Animal Farm things which are not equal are unequal, but in America - the land of opportunity and firepower - there's only equal and 'not so equal'.)

Marc Leeds confesses that he got a flying start putting The Vonnegut Encyclopedia together because he had a vast collection of files cards left over from the writing of his university dissertation on Vonnegut. The spirit of altruism naturally moved him to desire to make this useful tool available to future generations of post-graduate students, and moved him so quickly that he decided not to wait until the Vonnegut canon was sealed shut by the author's death, even though this might mean that he would have to do a second edition some time, inflicting his publications record by one more item. Since Vonnegut is well and actively publishing, he says, 'this work may seem premature... However, Vonnegut's fictional world and his readers are unique.' The Encyclopedia has no entry on 'non-sequitur', probably because Kurt Vonnegut is less fond of them than Marc Leeds. Marc Leeds is the kind of man who regularly writes comments like: 'In the short story Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow' anti-gerasone is the anti-aging potion which allows people to seemingly live forever. Because it prevents death by natural causes, it is the cause of a severe housing shortage. (Everywhere in the world but America people will either live forever or they won't, but in America they will seemingly live forever even if the severe housing shortage forces people to live surrounded by lots and lots of other people, whether they like it or not. In America, writers are, of course, allowed to boldly, blandly, bloodily and bathetically split infinitives.)

If I were Kurt Vonnegut, I would not have wanted Marc Leeds to write my encyclopedia. I am, however, acutely aware of the fact that I am not Kurt Vonnegut, not even more or less. One of the sound-bytes FutureQuest plucked out of my long and intense discourse on the future of the family was: 'Howver you define it, the family is a nest of vipers lurking at the bottom of a can of worms.' As Kurt Vonnegut demonstrated in Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow (and then, seemingly, forgot) the very last thing people need is to be surrounded by lots and lots of other people. What people really need is to be surrounded by books they can read instead of books whose only function is to allow academic washwomen to manufacture a bogus intellec- tual currency.
This young man was tall ... shapely and muscular as an athlete. He had a clean, classically perfect profile, with firmly molded chin and sensitive mouth. His delicately curved cheekbones were brushed by long dark lashes ... It could be a quotation from True Romance rather than an sf novel, but in fact it is a description of Amos Ben Sierra Nova, one of the main characters and antagonists of the Man Who Fought. Anne McCaffrey's output, with various co-writers, is now so voluminous and the novels have such distinctive style, that she surely deserves a subgenre of her own within the sf fantasy field. Since 'Scientific Romance' has already been appropriated, I would suggest something along the lines of 'love-in-space'. McCaffrey's novels often have a spaceship or extraterrestrial setting, futuristic technology, and a heroine who is brave and self-possessed but who never the less melts into the handsome hero's arms before the end of the book. These traits - the importance of boy meets girl to the plot, the optimism regarding future technology, the niceness of the main characters and the happy-ever-after endings - might not appeal to those of us who look for gritty realism in their sf, but it is presumably these very characteristics that have made her books so very popular among her many fans. You pay your money. 

The refugees in The City Who Fought have fled from the Kollan, a people who earn their living by attacking and looting spaceships and planets and killing any witnesses. Bethel, a 'backwater' planet on the edge of inhabited space, was originally settled by a religious sect who severed contact with the Central Worlds. Amos, the young leader of a breakaway group who reeks the rigid beliefs of the Elders, must now find a haven for the remnants of his people and warn of the Kollan threat. Unable to reach a planet in their ancient transport, the refugees do reach SSS-900, a space station controlled by the 'shellep'erson' Simeon. To all intents and purposes, the space station is Simeon's 'body': his brain is connected to and controls all the station's functions while his real body is encased in a 'shell' as the only way to keep him alive. Simeon is having trouble adjusting to his new mobile body, the feisty Ms Channa Hap, but after some initial sparring the two work out their differences and set about delaying the Kolmans until the Navy can come to the rescue. No prizes for guessing what happens when Channa Hap meets Amos.

Power Play is the third novel about the sentient planet known as Planet Terrano B, or Petayee, that can communicate with its human and animal inhabitants. This extrapolation of the Gaia hypothesis is taken to its ultimate conclusion, for Petayee is capable of taking independent action against anyone trying to exploit its resources or damage its environment - not much use arguing with a volcano or an earthquake. The joint governors, Colonel Yana Maddock and her husband Sean Shorell, are determined that Petayee will be recognised as an autonomous planet, much to the irritation of Integal, the company that first terraformed it. Yana finds herself kidnapped by a pirate who demands Petayee itself as ransom, while Sean is beset by problems including a mountain of paperwork from the Integal company, a religious cult seeking to commune with the planet and hunters intent on denuding it of wildlife. In the background lurk Matthew Luzon and Torkel Fiske, seeking revenge for events in the earlier novels, who are behind most of Petayee's current problems. Despite telepathically cat-like, pantomime pirates, a selkie and rabbits who gather at Petayee-approved ouling places for the benefit of ecological harmony and human stomachs, Power Play avoids the whimsy that creeps into other McCaffrey novels featuring loveable humans pitted against a threat to their planet. What is a little hard to take, though, is the way all the strands of the plot are so neatly tied together by the end, but in this sort of happy endings for all but the most villainous characters are compulsory. Both novels are likely to prove good reads for McCaffrey fans and anyone who likes science fiction and romantic fiction - no-one can say that it doesn't cater for all possible tastes.

An un-named and invisible protagonist voyages for seven years seeking the secret of visibility (i.e. that of creating a new identity by transcending his initial state). He stays at an island where he crosses a perilous bridge over an abyss, then, under the tutelage of three successive guides, he explores and is subjected to the mysteries of the 'city of the invisibles'. In the end he is told by a unicorn that through pureness of heart he has overcome without knowing that he has. At that he accesses a 'shining place of silver, where all the known laws were different'. He becomes invisible to himself and, having left home in search of the secret of visibility, has found a higher invisibility, the invisibility of the blessed'.

Thus summarised, this fable shows itself to represent the eternal pilgrimage, through scenes of change and episodes of trial, towards an ultimate fulfilment in the form of a surcease, an elevation or a rebirth; in fact what, in varying keys and with varying emphases, can be found in all such genres of literature as are closely directed to the human individual's fate: in The Divine Comedy; in The Pilgrim's Progress; at the heart of stories of Narnia and of Middle Earth; and in such diverse poems as Shelley's 'Alastor', Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner' and Tennyson's 'Ulysses'. As those poems, a voyage is the opening allegorical device in Ben Okri's fantasy, but his prime milieu, standing 'for the sake of soul-making', is the City. Here again he writes within a distinctive iconic tradition - Campanella's City of the Sun, Blake's Golgonooza, Yeats's Byzantium (all utopian/platonic) and (on the doincohain) James Thomson's City of Dreadful Night and M. John Harrison's Viriconium. The city in which Ben Okri's pilgrim discovers himself has both ideal and frustrating aspects. It is a place of great architectural beauty, its inhabitants live utopian lives, but there is always some melancholy horizon they strive towards, a sense that what is finest about the city derives from elsewhere. The 'fragrance of eternity' that pervades the city doesn't come from its own streets and gardens, but it is as if these are 'continuously refreshed by breezes from the arbors of a hidden god'. All happenings have an element of paradox. Mighty statues hover between visibility and invisibility, levitate, disappear. When the seeker is anguished by a wounded dove, he can neither restore it nor kill it. A mysterious princess curses him for rejecting her love. Apparitions of a godess with a constantly hinted-at other-dimensional reality; and, in matters of action, as one guide proclaims: what would seem like a defeat would be a victory, an eternal victory of Light'. In the seeker's final ordeal a voice compels him to answer a series of arcane questions, the last of which concerns the mystery of the mutating bridge daringly crossed during his initiation. 'Creativity and Grace' is how he answers; and, having offered it, he finds his world filled with radiance, while he 'became as a child'. His new condition (that of a 'higher invisibility') is proclaimed by the then appearing white unicorn. The paradoxes, metamorphoses and magical shifts of this complex narrative follow each other so rapidly and often so incoherently, that confusion and ambiguity sometimes set in. The interpretative counsel given by transient guides is full of ambiguities and can fade to silence ... What does, however, sustain the story's strangely haunting impact is that quality of decoratively descriptive prose which is characteristic of this Nigerian born but British domiciled author whose novel, The Famished Road, won the Booker. The style of Astonishing the Gods could be described as baroque-paradisal (Western/Afro-Byzantine), at once naive and sophisticated (Riddles danced in the dark places, like blissful echoes). Even so the magickal kaleidoscope might overwhelm or satiate were the novel's eight short books not broken into sections of only a few hundred words. Given this structure of
pause and change the narrative becomes manageable and the fascination of its inventiveness does not pall as the seeming arbitrariness of direction (until the end) continues to mystify. This mystification, however, is one of the things that keeps one reading.

Robert Rankin
The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived
Jon Wallace

The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived is Robert Rankin’s first book since his last one, and returns us to the world of self-employed epic adventurer, Cornelius Murphy and his genius father, Hugo Rune, not forgetting Murphy’s sidekick, the diminutive Tuppo (‘Sorry, I didn’t notice you there!’). The world is in the most terrible danger and Murphy and Tuppo (as usual) are going to have a stab at saving it. Along the way they meet the usual in-jokes and weird array of characters that populate Rankin’s books, characters like young Norman, Boris the alien and Thelma and Louise (it’s too complicated to explain, you’ll have to read it for yourself).

Rankin has a lot of strengths as a writer, the most important here though is the ability to make you care about the characters. This is no mean feat in a book which is overly preoccupied with reminding the reader that they’re reading a novel:

“Enough of that!” cried Hugo Rune.

‘What a chapter! This chapter may not have been as long as I might have wished. But it is my chapter, and Rune does not share his chapter with characters in other scenes.’

Despite this authorial presence, Rankin’s style makes the book flow nicely. The characters seem to be sketched in, but their actions flesh them out. And their actions are very human, we all know people that would be like those with only a little bit of encouragement. All human life is there.

David Rodway had worked his way up to his position as the company’s only estate agent. He’d worked hard. Come up the hard way. Escort agencies, time-share agencies. Born agent was David Rodway. He’d been Cardinal Richelieu in a previous incarnation. Although he didn’t know that. All writers use tricks to help with the plot. Rankin uses the tendency for the written word to ‘hide’ the action to some extent. He springs the occasional surprise on the reader. You know how it goes, there are you making assumptions about what’s going on, then something in a descriptive passage, or the way the characters interact makes you realise that it was a trick to assume too much. He usually uses this to comic effect, but on the odd occasion, Rankin wields the technique to pull metaphorical rabbits out of hats and move the action along a bit.

What with the in-jokes, sleight-of-hand, cast of strange, but almost recognizable characters and whatnot, Robert Rankin’s books are a bit of an acquired taste. If you read them at face value, or are suffering from a deficit in the sense of humour department, then you might think that they are just silly (or stupid if you’re in the habit of condemning things like that). If on the other hand, you think that all life is absurd and we might as well have a good laugh at the whole thing, then you’ll probably thoroughly enjoy this novel.

Robert Silverberg
The Mountains of Magicpoo
Steve Jeffrey

This, the blurb informs us, is a ‘startling introduction (or re-introduction.)’ to the rich history of Majipoo, ‘a return to a major literary event’.

Whatever the status of the three previous Majipoor novels, The Majipoor Chronicles, Lord Valentine’s Castle and Valentine Frontier, I really doubt if the same could be claimed of this slim, and ultimately disappointing volume. The claim that it is an ‘introduction’ is slightly misleading: this is not exactly a ‘prequel’, but a novella set five hundred years after Valentine’s rule and, largely, several thousand miles away in the frozen wastelands of the northern continent.

Prince Harparia, pampered scion of one of the great pontiffal families, celebrates his twenty-fifth birthday with a hunting expedition on a friend’s estate. Showing off a trophy shot to his friends, he brings down a rare beast – just on the wrong side of the estate’s dividing line. Unfortunately he finds his impressive marksmanship has just deprived an unforgiving neighbouring Lord of one of his prize specimens. Harparia finds himself exiled to the drudgery of a backwater outpost, thousands of miles away, for a month, then a year, then two...

Finally the Court sends him even further away, as ambassador to secure the release of a team of paleontologists who have unwisely ventured into the domain of a small barbarian tribe in the frozen North continent. With a tricky shapeshifter, Korinna, as guide and interpreter, Harparia sets out with an escort of four-armed Skandars to confront the barbarian king, Tookella, and bargain for the release of the captured expedition. Tookella has no idea of the might and extent of the Majipoor empire and believes he is dealing with the Coronal, another king like himself whom he can face down in a contest of wills. To Harparia, the unwriting impersonation of the Coronal is deeply blasphemous, but he avoids the obvious immediate show of strength that would settle matters, and allows himself to be subjected to a series of petty and ritual humiliations at the hands of the barbarian king. Meanwhile Tookella has his own troubles with a band of degenerate shapeshifters who plague his borders.

So far, this is fairly standard genre fare, with hardly an original idea that would seem to justify the reputation of the original Majipoor novels. The plot moves in predictable fashion, with even the final turnaround confronting largely prefigured in the relationship between Harparia, Korinna and Tookella. The parallels are too obviously drawn. Harparia is the pampered prince who finds his strength under adversity; while the devious Korinna undergoes his own humiliation before Harparia and Tookella. Korinna’s revulsion for the aboriginal shapeshifters, and their part in their final rout, mirrors Harparia’s attitude to the barbarian customs of Tookella’s kingdom. The questions about the nature and inequality of power, and its colonial exercise, is almost completely sidestepped.

Tookella’s customs are so completely those of a cartoon macho barbarian that Harparia can take nothing away from this encounter but the freed paleontologists, a slightly wistful love affair with the king’s daughter, and turn his back in anticipation of a return to the luxury and petty vindictiveness of the Coronal’s Court. Nothing real has been learned, his exile and adventure will become entertaining stories for the Court and he can wave away his doubts as easily as he does his broken affair with Tookella’s daughter.

For somebody of Silverberg’s reputation, The Mountains of Majipoor is a disappointment. It reads like a slight juvenile novel; there is nothing here to match the beauty or power of Nightwings, Dying Inside or Thorns, or even the later fantasy works like Gilgamesh The King. This certainly doesn’t inspire me to seek out the previous Majipoor volumes if they are anything like this; and if not, then this must be considered a poorly judged introduction.

Charlotte Spivak & Roberta Lynne Staples
The Company of Camelot: Arthurian Characters in Romance and Fantasy Greenwood, 1994, 161pp, £39.95
Cherith Baldry

The purpose of this book, as set out in the preface, is to plug a gap in Arthurian scholarship by providing a character analysis of the central figures of the legend. As far as the medieval texts are concerned, this gap does not exist: whole books have been written about each of these characters. Where this book is new, I think, is in collecting together several character analyses and, more important, in giving serious scholarly attention to the modern reworkings of Arthurian legend which have – with the possible exception of T.H. White’s work – been largely neglected.

The eight characters selected for this treatment constitute the close Arthurian ‘family’, those men and women without whom the legend could not exist in the form we have it: Merlin, Morgan le Fay, Kay, Gawain, Guenival, Lancelot, Morbad and Arthur himself. Perhaps the authors could have included Tristan to represent that branch of the legend, or Perceval as a Grail knight, but...
neither of these belong to the closely knit 'inner circle'.

Each essay begins by discussing the character as an archetype as represented by the medieval sources, followed by the diversity of modern reworkings. The writers don't lose sight of the fact that some diversity is already present in the medieval texts; for example, that Guenevere is both noble queen and adulteress. They find a similar polarity in all the characters, a split between positive and negative aspects which modern writers have taken up and developed. They don't, however, make much distinction between characters who are inherently divided, like Lancelot and Guenevere torn between honour and disloyalty, and characters like Kay and Gawain who are treated differently by different writers.

Most of each essay is given to modern writers like Gillian Bradshaw and Marion Zimmer Bradley. This is to be welcomed, and it is fascinating to see how they have interpreted the Arthurian world and extended our appreciation of it. This is particularly clear in the portraits of the two women, Guenevere and Morgan le Fay, since modern writers tend to see them as more fully empowered in their own right. I felt, however, that the understanding of what modern writers have done, particularly for readers who are not familiar with original Arthurian material, would have been clearer with a fuller treatment of the medieval sources.

The question about this book which I couldn't answer is: who is the intended reader? The format and price suggest a scholarly audience, but there is not enough detail for the book to be really useful as a scholarly tool, though there's enough here to whet the appetite and a useful bibliography for further study. Lovers of Arthurian legend will delight in it, as I did myself, even with the reservations I've mentioned. There are so many good things in it that it might seem discourteous to ask for more. Perhaps Sir Kay, in another age, might have had a future as a book reviewer?

Lucrezia, a witch-princess studying the Art Political who, as her name suggests, has much in common with the Borgias, has other plans for Andris. She offers to buy his freedom in exchange for a part in her service: what he doesn't know is that this will involve planting the seed of a rare thorn tree inside him. Lucrezia wants to harvest the poison from the thorn tree's flowers, and it will only grow successfully in a sort of symbiosis with the human gut. As the spoor of the needle impales Andris from the inside and eventually kills him (this combination of 'sense of wonder' and ideas and horror reminds me of Dan Simmons's Hyperion),

Andris, however, is trained in the Arts Geographical and Arms Martial, and as such also receives an offer from the merchant, Carus Fraxinus. Fraxinus and fellow trader Hyr Keshvara are planning an expedition to the legendary Pool of Life through the previously impassable Dragomite Hills, where rumours of a strange glint has devastated the habitat of the weird creatures.

Unfortunately, the Princess's offer has priority, but there is another way out: with the help of his cousin, Marel Zabio, a young female pirate, Andris breaks out of prison. The solution is used as a diversion by Checulli, 'prince of thieves', who takes the opportunity to rob Xandria's treasury, and in the process Lucrezia is kidnapped. Thus a train of events is set in motion which involves each of the characters in a long and arduous journey across this strange planet, where everything quickly rots and spoils. In the Dragomite Hills they meet up, discover the truth behind the rumours of blight and chaos, and realise the 'Lore' and 'Apocrypha of Genesyss', handed down the generations, may be based on fact and that great changes are ahead.

And there it stops suddenly, inviting the reader to buy the next volume! Serpent's Blood is full of action and movement, of weird and wonderful creatures and vivid settings. I love the idea of 'The Slithery Sea'. Stableford provides strong, active characters of both sexes for the reader to identify with — even the dubious Lucrezia has her good points — but while there is emotional tension between the characters there is, considering the length of the book, surprisingly little sex (ie. none).

Perhaps the author thought it would hold up the action? Stableford's smoothly flowing prose and chapter-by-chapter viewpoint switching, keeps the suspense and interest high. For me, the first three-quarters of the book was unputdownable, but towards the end, when the characters go inside a dragonite lair, my interest dwindled slightly. Perhaps it's because Stableford likes to explore his vivid creations at longer length and in more depth than I require (I remember the same experience reading parts of Empire of Fear). Or maybe, since I read this practically non-stop, it's simply that I was suffering from sensory overload! But I'm looking forward to the sequel, Salamander's Fire.
Samuel J. Umland (Ed)
Philip K. Dick: Contemporary Critical Interpretations
£19.99
Andrew Butler

In the last ten years, the critical reputation of Philip K. Dick has become more or less fixed: he provides a critique of society for various shades of marxists, and he has been hailed as the prophet of postmodernism. But whilst it is valid to view Dick in these ways, this tends to downplay the theological, philosophical and psychological dimension to the works. (There are honourable exceptions to this, of course, such as the biographies by Sustin, Rickman and Williams, and Douglas Mackey's Jungian survey of Dick's output).

Samuel J. Umland's anthology of criticism provides a welcome corrective to the standard representation of Dick's writings. The anthology also breaks new ground in terms of which books are covered; it has the first sizeable coverage I've seen of The Crack In Space, Counter-Dick World and We Can Build You. Short stories such as 'Impostor' and 'Shell Game', hitherto all but ignored, are here given detailed study. All but two of the essays are new; Carl Freedman's 'Towards a Theory of Paranoia' is taken from Science-Fiction Studies and has already been reprinted in the collection On Philip K. Dick, and Merritt Abrahm's 'Man Everywhere in Chains': Dick, Rousseau, and The Penultimate Truth' is lightly revised from its appearance in Foundation. Antony Wolk's piece, 'The Swiss Connection: Psychological Systems in the Novels of Philip K. Dick', appears to be a reprint at first glance, in fact this was a ghost title listed in Lewack's bibliography of Dick and is in fact a new essay.

Wolk's article is in many ways the most interesting. It exposes Dick's indebtedness to J. S. Kassian's Language and Thought in Schizophrenia. It seems that Dick's ideas about schizophrenia, even down to the speech of his characters, is taken from this book, along with names of doctors doubling as names for mental hospitals. Wolk shows that Dick is not uncritical in his borrowings, as he questions how useful tests like the Benjamin Proverb Test are in diagnosis. We Can Build You and Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? are both illuminated by knowledge of this material.

For Gregg Rickman, We Can Build You becomes another opportunity for him to claim that Dick was sexually abused as a child. At times, Rickman is careful to indicate that this is only a theory – the protagonist is described as the 'putative abuser' (151) – at other times it seems to be established as fact – 'The women were more likely victims, like Philip Dick, of his abusive grandfather (their father), E.G. Kindred' (147). I do not wish to rule out the possibility that this did happen, but Rickman seems to read anything from eating disorders to the Civil War as sublimated symptoms of abuse. Such biographical readings are overly reductive.

Umland explicitly aims this book at an academic audience... students and a popular audience' (5) but a popular audience may not be aware of the controversy which has raged about Rickman's theories of Dick's sexual abuse and various personality disorders. Nor does Umland do his popular audience any favours by his chronological ordering of subject matter, which starts with Freedman's overview and Neil Easterbrook's 'Dionysia/Paranoia', Freedman's analysis of Lacanians and Marxist versions of paranoia presupposes a fairly specialised degree of knowledge. I think I understand his contention that 'it is, to put the matter mildly, unlikely that Philip Dick ever intended to represent the subjective or ideological state that a Lacanian-Marxian, which coordinates paranoia with commodity fetishism, would lead one to expect as paradigmatic for the bourgeois ego' (11) but I had to read it several times.

Easterbrook's essay similarly involves complex concepts and language, name-checking Rorty, Levinas, Deleuze and Derrida, and especially Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty is one of several philosophers to discuss the relation of the self to the outside world, and to itself. This line of thinking illuminates the short story 'Impostor', where the protagonist does not realise that he is in fact an android double of himself. It is Spence's realisation that he is self-identical which leads to his body exploding and the destruction of the Earth. Again it has to be emphasized that Dick probably never heard of Merleau-Ponty, but Easterbrook has described a very useful theoretical framework.

None of the essays which follow are quite as difficult as the first two, and it would be unfortunate if readers were put off from reading the volume by them. There is perhaps a certain dryness to the material, but this is typical of much academic writing. What is much more likely to be off-putting is the volume's cover price.

Umland may wish to appeal to a wide and popular audience, yet with little or no change from fifty pounds for a two-hundred page hardback that has no dustwrapper, this seems unlikely to happen. It is more the fault of Greenwood Press than Umland, but at such a price I cannot recommend.
Signposts

Peter F. Hamilton
The Nano Flower
“A highly readable hard-core novel. If it were my decision, future reprints would be blurred WINNER OF THE BSFA AWARD.”
Graham Andrews

R. A. MacAvoy
The Belly of the Wolf
“A book of high imagination, depth and humour. I enjoyed it, and I highly recommend it.”
Charit Baidny

Pierre Ouellette
The Deus Machine
“Ouellette has produced a gripping read, combining bleeding edge computer technologies with genetic engineering in a tour-de-force of near-future extrapolation... a fascinating and inventive piece of fiction.”
John D. Owen

Robert Rankin
The Greatest Show Off
“ How Raymond and Simon, helped by Professor Merlin and his circus performers, give the Edinleys and B.E.A.S.T. their comeuppances and save the world makes an amusing read”
Alan Fraser

Nancy Springer
Larque on The Wing
“An uplifting novel which shows how the other half lives, if female for male, or gay for straight. Springer has created a thoughtful fantasy that helps us to imagine what it might have been like.”
Carol Ann Green

Reviews

Patricia Anthony
Cold Alloys
NEL, 224/45s, 288pp, £4.99
Benedict S. Culfum

A third world war forms the backdrop and provides most of the characters in Anthony’s first novel. The Arabs, led by the Egyptians, are fighting the rest of the developed world; depriving their own as they turn them into deprived of food. The cold allies of the tale are actually aliens, and each of the warring faction is desperate to know the nature of the alien “blue wove” hovering around battlegrounds.

The tale is told in episodic form following the impact of both war and aliens on the eight different characters, six of whom serve in one or other army. Contact is made between human and alien at the point before death, or through dreaming / trance. As the story unfolds the reader is offered tantalising glimpses as to the purpose of the aliens but by its end it is still unclear as to whether they can be regarded as benign, evil or merely other. Their interest in humankind appears to be driven by an almost vampiric desire to experience or feed on human emotions; some like-ego, some like death theses.

Gordon drives a remote controlled tank and it is hinted that the earthbound form of the aliens might instead be representative of some remote device or walrus. Just as Gordon had a childhood love of videogames then humankind might be construed as some large-scale entertainment by these space invaders. By virtue of its episodic construction, this novel did not make for a smooth read although it was an intriguing one.

Not a bad first effort by Anthony, it still remains to be seen if she can sustain the gap between short story and full length novel but the signs are favourable.

Robin Bailey
The Palace of Souls
(Brothers of the Dragon volume III)
NEL, 20/49s, 282pp, £5.99
Alan Fraser

A couple of years ago I reviewed the first volume in this series for Andy Sawyer, and found it disappointing. Billed as “a fantasy for the modern age”, I found that all this meant was that the characters said “fuck” now and then. However, I found the central premise of the plot quite original. A martial arts expert himself, Bailey has created in his parallel world of Palenoc ("No Place") a place where killing people is extremely unprofitable, because the soul of the murderer come back to torment their killers for the rest of their lives. Therefore, no-one goes into battle with edged weapons, for fear of causing fatal wounds to their enemies.

Into this world in Book 1 were whisked brothers Eric and Robert Podolsky, American martial arts experts, who find their skills of defeating enemies without causing them permanent damage are to the importance of fighting for the forces of Light against those of Darkness.

The latter are led by the beautiful but utterly evil sorceress Shandal Karg, known as the Heart of Darkness. Because of her strong magic powers, she kills with impunity, but her palace is surrounded by the souls of those she has murdered. In this third part of the story, Eric and Robert have become separated, and must fight separately with Palenoc’s dragon riders against Shandal Karg and her black unicorns to save their adopted worlds from complete domination by the Heart of Darkness. Assisting them are fellow Earthfolk Scott Silver and Katherine Dowley, who is carrying Eric’s baby, a child with a special role to play.

I have to admit I found The Palace of Souls an easy and compelling read, with a fast-paced plot, and one of the most evil villains in Shandal Karg that you are ever likely to encounter. Even though the immediate story comes to an end in this book, there are enough loose ends and hints left for Bailey to follow up in Book 4. Overall then, a worthwhile buy, enhanced by an excellent cover portrait of Shandal Karg by Chris Achilleos.

Nancy Baker
The Night Inside
Creed, 4/3/95, 312pp, £4.99
Tanya Brown

Ardeth Alexander, a research student in Toronto, has measured out her life in careful plans and predictable behaviour. It’s a guarded life, with no one allowed to become too important to her—a younger sister Sara, singer with the rock band Black Sun, for whom Ardeth is a bitter, uncaring stranger in an uncertain world. But Ardeth’s researches, unknown to her, have uncovered truths that she would rather not have revealed. She is abducted and imprisoned in an abandoned asylum—where, each night, she is required to give her blood to the monster in the next cell. Helplessly, she submits, planning her escape; but gradually it becomes clear that there is one only, ghastly, way out.

How else can she avenge what has been done to her? And Ardeth is not the only victim; there are all the demons, the actresses, out in the gully with stakes through their hearts... The sacrifice that must be made are sympathetic described; there’s a real sense of the anguish she feels at giving up everything normal and safe. Only then can she learn the lessons that her old, orderly existence denied. In the city, a killer is stalking. Sara is hunting, relentlessly, for her lost sister. And Ardeth is seeking out the real monsters; whatever they may be,
Iain M. Banks Feersom Endjinn Orbit, 8/695, 279pp, £5.99
L. J. Hurst
Strange conjunctions happen somewhere and for no clear reason...this is one of them: Riddley Walker meets Jerry Cornelius. I have reviewed Feersom Endjinn twice already, and I am not clear about what exactly happens here. I think that says more about the book than me. The story is something like this: a vast technopolis, where computer technology interpenetrates everything so that everything that happens can be known, and everything that both happens and happens can be computer simulated, is under threat. The world is going to be destroyed because the stars are difficult if not impossible, war is breaking out and the levels of information in the computer network is tending towards entropy.

How do I know all this? Partly because I do not go about their business of living, loving, spying and dying, there are data dials and the narrative is text. So a man can walk through ghosts and drop through a hole in an acid-eaten roof to drop two kilometres of his data...He bounces off the walls of his mind is recorded by spy technology...Now that technology is so good that one of the heroes dies seven times in two pages. The kind of thing that ways requires a decadent king) can see everything, but then we discover nothing is real.

And worse, there is something even more omnipotent than the master of the cyberspace. That omnipotence, of course, is Ian Banks. Every time there is something to be learned he cuts away. Technological threats to release an evil genius from the bottle, and at the end of time it could be at its most frightful — here is Ian Banks' reason to fear some of these posts. Fiction is even more powerful than data.

Clive Barker Everyville HarperCollins, 24/495, 640pp, £4.99, 590pp, The wire, the violence, Susan Badham
I first noticed Clive Barker when I read his Book of Blood, an extensive collection of tightly themed, impressively written stories. Unfortunately he has not written any books, with a few exceptions like Waveworld, which has never managed to both well constructed. Barker has a tendency to meander and to digress, a tendency which has not been improved by his other career as a film maker. Films, after all, can show more spectacle while still maintaining their narrative drive. He has also fallen into the 'Stephen King trap' in which he has distinct personalities but simply progress around the landscape of terrifying terror counting different features. Their destinies are played out, but we hardly care what happens to them, or the side of a mountain or die in a car crash. Though every novel is eventually drawn towards the geographical centre of the action, their presence is more or less irrelevant to the appeal of the many events taking place.

In this book, Barker provides the key to his novel. It is as being important to the nature of reality, as being an essential creative force in a metaphysical sense, but to the reality in this book is pretty anemic and so is the storytelling...

Peter Benchley White Shark Hutchinson, 16/895, 307pp, £4.99, Steve Palmer
You would think that by now stories about bizarre, obscure or imaginary Nazi experiments, held over two centuries after the Second World War, only to be terrifyingly unleashed (or released, as the publicity blurb has it) would have been done to death, and the genre, if genuine, has reached its peak. Yet here's one, this time from the author of Jaws and The Deep.

I tried, I honestly did, but I'm afraid the hackneyed plot of under-water Nazi beast lost in the Atlantic, coincidentally with a slow metabolism, suddenly reawakened — unleashed, sorry only to cause the world great peril, was just too pedestrian to credit. I mean to say, and in 55 chapters too, some of which are less than one page. Have not the microbes use of one sentence paragraphs? Aargh! I can't take it. Quick, nurse, the screens! Beam me up, Scotty! Abandon novel!

Ben Bova, Frederik Pohl, Jerry Pournelle & Charles Sheffield Future Quest Earth in The Year 2042: A Four-Part Invention AvoNova, 295spp, 294pp, £5.90, A Newcomer to Point 2042, a new novel published by the mainstream publishing house after appearing in numerous of SF magazines for years.

In his debut novel his protagonists are an American ex-pat, his wife and irritatingly cute son coping in a strange England. They have a dream of converting an ancient coastal fort into a luxury hotel. Chris Shianne and Barbara have invested a great deal to realize this dream and arrive to inspect the defect site with enthusiasm and zeal. However, they relate steadily to sour when he makes curious discoveries about the old fort.

The quantity surveyor failed to discover that the village is a site of an ancient religion without which the fort will become: it's evident, though there aren't many of them...

Nancy A. Collins Point it Black NEL, 18/895, 263pp, £4.99, Tanya Brown
P oint it Black is the third novel to feature Sonja Blue, the soubriquet punk vampire, and extraordinary. Sonja hasn't given up hope of redeeming Morgan, the antitropical vampire who made what standards. The hunt, however, doesn't stop her amusing herself by hunting down and getting rid of other vampires, to the sick bag. That said - it is a confidant first novel from an author.

Stuart Clark Nailed By The Heart NEL, 1995, 360pp, £5.99, Chris Hart
Clark is the latest in a series of prolific short story writers (including Steve Baxter and P. F. Hamilton) to have novel published by the mainstream publishing house after appearing in numerous of SF magazines for years.

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They are more dreadful than the man who shared their imprisonment.

The Night Inside combines elements of thriller, romance and, in fact, horror. But despite the occasionally clumsy style, it's a good read.

they were impressed by his other
though, that soon she'll be ready to go out into the world, and fulfill her mysterious destiny. Meanwhile, through the sultry nights of New Orleans and the sleazy private sex clubs of New York she copulates among the Pretending Races - werewolves, vampires, demons and seraphim, with Morgan, and a solution to her own divided nature.

Collins's novel world is richly detailed, contemporary and all too credible. There's a depth to the characterization both of her characters and of the reader that fascinates and seduces the reader. The climax of the novel results in an almost biblical scale - and the key to Sonja's own nature. There's one problem, though: how can Collins follow this?

John Douglas

The Late Show
NEL, 163/95, 267pp, £5.99
Susan Badham

The man who wrote this book lives in Manchester. When he has to get rid of the manuscript he's written, he's not sure if he can even sell it. May I suggest Bury market? There's a man with a secondhand bookshop who'll give him a fair price — about 5 pence a book. This novel is a "malign entity eats cinema full of teenagers" story and to be fair, the blurb and cover picture leave you in no doubt as to whether you're going to get M.R. James fans are unlikely to pick this up by mail.

If it was a competent, well written example of the slasher genre, I'd have no problem with it, but unfortunately it isn't. It's an example of the trunk novel; the one most beginning writers write to, and send out to publishers and put away after they've collected about thirty rejection slips, and when they become authors, they'll get the manuscript put years later and have a sigh of relief that no one else saw it.

The book has no particular structure, though the plot manages to be incoherent and unpalatable. The author puts in everything: no apparent obsessions, obsessions about living in Lancashire, and all that. Psychology, without thinking about its function in the story. As a result, the whole thing is a grab bag of some good and mostly bad stuff. It isn't really a novel, more a collection of scenes. It's possible that his next book will be worth reading. This one isn't.

J.R. Dunn

This Side of Judgement
NEL, 204/45, 322pp, £5.99
Jim Steinbeck

By the time of this thriller, Mr Steinbeck the USA has had its back broken. The federal government still functions, but much of the territory has rebelled because of their hubristic mentality due to the effects of increased terrorism and a failed invasion. One of the terrorist groups, known by the clumby neologism of 'Chipheads' (work it out for yourself), has demonstrated due to the efforts of a government agency and the failure of its own technology. There are, however, still many of them loose. Enter Ross Bohlin, agency loose cannon, closest to the truth by the only means of conspiracy. So far, so routine.

However, this is just another cyberpunk novel for the nineties. (There's a great line where one of the characters jokes about being one.) Well, there are a certain new area of research might lead to a non-games use for virtual reality techniques. This is in his background development. One is given the impression that he has spent a lot of time reading our past, seamlessly into his future. This is beautiful, and very, very believable, but what shocks me is that he is heading in this direction already. This is a carefully planned, bloody, battered treat in a first novel. Exposing the tendency to flag somewhere in the middle, the reader might be surprised when the book rushes up on him. It seemed to rush up on Dunn as well, but that's how you keep an audience at the start of a promising career.

Raymond E. Feist

Shadow of a Dark Queen
AvoNova, 595, 497pp, $5.99
Cheryl Bailey

The prologue of this book shows a race of serpent warriors, the Saaur, escaping from devastation on their own world through a portal in space. The world to which they go is Midkemia.

Not having read Feist's earlier Riftwar Saga, I'm unfamiliar with the basic background, but he seems to be using the same world and concepts, and a few of the characters. The Shadow of a Dark Queen is the first in a new series, The Serpentwar Saga.

Following the Prologue, we meet Uthur, a warrior-endowed with a sled, and Edit, Elms and bastard son of the local Baron, and follow his fortunes as he tangles with his illegitimate half-brother, Fess, his home, and ends up in a squad of soldiers on a suicide mission to the top of a giant mountain.

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The Nuns Flower is a highly readable hardback novel—not an inevitable combination, believe me—yet if it were my decision, future reprints would be blurbled WINNER OF THE BSFA AWARD. And, having family connections, I was able to arrange the Rutland Press edition.

W. Harbisson
Genesis
NEL, 18/5/95, 815pp. £5.99
Steve Jeffery

think I might have got on better with this book if I had known what Harbisson was doing. Even if I thought I knew what he was doing.

This third volume brings the story forward from the years following WW II up to the mid-1970s. It is, apparently, the book that spawned the Projekt magazine chronologically it falls after Inception and Phoenix. Harbisson has discarded his previous style of writing for a more lucid and concise approach. He no longer writes in the first person, although in the last chapter of this book he does use the first person again.

The title is appropriately chosen to catch the reader's eye and to suggest the contents of the book. The story is set in the future, and the author has created a world that isboth familiar and strange. The characters are well-drawn and the plot is gripping. The book is highly recommended for fans of science fiction and fantasy.

Tom de Haven
The Last Human Race
Benedict S. Cullum

A particularly feature of de Haven's writing, and the book as a whole, is the way he uses language to create a sense of atmosphere. The setting is a distant future, and the author cleverly uses the language of the time to create a sense of distance and otherness.

The title is appropriate, as the book is about the last human race. It is a thought-provoking read that will leave you thinking long after you have finished reading it.

Sheila Holligton
Nightshade
Creed, 4/5/95, 320pp. £4.99
Steve Jeffery

There was something odd about this book that took me a while to work out. It runs as two stories in parallel: that of Rose Thorpe, confirmed city dweller and photographer who concerning the effects of the UV rays on the barren moors of Yorkshire to decide what to do with the cottage and the land; and that of Thomas Thomason, who has the ability to control the weather. The two stories are closely intertwined, and the events around the cottage and nearby farm some two hundred years earlier. What is odd is that the present-day story of Rose is written in the past tense, while that of Thomas is told in the present tense. Unfortunately, Holligton also drops into a rather stilted English dialect for her characters that sits even more awkwardly when it spills over into the author's narrative. The story's setting does not really come off, and almost makes it seem like you're reading two different books in tandem.
Graham Joyce, Requiem
Creek, 4/5/95, 305pp, £4.99
John D. Owen

Graham Joyce’s Requiem is a psychological thriller, exploring the aberrant mind of Tony, a academics, a medical student, who killed his own family. Joyce’s vivid depiction of Tony’s psyche is both disturbing and compelling. The novel is a horror story with a psychological twist, and it will keep you up at night.

Simon Ings, Hotwire
Harper Collins, 6/95, £4.99, 343pp
Colin Bird

You may gather from the title that this novel is a sequel of sorts to Ings’s previous book, Hot Head. Ings seems to have moved on, but his writing style remains consistent. Hotwire is a grabsbag of ideas and characters, but it still manages to be entertaining. The novel is a mix of science fiction and horror, and it will appeal to fans of both genres.

Stephen Leigh & John J Miller
 Avatar Press
Series Book 5: Dinosaur Empire
AvoNova, 3/96, 229pp, £4.99
Andy Mills

A fast-moving juvenile, this is the fifth in the series of graphic novels called The Time Tunnel, where the heroes bounce randomly from one time to another. Much the same happens here, except that the protagonists - who seem to be mainly teenagers - carry their guns with them and travel into parallel time streams. In a preposterous story, the first book in the series had them be time-travelling aliens from another planet, while this book has them be time-travelling aliens from another planet. The series is a fun read, and it will appeal to fans of time travel and alien adventures.

Jane Lindskold
Marks of Our Brothers
AvoNova, 6/95, 248pp, £4.99
Norman Beawick

Science fiction as a popular genre would languish if it did not include fair quantities of fast-moving, perfectly routine stories, sufficiently plausible to hold attention, along with one man’s mind. Joukowsky’s brain’s really a hindrance to the reader - the story is easy enough to follow. In this book, the author avoids anthro­­pig ignorance IS! really a hindrance to the reader - the story is easy enough to follow. In this book, the author avoids anthropomorphic problems, and the reader can follow the story without any difficulty.

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Nonetheless, the story rat-tles along nicely, and the reader can find out what happened. Who can grumble at that?

R. A. MacAvoy
The Belly of The Wolf
Avonova, 295, 217pp $4.99
Chenth Baldry

The Belly of The Wolf (aka Winter of The Wolf) is the third volume of a trilogy. The first two are Lens of The World and King of The Dead.

The main character and narrator, Nazhuret, is the son of a nobleman who grows up in ignorance of his real identity because his father has been assassinated. Nazhuret’s upbringing (described in Lens of The World) has made him an original thinker, an unpretentious and unconventional man who thinks of himself as a scientist and resists the pressures that would make him a warrior or even a king. The cover of The Wolf shows Nazhuret in middle-age, when he and his daughter are thrown off the back of the man that he does not lead a victorious army, but expands all his other abilities. The story takes place on both sides of the point where they can talk.

R. A. MacAvoy describes her world in vivid detail, on the large scale of politics and racial differences, and the small scale of art and architecture, clothes and food and weapons. A reader might almost be beguiled into approaching the book as history. The fantasy elements are subtle and ambiguous, almost - but not quite - the allusion of the character’s imagination.

This is a book of high imagination, and I very much enjoyed it, and I highly recommend it.

Julian May
Diamond Mask: The Galactic Milieu Trilogy Book Two
Pan, 307pp $5.99
Norman Beswick

Another Julian May
Metaphysics epic, more than just galaxy-wide, with a huge cast of characters, most of them interrelated.

Book one, Jack The Bodless, told of the intervention by the Ylkyn, bringing Earth into membership of the inter-galactic Milieu and the development amongst some humans (including the eponymous Jack the Bodless) of “metaphysic” powers.

In book two we meet young Dorothy MacDonald, who also possesses huge latent abilities but prefers a quiet life on the Scottish island of Caledonia.

The monstrous spirit Fury, who at times possesses the Body of his fallen alien creators. She was used to destroy the human beings, and when she rejects him, vows to destroy her. She is taken to the Metaphysical Institute and realises her power and decides that her human planet is being subverted by the anti-Metaball rebels. She returns to her world and realizes her full potential.

Andre Norton
The Hands of Lyr
AvoNova, 685, 388pp, $5.50
Viki Lee

Androsha (Nosh) is a young girl almost dead on her legs, facing the horrors of the city. She stuggles to rise, but in evitably fills her pages with enticing fantasy, and much more interesting are the personal interactions of the tiny handful of characters. I felt her aliens were simply not alien enough. Moreover, take away the language of Metaphysics and there seems little difference between it and magic, although she redeems this for us by her impressive grasp of geologic and other scientific jargon.

A good read but not a masterpiece.

Billie Sue Mossiman
Widow
Headline, 185/6, 471pp, $2.99
Martin H. Brice

This is a fantasy novel - but it is not a novel of the kind. There are no wizards, no goblins, no lizards distorting of distant stars, no history of some mythical Celtic Empire.

This novel is about ordinary people in present-day Houston, USA - and their fantasies - fantasies which, perhaps, are more realistic than the real world.

There are the fantasies of Big Mac, a bag-lady near death, who imagines she can survive the weather and the violence of the streets. There are the fantasies of the rich and respectable teenagers, who believe that gay-bashing makes them safe.

There is the fantasy of the ambitious young woman, who dreams of solving the big crime...

The fantasies of the bedridden elderly mother, who imagines her son doesn’t love her...

And her son, who fantasises about becoming a famous author and serial killer...

The fantasies of the racists, the wife beater, the cop who believes he’s in love... The fantasies of the men who go to strip clubs...

And the fantasies of the strippers whose minds block out the audience.

Most of all there are the fantasies of Kay Mandel, who believes that all men are evil and must be exterminated like rats.

Admittedly, the reader cannot help but sympathise with her; she has suffered terribly through the actions of the men in her life. Nevertheless, by condoning her plot, she mirrors the evil-doers she annihilates.

This is not a cozy read; but it is a gripping read. And it should be read; there are a lot of lessons here - and, in spite of everything, a lot of human kindness.

Eric S. Nylund
Paw’s Dream
AvoNova, 595, 349pp, $4.99
Chris Hart

In Paw’s Dream Roland Pigchard has an elaborate strategy for returning his job as a shop clerk. He dreams. He dreams he lives in a alternative world where he is a Great Or. in Mereon there’s a librarian who dreams that he is working races are somewhat bemusing. There are certain similarities between the novel and Elvenblood to let the reader know what happened in the first book, but it’s rather like reading both books back-to-back, or perhaps tackling a double-sided jigsaw, in order to get the whole picture.

Following the second wizard-war, Lashana (Shara, the Eleneniane), the wizards, and assorted allies have found a new secret ‘hol in’ after flying the Elves. The young warriors and their families have made hands full, trying to build and protect their new home, whilst striving for unity with the older warriors and Blones who blame their present decline in comfort and standing on the younger element.

On a scouting mission south of their new hold, Shana and her friends are taken captive by the nomadic Iron People. They are imprisoned with scrolls of iron that limit their powers, only to be rescued by the Younged of magic and illusion. The Iron People thus hold the secrets of protection against the younged. Bessie, but Shana and her friends are in no position to use it, unless they can escape.

Lorryn’s Shoynoba brings the two to the iron and steel court for different reasons; Hansa lets them in, and they discover at any cost. They flee south seeking refuge amongst the wizards. After losing their accomplice, the human slave Myre, they are left to their own devices in a world that is alien to them.

Lorynl sees the elven council who have embarked on an almost inquisition to hunt for half-bloods since the second Wizard-War. Lorynl and her mother hold a secret that they have discovered at any cost. They flee south seeking refuge amongst the wizards. After losing their accomplice, the human slave Myre, they are left to their own devices in a world that is alien to them.

Lorynl’s friend Lorynl is a young female who has just discovered she can levitate, and she is the main character of this book. She is a powerful young woman who has made a name for herself amongst the Elves. She too encounters the Iron People, but on a very different plane.

If you manage to eventually get your head around who’s who, and what’s what in this book, that there are dragons involved, some good, some bad, and all of whom can shape-change, then this book can be a real page-turner! It’s extremely convoluted, and not helped by the author’s seeming dislike of cutting the cast from time to time to make it more manageable. Although, I would recommend it to any who enjoy wizards, elves and dragons, for I am not brave enough to backtrack and tackle the next 600 pages of the first book.
in a 24-Hour Quick-Stop store on Earth.

Think of an ‘alternate world’ sfic fantasy novel and the reader automatically conjures up somewhat similar volumes by Stephen Donaldson, which will probably come to mind: clearly, derivative dross. The problem with the scenario given above, along with the z-grade production values of the publisher, is that the reader should not start, but be prepared to be surprised.

This is fast, smash and grab, and that can’t help but seduce you into loving it, even though you’ll regret it later. Roland becomes embroiled in a war against a horde of men – those are interesting ways. And there is a great deal of nature-de-force, of course, with the super-powered man carrying out ‘black’ operations, weaponry, but the story drags on. There is a cast of characters who are, on the face of it, intriguing but lacks any real depth, a sense of what makes them tick, why they act the way they do. There is a feeling that it could have been more exciting, more engaging.

Richard Parsons & Tony Keaveny
Krap The Conqueror

This book sums itself up in the first word of its title. If anyone buys it for you, they either have no taste or no judgement, or certainly deserve to be taken off your Xmas card list (well, actually, they deserve to be burnt out and consigned to the earth and killed, but I’m trying not to be extreme this week). The writing is lifeless, the humorless cast of characters is so thin that they were so lazy amusing whenever either of them said ‘toilet’ or ‘witty’ that this pile of steamed manure was in such a mess as being managed to get down on paper before the man from the publisher even had time to notice it. Ah yes, the publishers.

When I think of the world’s resources they have wasted on publishing this juvenile collection of outdated, unfunny, stereotyped jokes my blood boils. There is nothing in here that can be collected from the discard pile of your average, ten-year-old, strip-draw company and contain the same deeply rational view of the world. Thus the fable (Gosh! It’s another word for home, menologists). I have tried to unravel the mystery of the eyes up the barbarian, who in turn scorns any available four-legged animal because that is what barbarians do, of course. Although he may have mental muscles, he is small in the only area where it really counts, snigger, snigger. And for the excuse for a plot... just say no.

Diane L. Paxson
& Adeline Marie Barnes
The Shield Between The Worlds
AvonNovel, 595, 317pp, £4.99
Cheryl Bradby

This is the second chronicle in the series. It appears to be volume two of a trilogy. I haven’t read the first volume, so I can’t comment on the incidents of these two, the hero’s children are covered satisfactorily in the first few pages.

The Shield Between The Worlds begins with Fionn as a young man, having renounced his heart-honour in favour of training as a bard. Of course, he’s forced back into warfare and becomes the chief warrior of the Grail, and there are cute kids and attractive women who brave the vicissitudes of life in this world. I was won over by the central action suf-
fers from this, I would have liked to get more involved with the new characters, Susan, Glod, Clif and especially the unfortunate Inter-Gemein, the bard from Llamemaro who are just getting to know when... But I'mn't givng up to the idea that there will also be greedy and want to have all of this without losing any of the rest of the book. Terry Pratchett's work often has its dark side, and Soul Music is no exception to this, but the lack of environment with the central characters dilutes it out this time around, and this takes a little bit of the magic out of the book making it good but not great.

Robert Rankin
The Greatest Show Off Earth Corgi, 6/4/95, 320pp, £4.99
Alan Fraser.

I have not read anything by Robert Rankin before, but I have heard good things about his fourth book, The Tramontana Trilogy. Rankin writes zany SF-comedy with a uniquely British flavor. In the same way that this book would ever travel over the Atlantic.

Our hero, Raymond, who leads a quiet life in the Home Counties village of Bramfield, is kidnapped by a flying starfish from Underwater Earth, and finds himself sold as a delicacy in a Venusian food market. Escaping, he ends up in the house of Professor Merlin, the eponymous The Greatest Show Off Earth, which tells the story of the planet Ceres, the Solar System, all of which are inhabited, in a Victorian steamship. Raymond also discovers that the Nazi cosmology theories about the hollow Earth are true, except that we live on the INSIDE, with our view of space and astronomy controlled by holographic projections from the top-side. The outside of our Earth is a kind of Eden, but we know it is arranged to look like it. (Of course, AND it has "Europa" as its largest city), and Raymond learns with horror that the top-siders or Edentines (Eric van Däniken's astronauts who found Earth's ancient civilizations, by the way) are fed up with all our pollution coming out through the polar holes, so are just about to block up the holes with two of Eden's moons, and suffocate us all. Meanwhile, back on the lower Earth, Raymond's best friend Simon, who narrowly escaped capture himself, has been branded as a serial killer, and is trying to evade both the police and a sinister organisation called拆HEEM. This is an End Times cult that worships the demonic half-man/half-robot Urimas. Also we meet a villain called Long Bob Bum-Poo, and the police Fire Action Response Team (F.A.R.T.), which allows Rankin to reveal in such schoolboy-humour gems as "only F.A.R.T. can stop Bum-Poo." All this, and jokes about Uranus.

How Raymond and Simon, helped by Merlin and his circus performers, save the Edentines and E.A.E.S.T. their

copeances and save the world makes a very amusing read, with plenty of good jokes at the expense of our British holidays (not to mention sadomasochistic holidays in Lourdes). Recommended.

Robert J. Sawyer
The Terminal Experiment NEL, 1/8/95, 335pp, £5.99 Julie Aldridge

It's 2111, a world of satellite cities and virtual telephones, where the internet is the world-wide source of communication, and bookreaders and thumb-print locks are in standard usage. Peter Hobson, a scientist, has discovered that a small electrical charge leaves on the brain on exploration, and the discovery of this "soulwave" sets the medical, religious and legal worlds on their heads. This generates Hobson's interest in AI, and he makes three computer simulations of himself, one as a clone, and one each as an immortal being and a dead one. The novel then turns into a murder mystery - Cathy Hobson's former lover is murdered, and when her abusive father dies, suspicion points at the three clones. We know the human characters are innocent, so which of the sims is the murderer?

I found the near-future believable depicted. The developments are realistic and I enjoyed the way the internet and the tech have evolved. But for which a mad upper."

The Quintaglio Ascension: 2: Fossil Hunter NEL, 20/4/95, 290pp, £5.99 Andy Sawyer

No relation, by the way. Robert J. Sawyer is a Canadian author, from the little I can read of him, it seems to have a solid line of good, middle of the road science fiction stories. The Quintaglio Ascension is part 2 of The Quintaglio Ascension, the story of an intelligent dinosaur species whose technology and astronomy has developed to perhaps mid-16th century in our reckoning, which discovers that not only is the world a moon of a huge gas-giant rather than an isolated continent floating down an endless river, but also the increasingly frequent

R B is a sign that this moon is about to be torn apart by tidal stresses to become a ring system.

Book 1 Far-Seer, ended with Afsan and the Copernicus of his species, in a project to develop a means of emigration. The central character is Toroco, the son of Afsan. This relationship is important to the story for reasons that will become apparent, but a large proportion of the plot follows the previous book's technology and scientific development. Toroco is a geologist who explores Land's fossil record to discover significant differences to that which the reader will be familiar with. The unearthing of an artefact leads to another character - a typical science-fictional trope, in fact, which is difficult to do justice to, not the most interesting part of the story.

What is interesting, and what makes the book good SF and good reading - is Sawyer's biological ingenuity and the well-rounded description of his alien society. The Quintaglions - essentially, small intelligent Tyrannosaurus-like dinosaurs are strongly territorial creatures whose society mixes cooperation and aggression in different proportions. We lose population pressures, only one hatchling per clutch of eggs are allowed to stay alive. The only exceptions to this are the ruling Family and the offspring of Afsan and Novato who - Far-Seers - are allowed to survive because Afsan was thought to be a kind of Messiah figure, the "One". In such a society, the concept of "sibling" is something cast-aside with mysticism and belief, which is partly "you" and for whom the general rules of terriory do not seem fashioned well. The half-seconds that every hatch is open to a political "selective breeding" will, as is revealed, be central to the great Darwinian question of what, in "survival of the fittest" is "the finest". Sawyer's work explores the biological parameters of the story, Afsan has to solve a murder mystery (murder, an overlooked character or the cause of death). While the book is good SF, it is not as engrossing as the previous book. The world is well rounded in detail, and the characters are round and interesting, with a few exceptions. The writing is not as gripping as in the previous book, but the world itself is fascinating and well described, and the characters are well developed. This is a good SF novel, and I recommend it.

Robert Silverberg

In this grim vision of Earth's future, we see the world being torn away from the rewards of destruction of the world's ecosystems in earlier centuries. The great hordes of humanity that have spread to the farmlands have turned into desert. Pollution is visible in the sky, which can only be breathed with teh aid of masks. Industrial development is controlled by rival factions, and the book is packed with ideas and technology that reveal the way to discover genetic engineering techniques that will adapt humans to the changing environment. This book is already a smash hit on Earth for life on one of the satellite worlds which orbit the planet, but this will not be possible for Earth's future population, which leaves a third alternative: interstellar exploration.

Nick Rhodes is a genetic engineer who has doubts about the future of his work, while recognizing that life on Earth will be untenable within solar systems if humans do not adapt. Victor Farkas, whose work for the megacorpor is very different from the kind of work done for teur surgeon who gene- spliced him before birth, leaves him with "blind sight", but no eyes.

Paul Carpenter is scrabbles his way up the corporate ladder and becomes the captain of a ship to explore the various characters are skillfully handled and entwined to make a story that is compelling. The most engrossing aspect of teh book is the entirely convincing description of the human body. The world is not perfect, but where adaptation and compromise seem to be the only options.

Michael Slade
Ripper NEL, 2/4/95, 377pp, £4.99 Mat Coward

Who would slash the body to shreds, then rip the face of America's foremost feminist - and hang her out to die? asks the man behind the "prime-grade horror" paper- back, that all who like their fear filled with humor. (This is a horror novel, but it's not a shock-job publicity his new phone-in book, but merely a mad ripper.) I found the author's note has been changed from earlier volumes in this one-word title series (e.g. Headhunter, Cuthroat), it still says "Michael Slade is the joint pseudonym of a team of Canadian crime writers specializing in the field of criminal insanity", but it no
longer mentions that they have ‘defended and prosecuted some very dangerous individuals’. Write about what you know—the way they say it isn’t.

Actually, this book isn’t all bad, if you like extremely gruesome torture to non-human characters. It’s certainly exciting in places, with lots of lively dialogue. But (and I don’t know whether this has anything to do with the profession of its joint authors) it’s very overwritten, and contains some quite nastily daft sentences, like: ‘The clock above the bulletin board tossed seconds across the room, time defying the steam that rose from his coffee cup.’

Nancy Springer

Larque on The Wing
AvoNova, 295 pp., $4.99
Carol Ann Green

Larque Harootunian is heading for a mild life crises, the change of life is so different from any she’s heard of before; it explains the very strong opposition of kind, gender and love. Larque didn’t expect to change so much older, for God’s sake, which is really basic, the first thing anybody notices about a person. Then, becoming not only male but—what a way to do the big four-oh...’ (P1)

It all starts the day Larque is visited by a dropper of some hormone aged 10 years old, Skyllark is unforgivable and uncouth and Larque wishes she would just go away. But when Skyllark does leave, Larque finds herself missing something in her life, something she can’t quite define at first, but knows that it is very important. What is missing is her own childhood dreams and hopes. To recover these, Larque must recover Skyllark.

Springer leads us on a journey through life, making us remember our own childhood dreams and hopes. Through Larque’s transformation to the young, gay male Lark, she shows us the other side of gender and what it is like for a middle-aged woman to see and experience the world as a young man. As Lark, Skyllark and Larque can experience what it is truly like to be abroad at night and not fears the dark, knowing that your strong male body will keep you from harm. But, it’s not as simple as that, as the gay bashing of Shadow, the enigmatic man who transforms Larque into Lark shows. The night isn’t always safe for men either, and at least as Lark, she has the ability to deal with the threat.

Larque on The Wing explores the relationships between our inner selves and how these relationships react to our outer relationships with our friends and family. It explores Larque’s fight to incorporate her ‘selves’ back into one self and live the life she’s always wanted to. It is an uplifting novel which shows how the other half lives, be it female for male, or gay for straight. Springer has created a thoughtful fantasy that helps to imagine what it might have been like...

Michael Swanwick

The Iron Dragon’s Daughter
Avonova, 495 pp., $4.99
Chris Ames

Recently there’s been a move towards informing classic fantasy with the tropes of 20th century America... elves in shopping malls, that kind of thing, paralleling our world with the simple addition of magic, as though that would change nothing. Michael Swanwick’s The Iron Dragon’s Daughter begins in an Dickensian world where Jane, a changeling, is isolated, and brings another product of vast, sentient artificial dragons. So far so picturesque, as does some already strange, this is not standard Fantasy world, and the opposition of rich and poor, of the middle class and the poor makes it gate accounts for a lot of the dynamic of Fantasy, right? Only when Jane does break out of the factory by saving herself to a stealth dragon that somehow has become more than the sum of its parts, we find with her a world stranger than the first chapters might have prepared us for.

The Dragon reeds for a while and Jane becomes a fairly standard American teenager, listening to music and hanging around the mall. Her universe is populated by mythological species of every hue, named to the Irish that every Fantasy writer seems to use, but in Welsh, which brings another production of vast, sentient artificial dragons. This is a much better novel than the first book in the series — voices for God, a microorganism that makes you like it this, but I wouldn’t recommend this as your introduction to the Babylon 5 saga.

Roger Zelazny (ed.)

Warriors of Blood and Dream
AvoNova, 659 pp., $5.99
Pat McMurray

There are two problems: I’ve always had a theme anthologies. I find that it’s strictly maintained, it can quickly get boring as you read the fourth story of a speaking cat, a flying horse, a alien pretending to be human, invasion by insect men, the theme is not maintained, the unity of the anthologies is lost, and then what’s the point in a theme anthology? An interesting conundrum.

This anthology consists of 15 short stories, and I find that the first thing that is any idea that the editor, Roger Zelazny, might have gotten either of these mistakes can be discarded. The martial arts involved do include karate, judo, and the like, but also boxing, wrestling, Native American magic and calligraphy. The combat involved was as often of the mind as the body, and the authors really ring the changes on this theme. Equally importantly, this interesting story doesn’t lose the common theme that makes this an anthology rather than just a random selection of stories, that of people fighting their enemies with both mind and body. This is a interesting and readable selection of stories — Roger Zelazny was a good editor.

Several of the stories are particularly striking. Joe Lansdale’s ‘Master of Misery’ is a grim little gem, about the body dies in misery, Joel Richards has written an interesting depiction of a alien hunting human in ‘Forest’, Richard Lupoff’s ‘Easy Living’ shows how blunted the human mind and fantasy can become for an expatriate. There are two longer stories in the collection, almost novel length. These are Walter Jon Williams ‘Blood of the King’, a laugh-out-loud story of Chinese myth and magic, and Steven Barnes ‘Sand Man’ a seriously good story around Native American myth.

Not every story works, Victor McEvoy’s ‘Guardian Angel’ was very unconvincing in its portrayal of a future gang-run USA. However one weak story out of fifteen makes this a very good anthology.

This book is based on the television series Babylon 5. It is a novel set on Babylon 5, rather than a novelisation of an episode. It doesn’t stand alone, and would be almost impossible to follow without being familiar with the series. Unlike Trek novels, Babylon 5 novels are meant to be part of the canon, they’re placed in order...
Can SF be PC?

by Verity di Staff & Ernest Newman

It is accepted that the majority of literature studied today throughout the English speaking world is the product of Dead White European Males. It is equally true that the majority of science fiction seen as characteristic of the genre was written by Dead White American Males. It is therefore not surprising that the genre is rife with Americocentrism and technophalism. For many readers this seems a necessary support to their besieged egos in the face of the rise of feminism and ethnic diversity. The question facing the politically correct reader of science fiction is: Is SF capable of anything better? Or is it so intrinsically riddled with inappropriate and outdated cultural baggage that we must turn our backs upon it in the search for the literature of the new age.

Science fiction in its American format grew from the power fantasies of technophilic white adolescent males. Fictions were dominated by male heroes who were intelligent, handsome, heterosexual, decisive and white, and operated within the world of male-dominated science. Women were there to provide ego support and to be rescued (screaming) from many-tentacled rapists. Persons of other races provided either threat or comic support. People challenged by physical or mental handicaps were unlikely to be seen on central stage.

And this was the so-called Golden Age: the age of a pulp industry supported by adolescent males, who consumed their gaudy pleasures in solitary secret between torchlit sheets. Most would now be repulsed by these sleazy unhealthy products of an unhinged masculinity; but has the genre progressed since then?

Throughout its development, science fiction has remained the preserve of White American Males. That current SF has yet to learn the lessons of PC thought is in part a result of this. It is also a consequence of the perceived market for the genre – in the mind of the public, SF is still read chiefly by spotty, sexually-repressed, anorak-clad nerds.

The advent of the New Wave did little to change the face of populist SF: it was no more than a stylistic exercise and made no attempt to change the underlying assumptions of a pumped up masculine genre. A thin veil of irony was occasionally laid upon the technophilic fantasies of a white male writer’s long-vanished youth.

The Eighties saw the origin of Cyberpunk. Although touted as revolutionary, this was once again a stylistic gloss applied to the same warped technofantasies. Instead of thrusting penile rockets, we had cyber probes; male penetration fantasies elevated into virtual worlds. Women achieved a higher profile, but the language and style of Cyberpunk insidiously relegated them to the role of boy-toys: stiletto-heeled whores with empty mirrorshaded eyes. And still they inhabited a monocultural, white bread world.

Despite its self-proclaimed counter-cultural sensibilities, Cyberpunk simply reiterated the fears and attitudes of American middle-class society – the increasing power of the Japanese in the US market place, the trend amongst multinationals for acquisitions and mergers, the usage of designer drugs and the increasing personalisation of technology.

Heterosexuality is dominant throughout SF. A few books have been published which feature overtly
Can SF be PC?

Very little SF is directed at those who are differently pleased - for instance, there are no SF novels with transvestite lead characters. There are examples of SF with supporting characters that could be described as such, for example The Dreaming Jewels by Theodore Sturgeon or John Shirley's 'Wolves of the Plateau'. And there have been novels that explore gender roles, using either characters that change gender through biology, such as Ursula K LeGuin's The Left Hand of Darkness, or FM Busby's The Breeds of Man; or those that change their sex through choice or accident - the works of John Varley, Robert Heinlein's 'All You Zombies' and I will Fear No Evil, The Passion of New Eve by Angela Carter, and Samuel Delany's Triton. There have also been SF novels where gender differences have been used as mere gimmicks, such as Thomas T Thomas's Crygender or Samantha Lee's Childe Rolande.

Gender developments, such as New Wave and Cyberpunk have had little effect on populist SF. The American style co-exists with a number of splintered sub-genres. That some of these sub-genres make use of PC thought to a limited extent is irrelevant.

The majority of SF is still written by (Dead) White American Males. SF written in such a tradition can not be PC. Writers may seek to challenge the reader's attitudes and prejudices, but when the underlying assumptions of the genre operate to confirm the self-same prejudices and assumptions, then nothing has been achieved. We fear that it is impossible for science fiction to embrace Political Correctness, and believe therefore that the genre is without a future. It is therefore the responsibility of all right thinking authors to abandon this outmoded and culturally retarded genre and to build a new form of future fiction, freed from the white male constraints of story, plot or characterisation.

gay protagonists, but these are few and treated as tokens by the homophobic mass readership, who appear unready to explore their own sexuality in the full and open manner which will become the norm when we have sloughed off the redundant behaviour patterns inculcated into us by the old paternalist society.

At its most obvious, technophilia is displayed in the magazine covers which sport penis-shaped rocket ships. Weapons of destruction are equally prevalent - whether as planet-buster bombs or hand-held laser weapons. A whole sub-genre, militaristic SF, is devoted to fiction based around destruction and its technical means.

Technophilia is a function of both the male need for control and the image of technology as substitute penis. Even when technological or scientific tools are used as literary devices, they are camouflaged as technophilic signifiers. Few writers are so subtle. In David Nighbert's Timelapse, the hero has the "fastest spaceship in existence". And even more insulting, this spaceship has a "sexy, contralto" voice.

The development of science has sought to explain our surroundings, whilst technological development has been geared to controlling and exploiting them. This is a masculine Endeavour, and SF has not seen fit to challenge this or even raise it as a point for discussion. It holds this dubious philosophy dear to its hollow technophilic heart.

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Americocentrism is certainly still rife within science fiction. John Kessel notes that William Gibson's Neuromancer does not mention the United States, or even an American brand name in the New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, 1988. This view is expounded further by Orson Scott Card, another White American Male. In a review of Australian author George Turner's Brainchild he writes: "Science fiction has long had as one of its givens that the near future will be dominated by the United States..." (F&SF, 02/93). He goes on to say "[i]t is taken for granted that anything that matters in the world of the future will be American." These statements typify the attitude of the men who produce the mass of commercially available science fiction. In most science fiction novels where a technical endeavour is detailed, the lead character is a white American male; other nationalities play minor roles or even supply the villains.

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