

**V**  
**ector**  
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**Summer 1995**

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

**The Critical Journal of the BSFA**



**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?  
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## 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:

Chris Amies, KV Bailey, Stephen Baxter, Norman Beswick, Tanya Brown, Colin Greenland, Steve Jeffrey, Graham Joyce, Paul Kincaid, Ken Lake, David Langford, John Madracki, Boyd Parkinson, Stephen Payne, Mark Plummer, Camilla Pomeroy, Ian Sales, Surendra Singh, Maureen Speller...

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



### Mirrorshades

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 *Valentine* 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 slagging 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

Congratulations on finally bringing out *Vector* 182, after all your tribulations.

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*

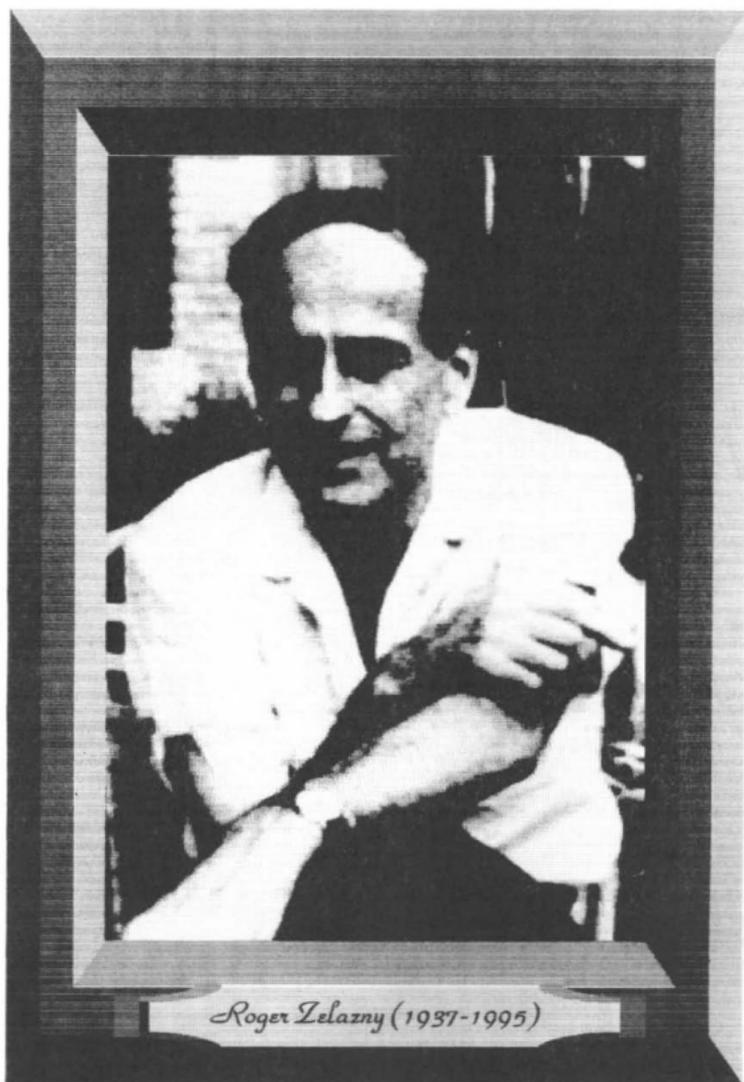
(Sometimes the more subtle shades of grey are lost in the printing process – sorry! Catie)

*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!

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# **THIS IMMORTAL**

BY TANYA BROWN

**R**oger 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.

**I**n 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.

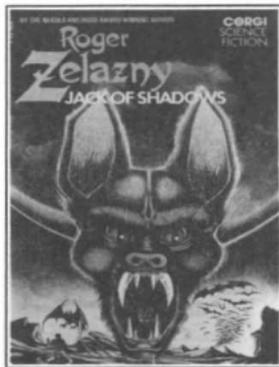
In his short stories, he sometimes played the trick the other way around. Mythical beings were uprooted from their natural habitat and deposited in mundane times. In Zelazny's Hemingway pastiche, 'The Naked Matador' (1981), a criminal on the run is assisted by a strange woman who wears a headscarf and 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, Tingel, 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 good 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).

**Z**elazny plays with archetypes throughout the 'Amber' series – Amber, after all, is the archetypal city. There are magical messenger birds (which have a habit of sitting 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 sideroads 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 posited a 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 etymology, 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 life. "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

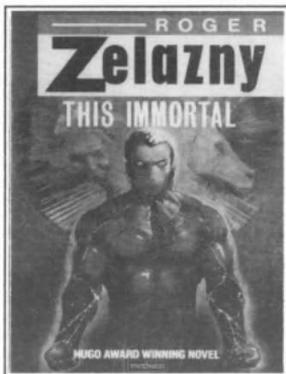
work, from Chaucer to Whitman, and was a poet in his own right – although his poetry is not easily obtainable. The influence of Jacobean tragedy has already been noted; reading the 'Amber' books is much more fun if you've a Dictionary of Quotations to hand! He had an eye for detail – both emotional and physical – that, at its best, was reminiscent of Theodore Sturgeon; and a tendency to philosophise:

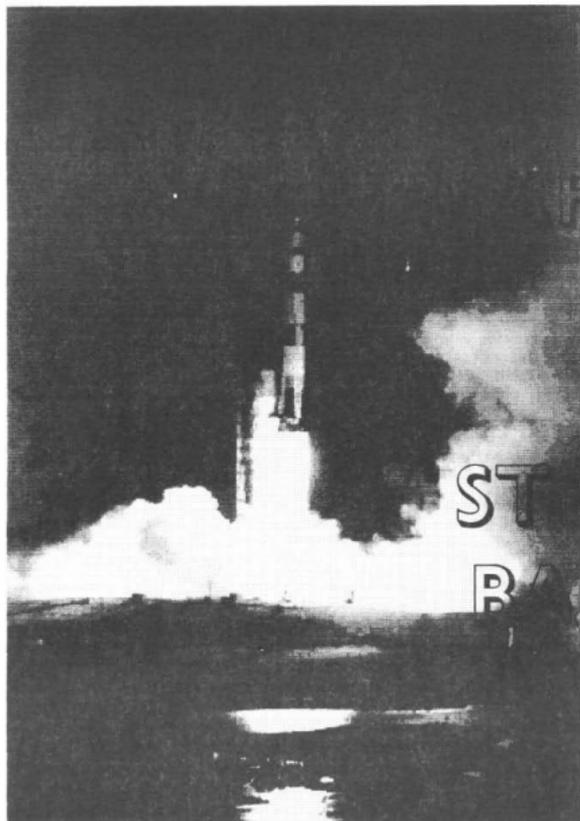
"Sipping beer in a mountain lodge on the planet Divbah... I once looked out through a wide window and up at the highest mountain in the known universe. It is called Kasla, and it has never been climbed.... It is one of those crazy things you think about and promise yourself that someday you're going 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."





# APOLLO 13 BY STEPHEN BAXTER

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 count-downs, 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 lighten 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-looking, 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.

(Universal; 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.

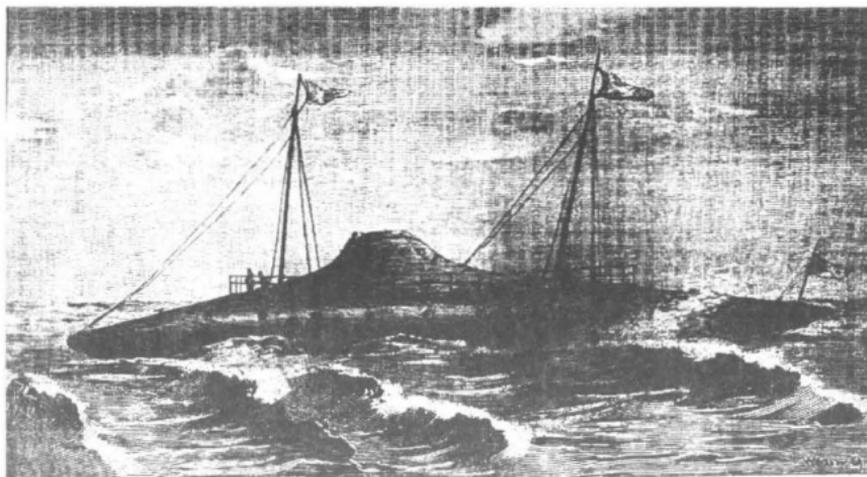
Nemo is a pure antihero, a depressive driven by the loathing of society and injustice that made him turn his back on the land for good. I've already mentioned the Disney film – James Mason has Nemo down to a T. When Nemo picks up M. Arronax, the narrator of the book, and his friends Ned Land and Conseil 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 Arronax 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 civilised 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 Arronax 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 amour, however thick, could support the blows of his spur? [um – Arronax 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 Arronax learns from the terrified dying scream of a crewman reverting to his native tongue, "A moi", 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 Arronax 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 use *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



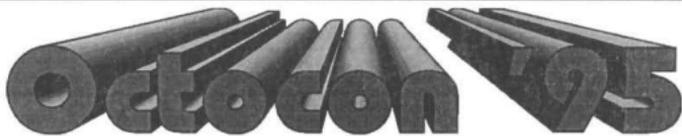
time for Napoleon either. But then, Frenchmen have a tendency not to think of Napoleon as a tyrant...)

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 good 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* like *Arctonax* 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.



Guest of Honour

## Mary Gentle

Author of "Golden Witchbreed", "Rats & Gargoyles" and "Grunts"

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WILL & WENDY SIMPSON

OTHER GUESTS :

Michael Carroll, Diane Duane, Maggie Furey, Robert Holdstock, Katherine Kurtz, Morgan Llywelyn, Anne McCaffrey, Scott MacMillan, Tom Mathews, Peter Morwood, Kim Newman, Tom Richards, Michael Scott, Freda Warrington & James White.

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contribute anything to solving the problem of the plague they must understand if they know the moon rituals? Well, among other reasons, because the plot which is centred on four or five individuals, would not stand it.

The moon-moths and the plague they carry is not a bad idea, but the way the book uses the idea is dreadful. I am at a loss to understand how it was published.

**Stephen Baxter  
The Time Ships**

HarperCollins, 1995, 455pp,  
£15.99  
Paul Kincaid

More than any other writer, H.G. Wells shaped science fiction. Whether he created the genre or not is irrelevant, what matters is that the scientific romances he wrote, particularly at the start of his career, gave us the themes and approaches that have been the hallmark of most science fiction. From utopias and dystopias to future warfare, from travel to other planets to alien invasion, Wells set the pace the rest of us have followed ever since. But it was his first novel which somehow seems to capture the imagination more than any other.

He first approached its themes in a series of essays for *The Science Schools Journal* in 1888 under the title *The Chronic Argonauts*. One hundred years ago this year those essays were revised and put into the form of a novel, *The Time Machine*, a slim volume in which an unnamed inventor regaled a group of archetypal late-Victorian dinner guests with his curious adventures. Wells's socialism was evident in the story of how humanity had become two very different races, the gentle, inoffensive, bovine Eloi and the dark, mechanistic, brutal Morlocks, but the time traveller's adventures there had revealed his own inadequacies and he had left his beloved Eloi Weena in peril. After a haunting, resonant visit to the end of time, he had returned to his own time, recounted his adventures to his dinner guests, and departed again on his errand to rescue Weena, armed with some carefully selected supplies and three books.

That open ending, coupled with the sheer novelty of a time travelling device, has

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 pastiching 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 unending 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 advanced 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 reviled Morlocks which form a recurring theme throughout this book.

Accompanied by Nebogipfel the Morlock, everything that the traveller despises but far 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 Nevathian 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 Wallis 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 cybernetic time of strange nanobings. Over 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 as 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-Victoriana that doesn't matter too much. In the end the pace, invention and audacity of the novel carry it through triumphantly.

**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 typos taken out. I'm afraid there is little that 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'll 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 simplistic and the action is telegraphed well in advance. You can even hum along 'born born born born' as our durtally challenged monstrosity rises from the deep to cause carnage amongst unwary guillemots and skinky 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 knows sharks and is convinced that neither the Blues or the Great White swimming offshore can be responsible for the dismembered 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 flees 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 a National Geographic photographer, never make it back to port.

Benchley's nod to sf is an unwieldy and (to be honest) deeply unconvincing conflation of *Jaws*, the shark, and *Jaws*, the steel toothed villain of various James Bond films. Quite why the Nazis would see a mutant underwater eating machine as a super-weapon to rival the V1 and V2 and re-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-engineered 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 sea lions (no, really) know none of this. They know there is something out in the water that leaves distinctly shark-like bites in people. It's not until they set out on a shark camera safari that they realise that something unexplained 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 lure 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 undemanding 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**  
*Millennium, 1995, 260pp,*  
*£15.99*  
**Phil James**  
**I, Arnold**  
*Millennium, 1995, 280pp,*  
*£15.99*  
**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 Trades 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 anachronistic 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, James's prose is more than just pedestrian, it's opaque and poorly constructed throughout. Take this sentence:

No-one had thought to ask Mayor Arnaud, or, perhaps more pertinently, the players in the brass band, how they knew that the sounds they were about to make were not exactly like those made by aliens such as the one inside the museum library when they were about to attack, or which in their ancient customs meant that your mother charged by the quarter hour and still didn't have two pennies to rub together.

So: an unfunny comic novel. But that's just my personal opinion. Presumably enough people were amused by the first instalments in the series to make this book a viable concern for Millennium. It's a funny old world.

**Octavia E. Butler**  
**Parable of the Sower**  
*Women's Press, 1995,*  
*299pp, £6.99*  
**Carol Ann Green**

In a near future America, Lauren Olamina lives with her family in a walled Neighbourhood just outside of Los Angeles. Outside the walls, homeless people and those living without the protection of

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.

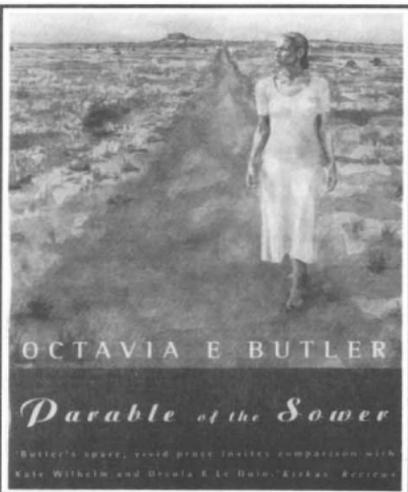
In the America of the future, slavery is returning. As the world disintegrates, towns are bought out by Companies offering protection for a price, loyalty. Farm workers are indentured for life, paid in Company scrip and in debt from the word go, for many there is no escape. For one of Lauren's followers, 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.

All that you Change  
 Changes You.

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 Anyanwu 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 at all. Heroes and heroines aren't black or 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 The 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  
Tripout**

*Hodder & Stoughton, 1995,  
377pp, £16.99  
Chris Amies*

*Tripout* 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 arid, brutal environment of the men and women who work deep space in Cherryh's universe, but it takes some getting used to.

*Tripout* 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 Bove 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 lowlives with hearts of gold who have survived in the chinks of the Merchant space machine. Away from the glazed fixity of Bove's private war (he just didn't stop fighting when everybody else did, turning privateer 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 Bove assembles is of an almost Pythonesque lunacy and fondness 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 hit someone else for no particularly good reason.' Then there's the odd fondness for using the sentence 'hard'. Usually as in 'Bove 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 Moyer's cover art shows, in inexplicable green and purple, orbital space, spiky spaceships. Not a human in sight. A touch of the David A Hardys 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 gun-ho 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 toebreaker 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 old-fashioned with its machinery-led stories and horrid certainties, even in the case of characters like Tom Hawkins who aren't certain of anything other than that their present life is a crook and that anything, even jumping ship and running for his life, has to be better. We're on Varley's steel beach, no direction home, and all bets are off.

**Mary Corran**

**Fate**  
*Millenium, 1995, 363pp,  
£16.99  
Tanya Brown*

Asher'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 Vallis, Prince Lykon's infant daughter, will save the realm – but Vallis has disappeared.

Fourteen years after the invasion, Asher has fled a repressive 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 chance to embezzle 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 strongboxes.

Then the Oracle summons Asher. She is horrified to find that it has a prediction for her – and more horrified 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

**Chris Curry****Panic**Hodder & Stoughton, 1995,  
370pp, £16.99**Bentley Little****Night School**Headline, 1994, 313pp,  
£16.99**Christopher Pike****The Cold One**Hodder & Stoughton, 1995,  
314pp, £16.99  
Norman Beswick

Three weighty hardbacks to be held in quivering hands...

*Panic*, to my mind the most successful of the three, is domestic. Ricky Piper is terrified, as a boy, by his grandfather's tales of the greenjacks who haunt the garden and are especially dangerous on Hallow'een. Ricky can both see and hear them. His twin brother, Robin, born without legs, feeds his terror. Robin is presumed dead after a circus fire and Ricky, after establishing a career, comes home to face his fears – with appalling results. The story is well-paced, builds up beautifully, and reaches a climax that is horrifying without being emetic.

Not so with *Night School*, which is set in Brea, a California campus infested with an evil presence which is centred on the sixth floor of the library. Fight from the start the horrors pile up: there are multiple rapes, professors torture animals and foment racism in class, murders abound and atrocities multiply. Professor Ian Emerson and college newspaper editor Jim Parker get involved with tracking down the source of the evil, together with Gifford Stevens, an obsessed occult scholar, and sundry girl friends. But the evil of Brea is aware of them and uses the university itself in defence. As an image of the mass hysteria that can grip a large institution, *Night School* perhaps works horribly enough, but the frenzied tone and graphic detail left me feeling cheapened and unclear.

*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

massage. But then the venue shifts to India. Govinda Sharma is ordered by his spiritual master to follow a mysterious 5,000-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 entranced 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. Kolmerten (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. Kolmerten 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 re-evaluate, reread and recover many forgotten utopian texts written by women. The books discussed ranged from *Blazing World* by Margaret Cavendish (1668), through *Millenium Hall* by Sarah Robinson Scott (1762) and *Cranford* by Elizabeth Gaskell (1851-53), to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's more well known *Herland* (1915).

Examining these texts in the light of contemporary feminist thinking, the authors highlight and expose the utopian tradition in women's writing through the centuries. For instance, in her essay on Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*, Lee Cullen Khana discusses the historical precedent this novel set in its exploration of 'points of

difference' and the intersections of genre and gender. Khana points out that although she was a member of the seventeenth century Royalist elite, Cavendish (the Duchess of Newcastle) could use her experience as a member of this dislocated class to speculate on the position of gender and power in her writings.

Two of the essays, 'Mothers and Monsters in Sarah Robinson Scott's *Millenium Hall*' by Linda Dunne and 'Gaskell's Feminist Utopia: The Cranfordians and the Reign of Goodwill' by Rae Roenthal, deal with the portrayal of all female societies and compare them with feminist separatist utopias of the 1970s by authors such as Russ, Gearhart and Charnas. Dunne describes *Millenium Hall* as 'an idealised community of women [that presents] an alternative to the traditional marriage plot of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century'. She highlights the discussion of the place of women in the eighteenth century and shows how Scott explored a world in which its inhabitants have withdrawn from the 'dominant male-controlled economic system' that her readers would be living in. Rosenthal describes a similar community in Gaskell's *Cranford*. These two essays, along with Carol A. Kolmerten's 'Texts and Contexts: American Women Envision Utopias, 1890-1920', discuss the difficulties many women authors faced as they tried to end their books, constrained as they were by the literary conventions of the time that often demanded 'happy' endings.

Kolmerten, in particular, describes the conflict between the need to conform to the traditions of 'the highly popular sentimental novel', which demanded a proper ending that 're-inforced and reaffirmed the culture's ideology regarding woman's sacred domestic sphere', and the need to portray their utopian visions in a realistic mode. In an attempt to avoid this dilemma, many women writers would subvert their books by refusing to end them in any conventional manner, preferring instead to concentrate on descriptions and discussions of utopian landscapes in the place of the lives of their characters.

As the book progresses, it comes closer to our own time. Jane L. Donawerth's 'Science Fiction by Women in the Early Pulps, 1926-1930', which comes just over half way through the book, starts the exploration of women's twentieth century science fiction. Donawerth discusses how the women authors used their narrative voices to form a bridge 'between the nineteenth-century technological utopia by

women and the constraints on women writers in the new twentieth-century science fiction.' She writes about the steps these authors took to relieve their female characters of domestic drudgery and how they explored alternatives to traditional child rearing and the nuclear family unit.

In 'There Goes the Neighborhood: Octavia Butler's Demand for Diversity in Utopias', Michelle Erica Green deals with a contemporary author who uses utopian 'points of difference' to explore and challenge not only questions of gender, but questions of difference as well. Green shows how Butler uses 'Difference, disagreement and diversity [to] provide the life force of her utopias'. Apart from Naomi Mitchison, Butler is the only late twentieth century author to be dealt with in any depth in this collection.

One of the most disappointing aspects of the book was the lack of analysis of the relationship between the subject matter of the individual essays. The editors could have encouraged a more in-depth exploration of the influences many of the earlier texts might have on contemporary utopian writings. I was also disappointed that, like many recent studies of women's utopian and science fiction, there was no mention (apart from Butler) of late 1980s and 1990s fiction by women, much of which encompasses and transcends the early utopian writing.

Nevertheless, this book goes a long way to help reclaim women's utopian fictions from history and does demonstrate a long tradition of this kind. It explores the early utopian fantasies and dreams by seventeenth and eighteenth century women writers and begins to pull out some common threads. This is a collection that informs and intrigues the reader about early interpretations of utopian and science fiction by women.

Greg Egan  
 Axiomatic  
 Millennium, 1995, 289pp,  
 £15.99  
 Stephen Payne

The first Greg Egan story I can remember reading was 'The Cutie', published back in 1989 in *Interzone* 29. The story details the experiences of a man (yes, a man) who impregnates himself with the embryo of a Cutie, a creature derived from human DNA and designed to allow people to experience pregnancy, birth and the joys of parenting – and nothing more. At the time it provoked a few extreme reactions (disgust, mostly), which served to put Egan, the unknown writer, on the New Map of SF.

Since then he has sold numerous short stories and this volume collects those – mostly from *Interzone* and *Asimov's* – published between 1989 and 1992. It's a sort of literary blueprint of what Egan the novelist has become and 'The Cutie', though inserted quietly towards the end, is the earliest published story included here and makes an interesting starting point. For 'The Cutie' cuts right to the heart of the matter: it highlights both Egan's strengths and his weaknesses as a writer.

The weaknesses are many. 'The Cutie' has only two characters: the narrator and his girlfriend – and the girlfriend walks out on page two! Motivation is not entirely convincing and the plot turns on a coincidence. Yet we keep reading, intrigued both by the sheer bizarre repulsion of it all and the moral complexities that backbone the tale. It is a combination that Egan uses over and over again. His interest in bio-engineering (as the cover would have it) permeates many of these stories, not just technically, but ethically. And the implications of what that technology will engender is the moral dilemma that we, the readers, must consider; just as the protagonist of 'The Cutie' must consider them when he faces the consequences of his actions.

Who can forget the title story 'Axiomatic'? It's a subtle, clever mix of mood enhancing technology and the weight of conscience. Yes, it suffers from a dodgy plot and a tenuously motivated protagonist, yet it is just as effective on a second reading. Why? Because again,



Egan presents us with a conundrum – how responsible are we for our actions if we have knowingly (literally) changed our conscience? This is what I like about Egan, he grabs it and uses it to create something that is greater than the sum of its parts. There is more. 'Eugene' takes the idea of 'designer' DNA babies to the ultimate conclusion. 'The Carees', which starts out as a kind of techno-thriller (like much of Egan's work) then devolves into a strange take on the human body and the meaning of art (can one be considered the other?). 'Learning To Be Me' is here too, and 'Blood Sisters', 'The Walk', 'Appropriate Love' and 'Closer', which describes the closest relationship between a man and a woman imaginable. Egan keeps on and on looking at what we are doing with ourselves.

The collection opens with 'The Infinite Assassin', the tale of an assassin who is infinite across all the quantum permutations of reality (perhaps prefiguring *Quantum Leap*). It's an enormous idea that left me ungluing my head from the ceiling. There are a couple of others (I still find 'Unstable Orbits in The Space of Lies' incomprehensible) and a couple of previously unpublished stories. 'Seeing' struck me as being a cross between *Quantum Leap* and P.K. Dick, while 'A Kidnapping' is about a weird,

virtual kidnapping, highlighting Egan's continuing fascination with communications technology. The only omission that I can recall from this period, which is unfortunate, is 'Dust'. Shame it's not here as I think it would fit in rather well.

In many ways Egan is the consummate SF writer. He is blessed with an astonishing imagination. He is concerned with many of the issues with which we are all concerned. He writes short stories that complement, rather than draw from, his novels. Above all, he's a writer with a conscience and that, for me, makes 'Axiomatic' such an emotive story – in every single universe.

Stephen Grundy  
 Rhinegold  
 Michael Joseph, 1994,  
 870pp, £9.99  
 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 four 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 genre-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 does 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 pure 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 sides 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, astonishingly, a first novel.

Barbara Hambly  
 Children of the Jedi  
 Bantam Press, 1995, 345pp,  
 £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 surprise then, when after 13 days and nearly 100

pages, I actually started to have my interest tickled.

Having seen the films, I was reasonably au fait with 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 crypts rumoured 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 with two of Luke's younger Jedi students, Dr Cray Mingla and her fiancé, Nichos Marr. Led by dreams and a mysterious force, Luke enters an asteroid field over the planet Pzob where his ship is attacked by the Eye of Palpatine, 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 Callista, a young Jedi Knight who had tried to destroy the ship once before. The Eye's mission is to destroy the planet Belsavis (for some reason I never quite 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 as 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 after this until the very end of the book. The Eye of Palpatine is full of suitably weird life-forms, the antics of some of these, demonstrating that the author has a wry sense of humour. I found it hard not to think of the warring Gamorreans 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 Callista are the highlights of this book, and are enough in themselves to keep one eventually turning the pages. It all becomes worthwhile when you read the twist at the end, but be prepared to seriously suspend belief! So, street-cred 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*  
Vikki Lee

It is interesting to note that only Harry 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 Shaf Sigvarthsson, the new Co-King of England with Alfred of Wessex, from the year 867AD onwards.

Shaf 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, ballista's and dart throwers, and sets off on a maiden voyage to test his ships against the vikings. After initial success in battle, Shaf's ship becomes separated and quickly becomes hunted, instead of hunter. The viking flagship, The Frani Orm, carries the three remaining sons of Ragnar Ragnarrson (called Ragnar Hairy-Breeks; Utbi the Grizzled, despoiler of women; Halvdan the rebeard, fanatical dueller and champion; and Sigurth the Snake-eye, so called for the whites around the pupils in his eyes. These three are bent on the destruction of Shaf, who slew their brother Ivar the boneless (apparently named after a problem he had with women before he raped and murdered them).

Needless to say, Shaf escapes this initial encounter but is left stranded on the Frisian coast where he starts a years-long journey into the frozen northern wastelands. His travels finally bring him full circle, and Shaf realises that the only way he can return to England is by defeating the Ragnarrson's at the Braethraborg, their own stronghold.

The whole story swings along at page-turning pace. Shaf's is by no means the standard 'young man defeats powerful enemy/unites the nation/becomes king' tale so often found in fantasy novels. 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 Lanzenden, and embark on a crusade to find the holy relic. Erkenbert is busy plotting Shaf'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 Shaf in his attempt to return to English soil.

As one would expect, this book builds towards a final climactic showdown between Shaf and the murderous Ragnarrsons. 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 Shaf is going to win, but should it really have been quite so easily? One would have expected one or two of the Ragnarrsons 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, fit of 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 drawn, even though Shaf 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 Sunnyvojde Rest Home for geriatric deities, from where the buses run to Wolverhampton, and ends in the cleansing of the world with washing-up liquid and fabric conditioner. The intervening ramifications are funny, 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* – 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. Julian, naturally, wishes to take over the universe by having *Osiris* declared insane; *Osiris* wants to escape from Sunnyvojde 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 troops, the volcano filled with *Stratford* 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 happily, random quality. Puns lie

in wait; 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 for a good comic novelist is a deep underlying seriousness. And 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 Lundqvist's Sykes-Fairbairn fighting knife. But he also has a wide generosity and compassion for human – and godly – failings. His satire encompasses the possibility of forgiveness and happy endings.

Tanith Lee

Vivia

Little Brown, 1995, 395pp,

£16.99

Paul Kincaid

**Her 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 heights in Europe at the end of the last century, was a form in which death, sex and cruelty entwined eternally in lush settings and overdescribed 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 adjectival 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 abasement, the horror, o the horror, of eternity. In this particular instance Vivia is the daughter of Vaddix, a minor warlord who cares more for his horse than his new bride or his daughter. Vivia 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 social disorder, until eventually everyone is killed. Only Vivia, 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 Vivia and takes her for his mistress and prisoner. Recognising Vivia's vampirism, he also provides her with a private harem of virgin girls whose blood she can drink at whim. He wants Vivia to take part in his sexual/magical experiments, but his ambition presages a fall and soon he and Vivia 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 no-one, characters or 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 Armes**

Rosa 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 allegiances lie in a distinctly libertarian direction, the past is a shifting mass of loyalties and betrayals that are

all of a sudden beginning to reach out and prod him once again. When he's not carrying out security contracts for the Felix Dzerzhinsky Collective with the help of his AI-controlled gun, he spends a lot of his time in his head replaying the assassination of Trotsky, which he identifies with the mysterious death of his own father, old-school Trot and computer genius Josh Kohn. But before he died, Kohn senior persuaded the world at large to use a free computer program called Dissembler, and Moh and others are waiting for the program to stop dissembling and do something. Years earlier, a meeting with Logan, an Esperanto-speaking militant spacerigger, provided a reference to something called the Star Fraction, and now the name is coming back into circulation.

Meanwhile Jordan Brown, seventeen years old and dissatisfied, leaves the religious enclave of Beulah City – the former Islington – for the bright lights and strangeness of NorLonTo – North London Town, where anything goes, for a price; he finds a new world on the far side of the fence, less safe but much more whirling. And Janis Taine, scientific researcher, finds her laboratory burnt down and herself *persona non grata* by dint of her association with the wrong stripe of people. The Men In Black are on her case. For every AI that is trying to come to consciousness on the right side there has to be one on the other side too. Somewhere in the Net there lurks the Black Plan; a Neomancer-like AI that is often believed to be nothing more than a myth. But once activated it is as implacable as the Furies.

This is an information-rich society. Usenet seems to still be flourishing, with newsgroups such as theories.conspiracy, fourth.internet, and alt.long-live-maoism-leninism-maoism-gorzalo-thought, providing the Felix Dzerzhinsky Collective with its newsfeed. In some ways this novel partakes heavily of the cyberpunk era; there are overtones of Snow Crash and Neomancer, but there is also the political edge, the fascination with the revolutionary Left without being entirely taken in by it. For MacLeod's struggling characters, cyberspace is the fifth-colour country, 'the new America' though that can be

seen 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 overdone. 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 disappointing, 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 he has to create it for himself.' Prosaically, Engels argued that the proto-hominid 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 blessed or cursed with the need to go on changing, creating itself as it creates the world around it.

Marc Leeds  
**The Vonnegut Encyclopedia**  
 Greenwood, 1995, 693pp,  
 £57.50

Leonard Mustazza (Ed)  
**The Critical Response to Kurt  
 Vonnegut**  
 Greenwood, 1995, 246pp,  
 £32.95

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 vicious 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 is entirely natural, therefore, that Americans should instal tributes 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 Bokonomism and of the psychopathology of Samaritania.

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 in

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 16pp.)

*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 straightforward slander or by poking fun at poor old Kigore Trout. Marc Leeds' introduction to this broadside simply says 'Inflamy 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 file 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, inflating 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-sequiturs', 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 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: 'However 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 washerwomen to manufacture a bogus intellectual currency.

**Anne McCaffrey & Elizabeth Ann Scarborough**  
**Power Play**

Bantam Press, 1995, 306pp.  
£14.99

**Anne McCaffrey & S.M. Stirling**

**The City Who Fought**  
Orbit, 1995, 436pp. £16.99  
Lynne Bispham

*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 Nueva, leader of a group of refugees from the planet Bethel, and one of the main characters in *The City 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 sub-genre 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 nevertheless 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 no-nonsense 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 pays your money ...

The refugees in *The City Who Fought* have fled from the Kolnari, 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 reject the rigid beliefs of the Elders, must now find a haven for the remnants of his people and warn of the Kolnari threat. Unable to reach

a planet in their ancient transport, the refugees do reach SSS-900, a space station controlled by the 'shellperson' 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 encapsulated in a 'shell' as the only way to keep him alive. Simeon is having trouble adjusting to his new mobile partner, the feisty Ms Channa Hap, but after some initial sparring the two work out their differences and set about delaying the Kolnari 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 Terraform B, or Petaabee, that can communicate with its human and animal inhabitants. This extrapolation of the Gaia hypothesis is taken to its ultimate conclusion, for Petaabee 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 Shongill, are determined that Petaabee will be recognised as an autonomous planet, much to the irritation of Intergal, the company that first terraformed it. Yana finds herself kidnapped by a pirate who demands Petaabee itself as ransom, while Sean is beset by problems including a mountain of paperwork from the irate company, a religious cult seeking to commune with the planet and hurlers intent on denuding it of wildlife. In the background lurk Matthew Luzon and Torlek Fisk, seeking revenge for events in the earlier novels, who are behind most of Petaabee's current problems.

Despite telepathic cats, pantomime pirates, a selkie and rabbits who gather at Petaabee-approved culting places for the benefit of ecological harmony and human stomachs, *Power Play* avoids the whimsy that has crept into other McCaffrey novels featuring lovable 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 sf 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 sf doesn't cater for all possible tastes.

**Ben Okri**

**Astonishing the Gods**  
Phoenix House, 1995, 159pp.  
£12.00  
K.V. Bailey

An un-named and invisible protagonist voyages for seven years seeking the secret of visibility (ie. 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 overcome'. 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 in those poems, a voyage is the opening allegorical device in Ben Okri's fantasy, but his prime milieu, standing for 'the vale of soul-making', is the city. Here again he writes within a distinctive iconic tradition – Campanella's City of the Sun, Blake's Golganoza, Yeats's Byzantium (all utopian/platonic) and (on the double) James Thomson's City of Dreadful Night and M. John Harrison's Vriconium. 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 a melioristic 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.

Appearances are at odds 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 his answer 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 inconsequentially, that confusion and obscurity 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 Prize. The style of *Astonishing the Gods* could be described as baroque-paradise (Western/Afro-Byzantinian), at once naive and sophisticated ('Riddles danced in the dark places, like blissful fireflies'). Even so the imagistic 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, the seeming arbitrariness of direction (until the end) continues to mystify. This mystification, however, is one of the things that keeps it one reading.

**Robert Rankin**  
**The Most Amazing Man**  
**Who Ever Lived**  
*Doubleday, 1995, 267pp,*  
*£14.99*  
 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 ingenious father, Hugo Rune, not forgetting Murphy's sidekick, the diminutive Tuppe ('Sorry, I didn't notice you there!').

The world is in the most terrible danger and Murphy and Tuppe (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 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.

*Uh? What?*

"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 these with only a little bit of encouragement. All human life is here.

"David Rodway had worked his way up to his position as the town'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 Richeleu in a previous

incarnation. Although he didn't know that."

All writers use tricks to help with the plot. Rankin uses of 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 you are making assumptions about what's going on, then something in a descriptive passage, or the way that the characters interact makes you realise that it was wrong 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 Majipoor**  
*Macmillan, 1995, 165pp,*  
*£12.99*

Steve Jeffrey

**T**his, the blurb informs us, is a "stunning introduction (or re-introduction.)" to the rich history of Majipoor, "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 Pontifex*, 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 Harpirias, pampered scion of one of the great pontifical families, celebrates his twenty fifth birthday with a hunting expedition on a friend's estate. Showing off a tricky 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. Harpirias finds himself exiled to the drudgery of a backwater outpost thousands of miles away, for a month, then a year, then two...

Finally the Lord 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, Korinaam, as guide and interpreter, Harpirias sets out with an escort of furry four-armed Skandars to confront the barbarian king, Toikella, and bargain for the release of the captured expedition. Toikella 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 Harpirias, the unwitting 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 Toikella has his own troubles with a band of degenerate shapeshifters who plague his borders.

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

Toikella's customs are so completely those of a cartoon

macho barbarian that Harpirias 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 Toikella'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

**T**he purpose of this book, as I 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.

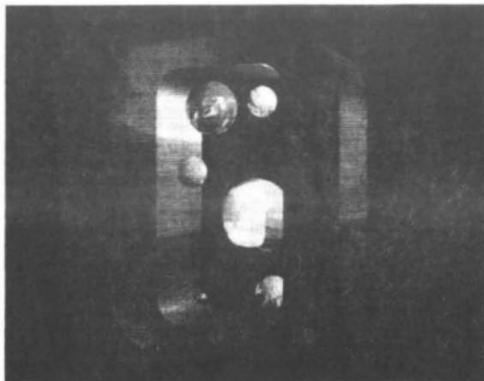
The eight characters selected for this treatment constitute the close Arthurian 'family', those men and women without whom the legend could not exist in the form we have it: Merlin, Morgan le Fay, Kay, Gawain, Guenevere, Lancelot, Mordred and Arthur himself. Perhaps the authors could have included Tristram 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?



**Brian Stableford**  
**Serpent's Blood**  
Legend, 1995, 485pp, £15.99  
Barbara Davies

Subtitled 'The First Book of Genesys', *Serpent's Blood* is the first volume in a new series which, at first sight, with its witch-princesses and giants and place names like 'The Forest of Absolute Night' and 'The Slithery Sea', might appear to be epic fantasy, and on the surface an epic fantasy quest is what you get. But dig deeper and you find it is really of extrapolated to its limits.

Stableford's fiction often reflects his interest in biology and especially genetics, and here he has allowed his imagination free rein. What, if he asks, human colonists can only survive on a planet with the aid of genetic engineering involving their own cells and cells from the existing flora and fauna? And what if, centuries later, a crisis in the planet's environment sets in motion some genetically inbred survival mechanism, such as change in behaviour or a physical metamorphosis?

It is against this background that we are introduced to the cast of characters: humans categorised by their skin tone as goldens, ambers and bronzes, and the planet's other denizens, nightcloaks, crocalids, serpents, salamanders, dragomites ...

Andris Myrasol, a minor Prince from Ferentina, is in the wrong place at the wrong time and ends up in a Xandrian prison. It looks like he'll be there for the rest of his life unless he can raise a colossal ransom.

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 period 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 tree sprouts it will impale Andris from the inside and eventually kill him (this combination of 'sense of wonder' of ideas and horror reminded me of Dan Simmons's *Hyperion*).

Andris, however, is trained in the Arts Geographical and Arts Martial, and as such also receives an offer from the merchant, Carus Fraxinus. Fraxinus and fellow trader Hryr Keshvara are planning an expedition to the legendary Pool of Life through the previously impassable Dragomite Hills, where rumours say a strange blight 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, Merel Zabio, a young female pirate, Andris breaks out of prison. The escape is used as a diversion by Checuti, '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 Genesys', 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 dragomite 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**  
 Greenwood, 1995, 228pp,  
 £49.50  
 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 Sutin, 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-Clock World* and *We Can Build You*. Short stories such as 'Impositor' 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 Abrash'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 Levack'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. Kasanin'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.

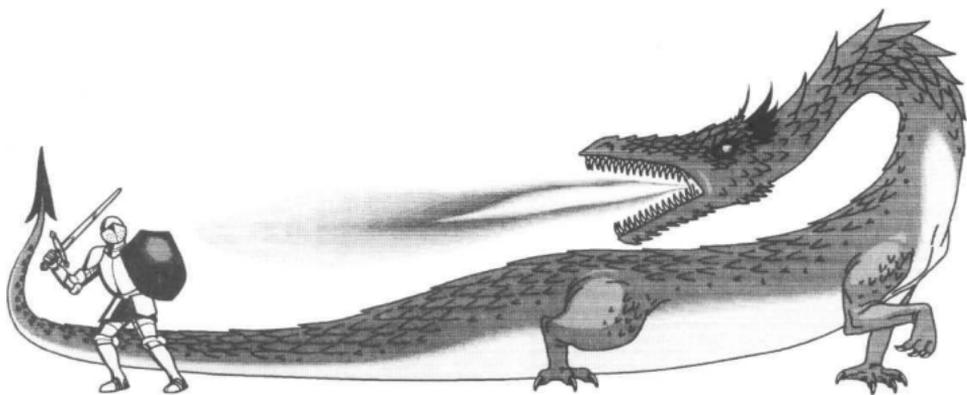
For Greg Rickman, *We Can Build You* becomes another opportunity for him to claim that Dick was sexually abused as a child. At times, Rickman is careful to indicate that this is only a theory – the grandfather is described as the 'putative abuser' (151) – at other times it seems to be established

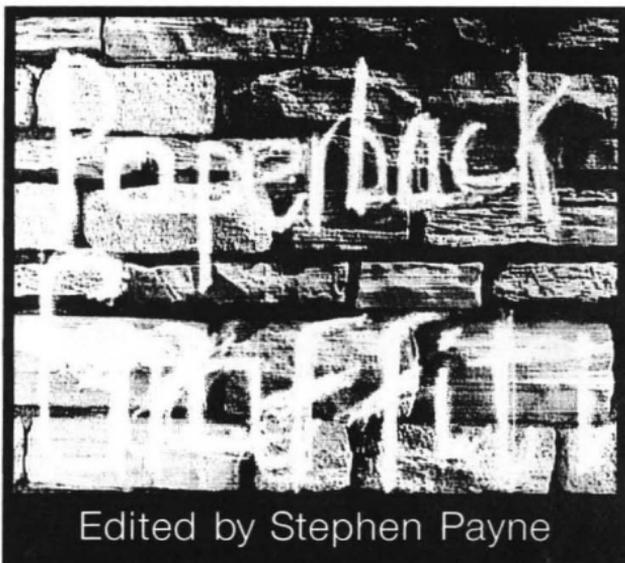
as fact – 'The women were more likely victims, like Philip Dick, of his abusive grandfather (their father), E.G. Kindred' (147). I do not wish to rule out the possibility that this did happen, but Rickman seems to read anything from eating disorders to the Civil War as sublimated symptoms of abuse. Such 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 'Dianoia/Paranoia'. Freedman's analysis of Lacanian 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 Marxist-Lacanian, which co-ordinates 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 'Impositor', where the protagonist does not realise that he is in fact an android double of himself. It is Spence's realisation that he is not self-identical which leads to his body exploding and the destruction of the Earth. Again it has to be emphasized that Dick probably had 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





Edited by Stephen Payne

## Signposts

**Peter F. Hamilton**  
**The Nano Flower**

"A highly readable hard sf novel. If it were my decision, future reprints would be blurb'd 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."  
Cherith Baldry

**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 Earth**

"How Raymond and Simon, when helped by Professor Merlin and his circus performers, give the Edenites and B.E.A.S.T. their comeuppance 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, be it 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

**Patricia Anthony**  
**Cold Allies**  
NEL, 20/4/95, 296pp, £4.99  
Benedict S. Cullum

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 them of fuel just as they in turn have been deprived of food. The cold allies of the title are actually aliens and each of the warring factions is desperate to know the nature of the alien "blue woodies" 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 live, some like death throes.

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 waifo. 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, 20/4/95, 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 souls of the murdered 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 Podlovsky, American martial arts experts, who find their skills of defeating enemies

without causing them permanent damage are of unique importance in 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 world from complete domination by the Heart of Darkness. Assisting them are fellow Earthfolk Scott Silver and Katherine Dowd, 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, 4/5/95, 312pp, £4.99  
Tanya Brown

Ardeeth 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 — except her younger sister Sara, singer with the rock band Black Sun, for whom Ardeeth is a refuge in an uncertain world. But Ardeeth's researches, unknown to her, have uncovered truths that some 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 only one, ghastry, way out. How else can she escape what has been done to her? And Ardeeth is not the only victim; there are all the dead girls, the actresses, out in the gully with stakes through their hearts...

The sacrifices Ardeeth must make are sympathetically described; there is 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 real saviour. A wealthy recluse sits and pores over her grandfather's diaries, searching for clues. And Ardeeth is seeking out the real monsters; whatever they may be,

they are more dreadful than the man who shared her imprisonment.

*The Night Inside* combines elements of thriller, romance and gory horror; despite the occasionally clumsy style, it's a good read.

Iain M. Banks

**Feersum Endjin**  
*Orbit, 8/6/95, 279pp, £5.99*  
L. J. Hurst

Strange conjunctions happen towards the end of time and this is one of them: Riddley Walker meets Jerry Cornelius. I have now read *Feersum Endjin* twice and if 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 cannot happen can be computer simulated, is under threat. The world is going to be destroyed, journeys to the stars are difficult if not impossible, war is breaking out and the levels of information in the computer systems are tending towards entropy.

How do I know all this? Partly because as people go about their business of living, loving, spying and dying, there are data downloads in the text. So a man can walk through ghosts and drop through a hole in an acid-eaten roof to drop two kilometres to his death. As he bounces off the walls 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 king (the end of time always requires a decadent king) can see everything, but then we discover he cannot see everything. And worse, there is something even more omnipotent than the master of the cybernet.

That omnipotence of course, is Iain Banks. Every time there is something to be learned he cuts away. Technology threatens to release an evil Geni from the bottle, and at the end of time it could be at its most insightful – here is Iain Banks' reason for fear some end game. Fiction is even more powerful than data.

Clive Barker  
Everville  
*HarperCollins, 24/4/95,*  
*640pp, £5.99*  
Susan Badham

I first noticed Clive Barker when I read his *Books of Blood*, an extensive collection of tightly themed, impressively written stories. Unfortunately his books, with a few exceptions like *Weeeworld*, have never managed to be as 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' of being so successful that editors are reluctant to tamper with his work for fear of damaging whatever it is that makes it sell.

This book, like many of his stories, shows a vivid visual image to the reader, so powerful that the plot and characters become subordinate to it. As a result they don't have distinct personalities but simply progress around the landscape of the novel, encountering its different features. Their destinies are played out, but we hardly care what happens to them, whether they are crucified on the side of a mountain or die in a car crash. Though everyone in the novel is eventually drawn towards the geographic centre of the action, their presence is more or less irrelevant to the world of changing events taking place.

In this book, Barker propounds storytelling as being important to the nature of reality, as being an essential creative force in a metaphysical sense. He may be right, but we hardly care what happens to them, whether it is the storytelling.

Peter Benchley  
White Shark  
*Hutchinson, 1/6/95, 307pp,*  
*£4.99*  
Steve Palmer

You would think that by now stories about bizarre, obscure or imaginary Nazi experiments held over from the Second World War, only to be terrifyingly unleashed (or unleashed, as the publicity blurb has it) and thereby bringing great peril, would all have been done by now, and the genre, if genre it be, could be laid to rest. 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 underwater Nazi beast lost in the Atlantic, coincidentally with a slow metabolism, suddenly re-awakened - unleashed, sorry - only to cause the world great peril, was just too pedestrian to credit. I mean to say! And in 55 chapters, some of which are less than one page. Help! Not the merciless use of one sentence paragraphs! Aarghhh! I can't take it! Quick, nurse, the screens! Beam me up, Scotty! Abandon now!

Ben Bova, Fredrik Pohl,  
Jerry Pournelle & Charles  
Sheffield  
**Future Quartet: Earth in the**  
**Year 2042: A Four-Part**  
**Invention**  
*AvoNova, 2/95, 294pp, \$5.50*  
Joseph Nicholas

This is an interesting idea, flawed in its execution. The idea is to take four SF authors, have them write cautiously speculative essays about

the world of fifty years hence, then produce stories set in those futures in order to explore them in more detail. The first flaw is that the viewpoint is particularly Western, and exclusively American – not surprisingly, given that the essays were originally written for a US magazine, but the result is a tendency to treat the rest of the world as either an appendage to the US or irrelevant. This is literally so in Pournelle's essay, entitled 'Democracy in America' in homage to de Tocqueville's famous tract on the American Revolution and largely concerned with the re-invention of US society; not until the penultimate sentence does he lift his gaze from domestic concerns, and then only to suggest that "Western Civilisation" should adopt the same "revival of morality" as the US.

The second flaw is less obvious, but the form of Bova's essay, and address by the new Chairman of the World Council, encapsulates it perfectly. It might best be described as a belief in linearity; the suggestion that the future can be extrapolated from trends visible in the present, and having thus been predicted may then be controlled, so securing a more rational and orderly outcome. This belief in linearity – central to the hard SF favoured by three of the writers here – is grounded in the Whig conception of history as the story of human progress, and was the chief characteristic of the technocratic worldview which dominated national and international thinking in the immediate post-war decades; yet if the past twenty years have taught us anything, it is that the future is anything but linear. It is discontinuous, chaotic, possibly even incomprehensible; anything but controllable.

The stories? The stories are modest and unexceptional – Pohl's, as one might expect, is the best written, while the other three are standard hard SF fare, of the kind for which their authors are well-known, and hence rather dull. Because what one really wants from a volume such as this is not cautious hard SF extrapolation, but something from completely outside the standard cannon – the sort of future foreseen by an Islamic fundamentalist, for example, or a Somali warlord...

Simon Clark  
**Nailed By The Heart**  
*NEL, 1995, 360pp, £5.99*  
Chris Hart

Clark is the latest in a group of prolific short story writers (including Steve Baxter and P. F. Hamilton) to have a novel published by the mainstream publishing houses after appearing in numerous of SF magazines for years.

In his debut novel his protagonists are an American expat, 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 Stainforth and his family have invested a great deal to realise this dream and arrive to inspect the derelict site with enthusiastic zeal. However, this elation quickly starts to sour when he makes curious discoveries within the walls of the old building. The quantity surveyor failed to discover that the village is a site of an ancient religion whose goal it would be to make a reappearance.

It sounds like *The Shinning* Revisited but it is more like *The Living Dead* meet *Die Hard* in John Wyndham country. The village is populated by a group of British eccentrics; there's the Major and his dog, a gin soaked vicar who dramatically confesses his loss of faith and, Tony Gatesman, the local occult specialist who manages to second guess the supernatural events. The whole phenomena is as 'weird as buggery' according to Gatesman, who sums up Clark's approach to horror; he is has a canny Yorkshire mans' skill with the uncanny.

This novel is not going to startle you with its originality; you have been here before – many times – but never with such visceral clarity. The novel form has not diluted Clarke's vivid flashes of anatomical decay, nor has it removed his will to experiment with narrative styles. The narration shifts from consciousness to consciousness so effortlessly that it becomes disorienting. Clark manages to achieve great ironic effect with tremendous economy of style. Unfortunately the layers of irksome moments are ruined by a pyrotechnic finale which comes complete with a wholesome family reunion that will make you reach for the sick bag. That said - it is a confident first novel from an author who has demonstrated flair for the horror short story.

Nancy A. Collins  
**Paint It Black**  
*NEL, 18/5/95, 253pp, £4.99*  
Tanya Brown

*Paint It Black* is the third novel to feature Sonja Blue, schizoid punk vampire extraordinaire. Sonja hasn't given up hope of destroying the vampire aristocracy since who made her what she is. The hunt, however, doesn't stop her amusing herself by hunting down other vampires who prey on unsuspecting humans – and by seducing her own prey. But the Other, the violent and bloodthirsty creature that lurks in her back-brain, keeps getting out. And the Other isn't nearly as well-mannered as Sonja; the survivors could tell of that, although there aren't many of them.

In a secluded house in Yucatan, the vampire-priest Lethe is growing a fast. Palmer, looking after for her and waiting patiently for Sonja's return, doesn't know what Lethe will become; it's evident,

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, Sonja walks among the Pretending Races - werewolves, vampires, demans and seraphim - seeking Morgan, and a solution to her own divided nature.

Collins' nocturnal world is richly detailed, contemporary and all too credible. There's a depth to the characterisation - both human and Pretender - that fascinates and seduces the reader. The climax of the novel reveals Pretender plotting on 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, 16/3/95, 267pp, £5.99**  
**Susan Badham**

The man who wrote this book lives in Manchester. When he has to get rid of the many unsold copies of this novel, may I suggest Bury market? There's a man with a secondhand bookstall who'll give him a fair price - about 5 pence a book.

This novel is a "malin" entry este cinema full of teenagers' story and to be fair, the blurb and cover picture leave you in no doubt as to what you're going to get. M. R. James fans are unlikely to pick this up by mistake.

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 of the most beginning writers write, send out to loads of publishers and put away after they've collected about thirty rejection slips. It they go on to become authors, they'll get the manuscript put years later and have a sigh of relief that no one accepted it.

The book has no particular structure, though the plot manages to be incredible predictable. The author puts in everything: nice phrases, observations about living in Lancashire, amateur 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 incidents. It's possible that his next book worth reading. This one isn't.

**J. R. Dunn**  
**This Side of Judgement**  
**NEL, 20/4/95, 322pp, £5.99**  
**Jim Steep**

By the time of this thriller - early 21st Century - the USA has had its back broken. The federal government still functions, but much of the territory has regressed to its old frontier mentality due to the effects of increased terrorism and a failed invasion. One of the terrorist

groups, known by the clumnet neologism of 'Chipheads' (work it out for yourself), has disintegrated due to the efforts of a government agency and the failure of their own technology. There are, however, still many of their loose. Enter Ross Bohlen, agency loose cannon, closely followed by the obligatory conspiracy. So far, so routine.

However, this isn't just another cyberpunk novel for the nineties. (There's a great line where all the characters jokingly suggests that a certain new area of research might lead to a non-games use for virtual reality). Where Dunn scores is in his background development. One is given the impression that he has spent a lot of time blending our past seamlessly into his future. This stuff is beautiful, and very, very, believable. We could easily be heading in this direction already. This is a carefully planned book which is a rare feat in a first novel. Expecting the action to flag somewhere in the middle, the reader might be surprised to find that the climax rushes up on him. It seemed to rush up on Dunn as well, but that's a minor flaw at the start of a promising career.

**Raymond E. Feist**  
**Shadow of a Dark Queen**  
**AvoNova, 5/95, 497pp, \$5.99**  
**Cherish Aldryp**

The prologue of this book shows a race of serpent warriors, the Saaurs, 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 background, but he seems to be using the same world and concepts, and a few of the same characters, for this book, which is the first in a new series, *The Serpentwar Saga*. Following the Prologue, we meet Erik, apprentice blacksmith and bastard son of the local Baron, and follow his fortunes as he tangles with his legitimate half-brother, flees his home, and ends up in a squad of soldiers on a suicide mission against a fearful enemy later revealed as the Saaurs.

Erik is likable, a thoroughly decent chap, though he hasn't the charisma to be a hero. The earlier sections, about his family problems and his military training, are absorbing, but at the point about two-thirds through when the action starts hotting up, I was tempted to skip, because there wasn't the same charm to be using the same world and concepts, and a few of the same characters, for this book, which is the first in a new series, *The Serpentwar Saga*. Following the Prologue, we meet Erik, apprentice blacksmith and bastard son of the local Baron, and follow his fortunes as he tangles with his legitimate half-brother, flees his home, and ends up in a squad of soldiers on a suicide mission against a fearful enemy later revealed as the Saaurs.

I enjoyed this; it isn't literature, but it's fun. Fans of *The Riftwar Saga* will certainly want to read it.

**Richard Gilliam, Martin H. Greenberg & Edward E. Kramer (eds)**  
**Grails: Quests of The Dawn**  
**Roc, 3/95, 387pp, £6.99**  
**K. V. Bailey**

The afterword is a brief but illuminating essay by Fritz Leiber sketching the mythic and literary parameters of the Grail legend, focusing on Chrétien de Troyes and Mallory (past) and Charles Williams (near-present). It should have come first to provide perspective against which this miscellany of 22 stories may be read: 22 stories plus 5 poems, in the best of which Jane Yolen unsentimentally identifies the grail as everywoman's body. For the most part authors have forsaken the image of something shining and celestial in favour of the humble, a pot or a wooden bowl, turning up in an itinerant's saddle-pack (Alan Dean Foster), in a junk-ped garage (Dean Wesley Smith), in an Oxfam shop (Neil Gaiman). The last two, 'Invisible Bars' and 'Chivalry' are among those which meld fantasy with the suburban commonplace; another, perhaps the most successful of them, is Rick Wilber's 'Greggies's Cup', where a Downs syndrome child shares delight in the playing with a renegade Lancelot.

The attributes most common to these various fictional grails is a bestowable power, but its efficacy often depends on the mediating bestower and / or recipient, as in the Alan Dean Foster story ('What you see...'); in Richard Gilliam's 'Storyville, Tennessee'; and indeed in the Chrétien de Troyes romance as ambitiously redone here in Diana Paxson's blank verse masque 'The Feast of The Fisher King'. That masque, written for performance, is one of the few contributions where the actual ancient legendary grail features. It appears, too, as St. Joseph's grail in Andre Norton's 'That Which Overfloweth'; but as the volume's secondary title, 'Quests of The Dawn', would suggest, the grail may be only one manifestation of universal quest. In Kristine Kathryn Ruch's 'Hitchhiking Across an Ancient Sea' grail is a metaphor; in Orson Scott Card's 'Atlantis', a time-travel based amalgam of middle-eastern myths, is Noah, or the Ark, or the quest for the myth itself instrument of renewal? Gene Wolfe's 'The Sailor Who Sailed After The Sun' is a fantastic quest-mélange which starts like *Moby Dick*, continues like *Monkey* and ends like a Pharoic contempt; so far as anything in it is grail, it is the sun.

Not every reader will read a thick theme anthology by leisurely dips or take it at a gulp. When stories are so varied in ap-

proach and quality, as here, the ed does the most sensible way. I used it at first. Then after quite a while I re-read at one sitting and found that the thematic variations, equivalencies and contrasts showed up most fascinatingly. You take your choice, but you'll find plenty to enjoy either way.

**Charles L. Grant**  
**Jackals**  
**NEL, 16/3/95, 255pp, £5.99**  
**Graham Andrews**

The eponymous Jackals are "... hunters who haunt a nation's highways and byways, preying on the weak and unsuspecting. They're human enough - except for their strange eyes, and claws that their laughter fingers in the night air - but they have no mercy."

"Jim Scott's been hunting jackals for a long time, they took someone he loved, once, and he's never forgiven them. When beautiful, battered Rachel (Corder) turns up on his doorstep, it's the prelude to Jim's final showdown with the jackals. They come in force - but Jim no longer fights alone. Now he has a group of jackal-killers, each determined to exterminate the human vermin" (blurb).

The phrase "I read this book in one sitting" is - more often than not - reviewerese for "I skimmed through it while pretending to watch

"... Only kidding, Stephen... Stephen? Nevertheless, I really did read Jackals from first page-to-last without skimming, and I've no idea what was on TV at the time (Bruges v Chelsea?). It's pure state-of-the-back-arts stuff."

"Grant's style of horror takes hold of your spinal cord and plays it like a violin. His prose leaks with moody atmosphere... and the pace never lags" (back-cover quote from *Mystery Scene*). It's not clear if the Masked Reviewer was writing about this particular novel, but he / she could very well have been.

I hadn't read much work by Charles L. Grant before Jackals. Just *A Quiet Night of Fear* (Berkley, 1981), to be honest. Hint: NEL also publish his *Raven, Something Stirs*, and *Stunts*.

**Peter F. Hamilton**  
**The Nano Flower**  
**Pan, 10/3/95, 566 pp, £4.99**  
**Graham Andrews**

*The Nano Flower* is Peter F. Hamilton's third sf / mystery novel, following *Mindstar Rising* and *A Quantum Murder*. Greg Mandel heroes in all three - a psi-boosted former private detective and veteran of the English Army's Mindstar Brigade who now works for the Event Horizon conglomerate.

Setting? Twenty-first century England - Rutland, mostly. The New Conservatives have taken over from the Peoples socialist Party following "... a long

dark decade of near-Marxist dictatorship just after the Greenhouse Effect ran riot" (p. 2). *Howard's Way + Blake's Seven + Doomwatch* – something that Mad Maggie might have written if she'd turned to it instead of fantasy (*The Downing Street Years*).

Mandel's latest mission next to imperialism is: find out who / what sent a 'nano-flower' to Julia Evans, the megarich owner of Event Horizon. "The geneticists estimate the source of the planet could be anything up to a couple of billion years further up the evolutionary ladder than Earth. The gene sphere is much larger than terrestrial DNA strands" (p. 67). These things never happen to Alan Titmarsh. Or do they...?

I think Hamilton should dump the glum Mandel as lead character and replace him with Julia Evans. As a *Working Girl* type, she's more like Melanie Griffiths than Sigourney Weaver; the acceptable face (and everything else) of capitalism.

Hamilton has been accused of perpetrating Thatcherite sin, with some justification: read the political thinky bits in *Ministar Rising* and *A Quantum Murder*. What the hell – some of my best (if deluded) friends are bring-back-Maggie fanatics. Let contention thrive. I find *Nano Flower's* New London / Crown Colony asteroid touchingly reminiscent of *Outrage Into Space*, the 1950s radio serial that enthralled millions (me, too).

However, I see him as a romantic Little Englander (tautology?), like G. K. Chesterton and J. B. Priestley – two of my favourite authors, by the way. *The Nano Flower* also hints that he might even hanker after the you've-never-had-it-so-good days of Harold MacMillan. Example:

"(The New Conservatives) were necessary after the PSP fell, rampant capitalism is always a good way to build quickly, and we needed that, then, we'd fallen so far. But unless you're very careful, that kind of economy becomes a runaway shark, always having to move to eat, to survive. You get unemployment in the name of efficiency, sex tourism in the name of market forces. That's over... They don't matter. England will benefit from Welsh secession as much as the Welsh" (p. 50).

Will (*The State We're In*) Huton couldn't have put it better. But I must point out that it was the rampant socialism of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal that rescued the USA, from depression – treating the ill-effects produced by rampant capitalism. Ditto the post-1945 U. K. John Kenneth Galbraith has knocked the monetarist spots off Milton Friedman. The secession bit also applies to Scotland, Northern Ireland, and certain English regions, e.g. Cornwall. Enough political-economic blathering...

*The Nano Flower* is a highly readable hard-fist novel – not an inevitable combination, believe you me! If it were my decision, future reprints would be blurred WINNER OF THE BSFA AWARD. And, having family connections in Oakham, I appreciated the Rutland locale.

**W. A. Harbinson  
Genesis  
NEL, 18/95, 615pp, £5.99  
Steve Jeffery**

I think I might have got on better with this book if I had known what Harbinson was doing. Or even if I though he 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 Saucer tetralogy, although chronologically it falls after *Inception* and *Phoenix*.

Hailed as an epic by luminaries such as James Herbert and Colin Wilson (with exactly the same blurbs that appear on the back of book 1), it is a weird farrago of UFOlogy, global conspiracy and Nazi mad genius scientist plotting world domination. We know he's a genius because he keeps reminding us of it twice on every page that he appears. Or maybe it's Harbinson, who has padded this book to an unwieldy and frankly unnecessary, 600 plus pages whereby the two worlds of his ten extended expository lump (sometimes even gracefully introduced by as "As you know...") and some of the most blatant repetition of entire phrases and sentences that I have ever come across.

As a vaguely scientific 'faction' on UFO sightings since the beginning of the century, it might have worked. However, Harbinson delivers these as verbatim conversations (or prompted) monologues in near encyclopaedic detail by his characters, and often for almost four or five pages at a stretch. Or maybe all UFO conspiracists are gifted with an eidetic retentive memory and the air of a lecturing professor. But when Harbinson drags his fascinated gaze back from all this toward the plot, things falter and fall over in an untidly mess. It is not that Harbinson cannot write very well (although in fact he can't), but that he chooses to do it through one of the most offensive and misogynistic viewpoint characters I have ever encountered. Every woman in this book is either a whore of a sex / rape object (complete with "thrusting" breasts) who need / want it 'stuck into them' – for their own good, of course. The central revelation of the origin of the UFOs comes at the (ahem) climax of four pages of the most excruciatingly banal sex writing since Henry Miller.

A strange and overwrought nonsense. Unless you have a deep and abiding fascination for detailed reporting of UFO sightings, I would pass on this

one. I read it in incredulous and appalled fascination. Or maybe that's what Herbert meant on the cover.

**Tom de Haven  
The Last Human  
Roc, 1995, 276pp, £4.99  
Benedict S. Cullum**

Apparently a feature of de Haven's writing, this third and final instalment of a fantasy sequence includes a fairly sizeable connected cast of characters from all of the three parallel worlds envisaged in the milieu he has created.

In some ways this is close to science fiction but, however one chooses to classify it, weird it certainly is! From time to time one is reminded forcefully of the differences between the diverging "humanities" of the worlds in question: some derive pleasure from mosquito bites, for example, whilst others willingly play host to numerous personalities within a single body!

Following the defeat of the monstrous Epiene in a earlier volume the mystery cast finds itself in an in-between place known as the Undermoment where magic of a kind exists but only so long as one continues to pay attention. Exceptionally, herein are found denizens of all three worlds together with assorted mysterious teachers and mages. The latter are attempting to contrive a situation whereby the two worlds can become safely aware of each other. This experiment meets with difficulty when it transpires that one of the recent arrivals has unwittingly provided access to the Queen of Noise. The ensuing battle, though, was little more than a formality.

As indicated, this is a very strange tale, albeit one that is extremely well told. Presumably down to the requirements of the publishing industry, for cash-strapped readers I feel honoured to observe that with smaller print and fewer blank spaces the entire work could have been published as a single volume.

**Brian Jacques  
Mariel of Redwall  
Legend, 19/95, 387pp,  
£4.99  
Sue Thomason**

Paperback reprint, first published by Hutchinson's Children's Books in 1991. The title page lists another six titles by Jacques in the same series, and the front cover suggests that the first of these is *Redwall*, which should presumably be read first.

The book is a member of the "dressed animals" subset of children's fantasies. Redwall Abbey is run by mice, the focus of a happy, peaceful community of talking badgers, otters, moles, etc. Their happy peaceful life is disturbed by the arrival of Mariel, a shipwrecked mouse, daughter of Joseph the Bellmaker and recently escaped from the foul clutches of the evil

sea rat Gabool the Wild (or, as her prefers to call himself, "Gaaaboooboooboo"). The Joseph Bell (that is, the bell made by Joseph the Bellmaker) has fallen into Gabool's possession, and many adventures must come to pass before it rests safely in the bell-tower of Redwall Abbey.

I was unable to read more than 100 pages or so of this book. Its plotting seems both twee and turgid. Character is determined by species (thus badgers are wise, otters are naughty, moles are stock comic peasants who talk in Zimmerman Aakzents and fall asleep with their noses in the puddings). Overall, it's a prime example of the sort of book I used to dread being given by out-of-touch relatives when I was eleven. Buy it for yourself by all means, if you like this sort of thing, but please get your little mouse / newphew whose parents swear "likes animal stories" a book token instead!

**Sheila Holligon  
Nightdrier  
Creed, 4/95, 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 comes up from London to teh barren moors of Yorkshire to decide what to do with the cottage her estranged father has left her in his will; and that of 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 set in the 1700s is told in the present tense. Unfortunately, Holligon also drops into a rather misguided attempt at dialect for her characters that sits even more oddly when it spills over into the author's narrative. It's a stylistic experiment that doesn't really come off, and almost makes it seem like you're reading two different books in tandem.

Both stories, of course, shadow each other. Rose's initial dislike of Haggabacks cottage, with its country isolation and odd neighbours, turns into something more complex as she becomes trapped there over Christmas and New Year, first by the turn of the weather and then by an unnerving shadowy presence in the cottage.

Centuries before, Nicholas Brett, shares an equal, but far more malicious dislike. His dabbling in the occult has already caused the death of one girl in London, and a lurid scar across his cheek. Now, his attention turns to Tully, the young chambermaid at the hall. Old Martha, the cook and Nigella, the farm woman up in Haggabacks, try to avert another tragedy.

Rose's shadowy ghost haunts her photographs, her cottage and her bed. Her incubus is both her perfect lover

and murderously jealous. Gradually, she drives everyone away from her as her demon lover grows stronger and more real.

As an erotic dark fantasy with strong elements of psychological breakdown and complex relationships, the modern parts of this are well done. The historical sections, I feel, work less well, mainly because the characters aren't so fully developed. It's a dark fantasy, rather than horror, because it resolves. Horror always makes you suspect things haven't quite ended at the close of the book. Having established a dark, brooding mood over most of the book, Holligan almost wrecks it at the very end by trying to pin a happy ending on everyone in the story, regardless of their motivations up to that point.

An oddly schizophrenic book: half of it is quite dark and obsessive, while the other sections around it seem less convincing and fully realised.

**Simon Ings**

**Hotwire**

**HarperCollins, 6/95, £4.99,**

**343pp**

**Colin Bird**

You may gather from the title that this novel is a sequel of sorts to the 1992 novel, *Hot Head*. Ings soon immerses you in a world of super AIs, datafats and intrigue. Familiarity with his earlier book is not necessary to enjoy *Hotwire*, although a knowledge of cyberpunk tropes can help to untangle the confused and episodic plot.

Ajay is a tough employee of the brutal Hagg Corporation, carrying out global missions for money to buy spare parts for his sister. He betrays his employees and goes to work for the mayor of Rio de Janeiro. The city's electronic brain wants to join the roster of "massives" — artificially intelligent cities, and Ajay needs to steal advanced "technix" which would allow the mayor to carry out this operation. When Ajay is captured by the orbiting Snow he escapes with Rosa, Snow's artificially created daughter, made of the very latest wetware.

This is cyberpunk writ large, with globe spanning adventure punctuated by bursts of violent action. As such it's highly readable and inventive but prone to jarring switches in the narrative. The characters are resolutely unsympathetic and the dulllest part unfortunately comes last leaving an unfortunate sense of anticlimax. This style of space opera / cyberpunk is hard to relate to and I prefer smaller scale novels set in the near future, like Gibson's *Virtual Light*. But if you enjoyed *Hot Head* I can guarantee you will enjoy this book. The illustrations by Simon Pummell, based upon folk designs, are interesting but don't help much.

**Graham Joyce**  
**Requiem**  
**Creed, 4/5/95, 305pp, £4.99**  
**John D. Owen**

Graham Joyce's *Requiem* is a psychological thriller, exploring the aberrant mind of Tom Webster, in serious mental trouble since the death of his wife. Leaving his teaching job for Israel to look up an old friend, Sharon, he finds her away from her Jerusalem home. Finding himself a cheap hotel, Webster befriends its strange owner, David Feldberg. Feldberg is an old Jew who possesses some fragments of Dead Sea Scrolls. He passes these to Webster before he dies.

The city of Jerusalem is in turmoil due to the Intifada. Webster's mental problems, fuelled by guilt at his wife's death, increase in the pressure cooker atmosphere. When Sharon finds him, he is well on the way to a complete breakdown, seeing things, playing out his guilt in his mind. She takes him in hand, and gets an Arab friend to look at the Scrolls, to see if they are anything more interesting than genealogical tables. He discovers an alternative version of the life of Christ. In the meantime, Webster is getting worse, until he finally confronts his guilt, discovering it to be false.

As a novel, *Requiem* works well, and Joyce's writing conveys the tinderbox nature of Jerusalem, and the overheated mental processes of Webster as he works out his salvation, with help from Sharon and her friends. But it promises more than it delivers. The whole strand of story with the Dead Sea Scrolls is a sideshow to Webster's own problems, and is tantalisingly dispersed without resolution. Similarly, Webster's mental problems turn out to be something more prosaic than his visions indicate. The story ends in a second death, this one really caused by Webster, the plot coming full circle. Is it a horror story? No, it's not, despite being issued on a 'horror' imprint, and horror fans might be disappointed if they approach *Requiem* as such.

**David Lee Jones**  
**Montezuma's Pearl**  
**Avonova, 3/95, 256pp, \$4.99**  
**Andy Mills**

Jones has the characters in this book spend a great deal of their time, and his wordage, explaining things to each other. Much effort is also spent questioning these explanations. If I was a character in Jones's book, I'd question them too. Exposition, characters, plot: they're all utterly, completely ludicrous. Moreover, it rapidly becomes evident that whilst Jones had given some thought to the beginning of the novel (a tourist in Mexico finds a giant clam on the beach, a clam which - he is told - may contain a treasure known as the Eyes of God) he had absolutely no idea

as to how it would develop. Hence the plot and his characters stagger from page to page, and the rationale for all this stumbling gets more and more convoluted, the dialogue cornier and more clichéd. For me the slippery slope comes when he introduces Vaca Gion, who is (I kid you not, and this, I must stress, is not a comedy) the Goddess of Vacations. I should add we've also got the God of Liquid Spirits and Mother Nature herself. And the evil scientist who's after the Eyes of God?

"The professor. I'm afraid he's not just some mad scientist. He's ... he's a god himself." "What? Which one?" The god of mass destruction?" "Modern technology." "Well, he would be, wouldn't he?" "I'll wager that you'll see copies of this book in remainder bins. Even when cheap, avoid."

**Katherine Kerr**  
**Freeze Frames**  
**HarperCollins, 6/95, £4.99,**  
**280pp**  
**Colin Bird**

This is a collection of six stories, of varying length, featuring a group of genealogically linked characters appearing at important moments throughout the author's future history. The stories are a mixture of science fiction and fantasy.

'Dr Lucky' is a Mephistophelean tale of a chemistry professor who sells his soul to the devil in sixties America and becomes the eponymous Dr Lucky, drug dealing on the campuses of San Francisco. A neat twist on the old tale, full of playful humour at the expense of 'hippiedom'. 'Asylum', the second best story, tells of Janet Conway watching the USA fall to a bloody coup over the Atlantic news feeds from a London threatened by rising sea levels. The story convincingly follows her attempts to gain asylum and her concerns for friends and relatives left behind who will be endangered by their association with Conway's liberal teachings.

The other stories are all disappointing in some way or other, particularly the long 'Resurrection' — an uncomfortable mixture of SF (parallel universes) and fantasy (the devil makes an appearance). This could have been the story of Tiffany, slowly realising through incidental details and fragmented memories that she was transported across the dimensional barrier at the moment of her death. Instead we get 'Nick' and 'the Rabbi' appearing to explain the whole story to her. Two concluding stories about aliens arriving on Earth to convert to Catholicism complete the book's pretentious attempt to weave short stories into a novel.

**Stephen Leigh & John J Miller**  
**Ray Bradbury's Dinosaur**  
**Series Book 5: Dinosaur**  
**Empire**  
**Avonova, 3/95, 226pp, \$4.99**  
**Andy Mills**

A fast-moving juvenile, this is reminiscent of that old tv series *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 temporal machinery with them and travel into parallel time streams. In a previous (presumably the first) book in the series there had been time traveller interference in prehistory (enter the Bradbury connection) and hence the intelligent dinosaurs who form part of the group of castaways).

For those of you who, like me, haven't read any of the earlier books in the series, there's a somewhat ponderous introduction. But ignorance isn't really a hindrance to the reader — the story is easy enough to follow. In this book the group visits ancient Egypt and Rome. It has lots of adventures. At the end of the novel the fate of two of its members is resolved, but the others move on to the next instalment in the series.

All in all, innocuous entertainment, with some history lessons for the kids thrown in for free. *The Dinosaur series* would make a good cartoon strip.

**Jane Lindskold**  
**Marks of our Brothers**  
**Avonova, 6/95, 248pp, \$4.99**  
**Norman Beswick**

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 the attention, along with one main character who holds the reader's interest and a sprinkling of sci ideas.

Jane Lindskold's book is just that: certainly no mould-breaking masterpiece but good enough for (say) a plane journey to the Canary Islands. Karen Saber has a criminal record and we meet her having just committed a vengeance murder, the first of a projected list. But she is an expert linguist and works for the Corp. The Xians live on a new planet marked for colonisation and have been dismissed as non-sentient. Karen thinks otherwise, but has to prove it. In doing so, she comes to work closely with the characters she has marked down for clearance.

The Xians are quite a nice idea, but there are several other non-human species in her book and I wondered if they were really alien enough. Sure, they set different things, but don't seem to think very differently from us. And as rather cheap space operas, things like the layout and security of space-ports work awfully conveniently for the plot.

Nonetheless, the story rattles along nicely and I wanted to find out what happened. Who can grumble at that?

**R. A. MacAvoy**  
**The Belly of The Wolf**  
*AvoNova, 295, 217pp \$49.99*  
**Cheirith Baldry**

**T**he *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 Belly of The Wolf* shows Nazhuret in middle-age, when he and his daughter are thrown into danger after the assassination of his friend King Rudolf. He becomes a key figure in the subsequent civil war, but it is typical of the book and of the man that he does not lead a victorious army, but expends all his efforts in bringing both sides to 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 product of the character's imagination.

This is a book of high imagination, depth and humour. I enjoyed it, and I highly recommend it.

**Julian May**  
**Diamond Mask: The Galactic Milieu trilogy Book Two**  
*Par, 7495, 460pp, £5.99*  
**Norman Beswick**

**A**nother Julian May metaphysical epic, more than just galaxy-wide, with a huge cast of characters, most of them instantly forgettable. Book one, *Jack The Bodiless*, told of the intervention by the Lyrmic, bringing Earth humans into membership of the inter-galactic Milieu and the development among some humans (including the eponymous Jack the Bodiless) of "metaphysical" powers.

In book two we meet young Dorothea MacDonald, who also possesses huge latent m-p abilities but prefers a quiet life on the Scottish planet Calcedonia. The monstrous spirit Fury, who aims at personal domination of the Milieu, pursues her, and when she rejects him, vows to destroy her. She is taken to the Metaphysical insti-

tute and realises her power and destiny, while human planets are being subverted by the anti-Milieu rebels. Now read on.

Julian May works hard at the cosmic backdrop to her epic and some set-pieces are competent sensawunda. But with so much to cover, she inevitably fills her pages with indigestible info-dumps, and much more interesting are the personal interactions of a tiny handful of characters. I felt her aliens were simply not alien enough, always a problem. 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.

**Billic Sue Mossman**  
**Widow**  
**Headline, 18/5/95, 471pp, £5.99**  
**Martin H. Brice**

**T**his is a fantasy novel... but it is not a novel phantastical. There are no wizards, no goblins, no lizard denizens of distant galaxies, no alternate history of some mythical Celtic Empire.

No, this novel is about ordinary people in present-day Houston, USA - and their fantasies... fantasies which, pressured by fevered imaginings, boil over into real life with tragic, horrific, terrifying consequences.

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 tes streets safe. There is the fantasy of the ambitious detective, who dreams of solving the *big crime*... The fantasies of the bed-ridden elderly mother, who imagines her son does everything for her out of love... And her son, who fantasises about becoming a famous author and serial killer... The fantasies of the racist, 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 condemning a whole section of the human race, she mirrors the evil-doers she annihilates.

This is not a cosy 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.

**Andre Norton**  
**The Hands of Lyr**  
**AvoNova, 6/95, 388pp, \$5.50**  
**Vikki Lee**

**A**nocha (Nosh) is a young girl almost dead on her legs, fleeing the horrors of the city. She staggers into a bleak and blasted land where a watcher, Dreen, last Priestess of the Goddess Lyr, is waiting for her; waiting for the chosen of Lyr. Dreen takes the young Nosh under her wing and teaches her the ways of the Goddess, discovering along the way that she has the "Hand Gift" - the ability to tell the value of stones by touch alone.

Kryn, Hold-Her of one of the last remaining major families in the city, is made outlaw and renegade when his Lord and father surrenders the family after being enchanted by the evil priesthood that now rule. Taking with him the family sword, Bringhope, Kryn swears revenge on the priesthood and the rescue and restoration of his family back to its former standing.

Dark forces are on the move, much darker than the priesthood themselves are aware of. It falls to Nosh, after the demise of Dreen, to restore the shattered shards from the statue of Lyr; the fingers of which were scattered throughout the land to prevent their power being lost to evil. With only Kryn (who distrusts and fears all forms of magic) as her sword and champion, she embarks on a dangerous quest against all the odds.

Andre Norton is described as "one of the all-time masters" on the cover of this book, and indeed, she has written enough books over the years to be so. However, with all her experience, I might be forgiven for expecting a lot more from this book, particularly in terms of her writing ability. Her sentence construction and punctuation leaves an awful lot to be desired throughout this novel. She seems to have a aversion for the simple comma, and when she does use them, uses them badly, causing the reader to continually re-read sentences in order to make any sense out of them. This continually spoils the flow of the narrative and can be very frustrating.

Despite all this, *The Hands of Lyr* is a very undemanding, "nice" story, one which would probably appeal more to a juvenile audience, which perhaps, it was written for. I expected much better from Norton.

**Andre Norton**  
**& Mercedes Lackey**  
**Evenblood**  
**HarperCollins, 6/95, 412pp, £5.99**  
**Vikki Lee**

**E**venblood carries on the tale started by these two authors in *The Evenbane*. If, like me, you've not read the first book, then the huge cast of characters and the various

racers are somewhat bemusing. There is enough information in *Evenblood* to let the reader know what happened in the first book, but it's rather like reading both books together, or perhaps tackling a double-sized jigsaw, in order to get the whole picture.

Following the second wizard-war, Lashana (Shana, the *Evenbane*), the wizards, and assorted allies have found a new place to live - the Elves. The young wizards and their friends have their hands full, trying to build and protect their new home, whilst striving for unity with the older wizards amongst them 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 collars of iron that limit their various powers to only the finest of magic, and illusion. The Iron People thus hold the secret of protection against even magic, but Shana and her friends are in no position to use it, unless they can escape.

Lorryn and Sheyrena both flee the even court for different reasons; Rena flees their tyrant even father, the powerful Lord Tylar; Lorryn flees the attentions of the even council who have embarked on an almost inquisitorial search for half-bloods since the second Wizard-War. Lorryn and his mother hold a secret that cannot be 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 their safe upbringing amongst the Elves. They too encounter the Iron People, but on vastly different terms.

If you manage to eventually get your head around who's who and what's what in this book, taking into account that there are dragons involved, some good, some bad, and all of who can shape-change, then this book can be a real page-turner! It's extremely convoluted, and not helped by the authors' seeming dislike of "culling" the cast from time to time to make it more manageable. Although I would recommend it to any who enjoy wizards, elves and dragons, I for one am not brave enough to back-track and tackle the near 600 pages of the first book.

**Eric S. Nylund**  
**Pawn's Dream**  
**AvoNova, 5/95, 345pp, \$4.99**  
**Chris Hart**

**I**n *Pawn's Dream* Roland Pritchard has an elaborate strategy to avoid the hum drum of his job as a shop clerk. He dreams. He dreams he lives in a alternate world, called Merendin. Or, in Merendin, he is a librarian who dreams that he is working

in a 24-Hour Quick-Stop store on Earth.

Think of an "alternate world" epic fantasy, like *The Deus Machine* and the dreadful *Thomas Covenant* volumes by Stephen Donaldson will probably come to mind—dready, derivative dross. The summary of the scenario given above, along with the z-grade production values of the publisher is not a very good start, but prepare to be surprised.

This is fast, smash and grab novel that can't help but seduce you into loving it, even though you'll regret it later. Roland becomes embroiled in a series of family feuds so intense that it makes the Corleones look like the *Brady Bunch*. He has to feel his way through the complex webs of family members in order to discover allies and enemies. He has been thrown into a game where the rule book is written as he goes along. What is refreshing is the use of the fantasy alternate world and Buddhist bunkum to investigate Roland's relationship with his father. The prose is purple, the sword and sorcery sequences have stepped out of Howard's Hyboria via Anthony's Zanth—but you'll not read better trash this year.

**Pierre Ouellette**  
**The Deus Machine**  
NEL, 16/3/95, 446pp, £5.99  
John D. Owen

Starting out like a hyper-active Michael Crichton, Pierre Ouellette somehow manages to turn *The Deus Machine* from a fairly standard "technology gone mad" novel into something considerably more interesting. He does this with some very cunning plot twists which run along the extremes of biotechnological mind games.

The plot revolves around a super-computer which is designing an even more superior computer within itself, in the form of a neural net. To help defray the cost of the research, the main computer is also being used to store and manipulate a vast Gene Bank database. A secret offshoot of the company is using the Gene Bank resources to design bio-warfare weaponry. But the neural net develops ideas of its own about what to do with the genetic database.

Along the way, Ouellette touches on many Clichésque clichés. There are the Government departments carrying out "black" operations and the solitary geniuses working to expose the perfidy. There is a cast of hundreds, many of whom get to die in interesting ways. And there are cute kids and attractive women who brave the vicissitudes of plot to heart-warmingly win through to the final chapter.

Clichés aside, Ouellette has produced a gripping read, combining bleeding edge computer technologies with genetic engineering in a tour-de-force of near-future extrapolation. There are a few places where the au-

thor "info-dumps" to glazed-eye levels, but overall his competency as a writer is more than adequate. *The Deus Machine* is a fascinating and inventive piece of fiction.

**Richard Parsons & Tony Keaveny**  
**Krap The Conqueror**  
**Michael O'Mara Books, 24/2/95, 150pp, £3.99**  
Susan Badham

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, and certainly deserve to be taken off your Xmas card list (well, actually, they deserve to be hunted down to the ends of the earth and killed, but I'm trying not to be extreme this week). The writing is laboured, the humour is the kind of the screamingly funny wit that you normally find on telly sticks and in Xmas crackers and I am amazed that it took two people to come up with this farrago of nonsense. I can only conclude that they were so busy laughing whenever either of them said "toteit" or "wily" that the pile of steaming manure was all they managed to get down on paper before the man from the publishers came round to collect 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. This is the sort of stuff that can be collected from the discard pile of your average, tenth-rate, strip-club comic and contains the same deep rational vein of the world. Thus every fairy (Gosh!) is another word for homosexual) has a limp wrist and eyes up the barbarian, who in turn screws any available four-legged animal, because that's what barbarians do, of course. Although he has mighty muscles, he's small in the only area where it really counts, snigger, snigger. And as for the excuse for a plot...

Just say no.

**Diane L. Paxson**  
**& Adrienne Martine Barnes**  
**The Shield Between The Worlds**  
AvoNova, 5/95, 317pp, \$4.99  
Cherith Baldry

This is the second chronicle of Fionn mac Cumhal and appears to be volume two of a trilogy. I haven't read the first volume, as the incidents of the hero's childhood are covered satisfactorily in the first few pages.

*The Shield Between The Worlds* starts with Fionn as a young man, having renounced his warrior heritage in favour of training as a bard. Of course, he's forced back into warfare and becomes the chief warrior of Eriu; the book ends with Fionn's discovery of his son Oisín, who is destined to be greater even than his father.

'Chronicle' is an apt name because this isn't really a novel; it's a series of linked episodes, easing them going from ambition to achieve, danger to overcome or a duty to fulfill.

I enjoyed the book, but I was never compelled by it. I didn't think its horrors were truly horrific or its wonders really wonderful. Although the writers praise Fionn as a reluctant warrior, his misgivings don't stop him from killing, and when he's in a really tough spot there's always help from his allies or teh Otherworld. And although he suffers various losses, I was never convinced that they really mattered.

Celtic fantasy seems popular now, and for its fans this book has a lot to offer. But if you were to ask me why this Celtic fantasy instead of that one, I wouldn't be able to tell you.

**Christopher Pike**  
**The Cold One**  
NEL, 3/93pp, £4.99  
Wendy Haley  
**These Fallen Angels**  
Headline, 18/5/95, 393pp, £4.99  
Martyn Taylor

Deja vu, deja blue. Genre novels have a habit of falling into well worn grooves. These can be because that's what the customers have come to expect—honor novel begins with the expository paragraph followed by the one line eyeball kick of second paragraph—or because they save the writer the effort—vampire protagonist won't kill. Some novels transcend their genre limitations by imagination and story telling skills. Others sink beneath their weight.

*These Fallen Angels* is the second in a vampire series. Whether or not Wendy Haley was inspired by Anne Rice's tales I don't know, but the similarities are very strong; only where Rice weaves stories of sense and sensuality in which every nook and cranny is explored and which can be read as discrete novels, Haley cobles together plotting by numbers with sex and piles in confusing references to the previous *The Dark Paradise*. Rice writes about Lestat, weak and vicious and adventurous. Haley writes about Alex Danilov, a combination of Louis and Duncan McClood of the Clan McClood. Ah, but it is cruel to compare Haley with Rice. The fact is that Haley writes genre novels, only not the genre you might think. Anyone who has read any Harlequin will recognize this genre even before the clincher. In the previous book, when it seems all the really interesting stuff has happened, Danilov killed his lover to prevent her becoming a vampire. Hey, it happens. In this book one of the confusingly large number of women who lust after Danilov's body, brings her back, sans sensibility, making her hard hearted Hannah, the

slaughtering angel of Savannah. Danilov wants her back, but how can he do it? Why, by giving her all an recalcitrant woman needs to put her on the straight and narrow—a right royal screwing.

If this book had been written by a man this alone would have returned it to sender. My only regret on finishing this was that Danilov was not killed off—not that there was ever any chance of that.

*The Cold One* at least revolves around an interesting Mogguffin—someone born from beyond the grave whose desire is to eradicate us soft-hearted, soft-headed humans who are such fin-ut to examine the way a fourth form biology student examines a frog. If the identity of said Cold One becomes obvious rather quicker than Christopher Pike intends he still gives us a fairly exciting, if imprecise search (do all Police Departments permit amateurs licence to trample over their cases, or only when an author can't be bothered to devise a more credible means of getting the information across?). He also gives us a strong twist in the tail which only seems just a little too convenient in retrospect. Mind you, he's blown it big time with a confusing and arbitrary second story involving an avatar of Krishna. Still, at least he was ambitious and that can count as a well of talent. Not essential reading, but interesting nonetheless.

**Terry Pratchett**  
**Soul Music**  
Corgi, 11/4/95, 378pp, £4.99  
Jon Wallace

Terry Pratchett returns to that period in Ankh-Morporkian history which features the island of stability represented by Ridiculy's Archchancellorship of the Unseen University.

If all that means anything to you, then you'll also know that the world is flat and supported by four elephants standing on the back of a giant turtle, and that this is a Discworld novel.

How do I review the sixteenth book in a series like this one? I can say, I suppose, that it features those characters that we've grown to know and love, the Librarian, CMOT Dibbler, the fleshily-challenged guy with the BIG voice. I can say that Pratchett has taken the chance to add a little more flesh to the bones that he created several books back (except for the tall bloke in black...). I can say that this book is the usual heavy mix of in-jokes and distorted versions of our reality that have sort of leaked onto the Disc; and that the author has created something that we, as readers, care about. And all of that would be true.

But I would also have to point out the flaws. This book is too short. Oh, it's big by Discworld standards, but it could have done with being longer. The central action suf-

fers from this, I would have liked to get more involved with the new characters, Susan, Glod, Cliff and especially the unfortunate Impy Yelyn, the bard from Llamados who are just getting to know when... But I mustn't give away the plot. I would also be greedy and want to have all of it without losing any of the rest of the fabric of the book.

Terry Pratchett's work often has it's dark side, and *Soul Music* is no exception to this, but the lack of involvement with the central characters dilutes it out this time around, and this takes a little away from 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 four-volume Brentford trilogy. Rankin writes zany SF comedy with a uniquely British flavour — there is no 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 Uranus, and finds himself sold as a delicacy in a Venusian food market. Escaping, he ends up in the circus of Professor Merlin, the eponymous *The Greatest Show Off Earth*, which sails between the planets of 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 not so far off — except that we live on the INSIDE, with our view of space and astronomy controlled by holographic projections from the top-siders. The outside of our Earth is called Eden (of course, AND it has "Eutopia" as its largest city), and Raymond learns with horror that the top-siders or Edenites (Eric van Däniken's astronauts who founded all of OUR Earth's ancient civilisations, by the way) are fed up with all our pollution coming out through the polar holes, so are just about to blow 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 B.E.A.S.T. This is an End Times cult that worships the demonic half-man / half-chicken Sate-Hen! Also we meet a villain called Long Bob Bum-Poo, and the police Fire Arms 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 Professor Merlin and his circus performers, give the Edenites and B.E.A.S.T. their

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

**Robert J. Sawyer**  
**The Torca Ascension 2: Fossil Hunter**  
*NEL, 18/5/95, 328pp, £5.99*  
**Julie Aikin**

It's 2011, a world of nanotechnology and videophones, where the internet is the world-wide source of communication and information, and bookreaders and thumbprint locks are in standard usage. Peter Hobson, a scientist, is doing very nicely due to an earlier invention and this enables him to investigate his primary interest. Since assisting in a transplant when the donor revved on the operating table, he has been fascinated by the idea of determining the exact moment of death. While conducting an experiment on a dying woman, he notices that a small electrical charge leaves the brain on expiration, and the discovery of this "soulwave" sets the medical, religious and legal worlds on their heads.

This generates Hobson's interest in an Afterlife, and he makes three computer simulations of himself, one as control, 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 Hobsons. 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 in which Sawyer extrapolates current personalities. Developments are slipped in naturally, though only heavy-handed aspect being the Simian Rights Movement — where chimpanzees now have many of their rights of humans.

Apart from the unnecessary, weak epilogue, I found this a good holiday read.

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

No relation, by the way. Robert J. Sawyer is a Canadian who, from the little I've read of him, seems to have a solid line of good, middle of the road SF involving dinosaurs. *Fossil Hunter* is part 2 of *The Torca 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 their world a moon of a huge gas-giant rather than an isolated continent sailing down an endless river, but also the increasingly frequent

quakes are 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, the Copernicus of his species, inspiring a project to develop a means of emigration. The central character is Torca, the son of Afsan. This relationship is important to the story for reasons which will become apparent, but a large proportion of the plot follows the previous book's line of scientific development. Torca 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 something vaster and stranger — a typical science-fictional trope, in fact, which is pure plot-device and not, in fact, 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 *Quintaglio*s — essentially, small intelligent Tyrannosaurus-like dinosaurs — are strongly territorial creatures whose society mixes co-operation and aggression in different proportions to our own. To limit population pressures, only one hatching per clutch of eight eggs are allowed to survive.

The only exceptions to this are the ruling Family and the offspring of Afsan and Novato who — *Far-Seer* tells us — were 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 about with mystery: a being which is partly "you" and for whom the general rules of territoriality do not seem fashioned, while the half-secretive culling of every hatch is open to a political "selective breeding" which, as is revealed here, is central to the great Darwinian question of what, in "survival of the fittest" is "the fittest". As Torca's work explores the biological parameters of the story, Afsan has to solve a murder mystery (murder, as opposed to breach-of-territory slayings, being virtually unknown) and to defeat a challenge to the authority of the Emperor. Both are predicated on what has just been discussed.

Like much SF, this series stands or falls on its detail rather than its overall plot, which is standard genre, although there is a fascinating confrontation foreshadowed for the next volume, and in terms of pagetunability, Sawyer is no mean artist. Fortunately the detail is worth the read. The *Quintaglio*s are a believable alien species and fans of well-drawn biological speculation should forget *Jurassic Park* and go for this series.

**Robert Silverberg**  
**Hot Sky at Midnight**  
*HarperCollins, 6/95, 388pp, £4.99*

**Lynne Bispan**

In this grim vision of Earth's future, humankind is reaping the rewards of the destruction of the world's eco-systems in earlier centuries. Genetic engineering effects has run riot and farmland has turned into desert. Pollution is visible in the air, which can only be breathed with teh aid of masks. Industrial development is controlled by rival megacorps who are racing to discover genetic engineering techniques that will adapt humans to their changing environment. Many people have already left Earth for life on one of the satellite worlds which orbit the planet, but this will not be possible for Earth's entire population, which leaves a third alternative: interstellar exploration.

Nick Rhodes is a genetic engineer who has doubts about the morality of his work, while recognizing that life on Earth will be untenable within six generations if humans do not adapt.

Victor Farkas, whose work for the megacorp is very different from Rhodes, is searching for teh surgeon who gene-spliced him before birth, leaving him with "blind sight", but no eyes.

Paul Carpenter is scrambling his way up the corporate ladder. While working as captain of a ship towing ice-bergs to a drought-stricken San Francisco, Carpenter makes a decision that costs him his job and leaves him with no direction in his life.

These characters and others are drawn together by a plot to assassinate the dictator of a satellite world. While the stories of teh various characters are skillfully handled and entwined to make a satisfying read, the most engrossing aspect of teh book is the entirely convincing depiction of ghastly future where adaptation and compromise seem to be the only options.

**Michael Slade**  
**Ripper**  
*NEL, 20/4/95, 377pp, £4.99*  
**Mat Coward**

Who would slash the body to shreds, then rip the face off America's foremost feminist — and hang her out to dry? asks the back cover of this "prime-grade horror" paperback. "For all who like their fear full-strength". (The answer, by the way, isn't a shock-jock publishing his new phone-in, but merely a mad ripper.)

I see the "About the author" note has been changed from earlier volumes in this one-world title series (e.g. *Headhunter*, *Cutthroat*); it still says "Michael Slade is the joint pseudonym of a team of Canadian criminal lawyers specialising 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 — that's what they say isn't it?

Actually, this book isn't all bad, if you like extremely gruesome loopy killer thrillers. 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 amazingly daft sentences, like: "The clock above the bulletin board tossed seconds across the room, time depleting the steam that rose from his coffee cup." Eh?

**Nancy Springer  
Larque on The Wing  
AvoNova, 2/95, 277pp, \$4.99  
Carol Ann Green**

Larque Harootianian is heading for a mid-life crisis, the change of life. But this change of life is so different from any she's heard of before; it explores the whole question of life, gender and love. Larque didn't expect to change so much. "Gender, for God's sake, which is really basic, the first thing anybody notices about a person. Then, becoming not only male but gay — what a way to do the big four-oh..." (P1).

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

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 virile male. As Lark, Skylark and Larque can experience what it is truly like to be abroad at night and not fear 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. That might isn't always safe for men either, but 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 us to imagine what it might have been like...

**Michael Swanwick  
The Iron Dragon's Daughter  
AvoNova, 4/95, 424pp, \$4.99  
Chris Amies**

Recently there's been a move towards reforming classical 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 a Dickensian factory where Jane, a changeling, is indentured to work on the production of vast, sentient artificial dragons. So far so picaresque, as there are already hints that this is no standard Fantasy world, and the opposition of rich and poor, of the baron in his castle and the poor man at his gate accounts for a lot of the dynamic of Fantasy, right? Only when Jane does break out of the factory by slaying herself to a stealth dragon that somehow has become more than the sum of its manufactured parts, we find with her a world stranger than the first chapters might have prepared us for.

The Dragon recedes 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 not in the Irish that every Fantasy writer seems to use, but in Welsh, which brings another level of disaffinity. It's a world that expects precise. Queen of the May Owen is to be burnt in a fertility ceremony; the near-immortals must be winnowed by the bloodletting of the Teind; the edifice of society is held under pressure by the chill authority of the Twythyng Teg; and through all this the Dragon has not forgotten the human child snatched from a parallel world to plot it through Hell Gate to Spiral Castle, the core where universes merge.

There are also lots of in-jokes, and it's a very intricate book, full of gears and cogs. Viewed alongside most Fantasy it does some very strange things to the genre, the sort of things only someone as well-read and capable of rigorous think-thoughts as Swanwick could do.

**Lois Tilton  
Accusations  
Dell, 2/88pp, \$6.95  
P. McMurray**

This is a book 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

within the series, and refer to events in episodes of the series. Commander Ivanova is accused of murder and relieved of her duties. Earthforce sends a clumsy and ruthless investigating officer and a complex conspiracy involving Martian mining companies and terrorists is slowly unravelled.

The series background provide both the best and worst parts of this book. SF crime mysteries have to be set in a rigorous frame to be convincing and successful. The series does provide the rigorous background but the limitations that make the crime and it's solution plausible are not obvious without that background.

Some character development does occur within this book, especially of Susan Ivanova and her relationship with Talia Winters. Lois Tilton handles these characters in a caring and convincing way — always a challenge for a novel based on a TV series or film. There are no obvious inconsistencies or glaring scientific errors. This is a much better novel than the first book in the series — *Voices* by John Vornholt. If you like *Babylon 5* you'll like this, but I wouldn't recommend this as your introduction to the *Babylon 5* saga.

**Roger Zelazny (ed)  
Warriors of Blood and Dream  
AvoNova, 6/85, 422pp, \$5.99  
Pat McMurray**

There are two problems I've always found with theme anthologies. If the theme is strictly maintained, it can quickly get boring as you read the fourth story of a speaking cat, a flying horse, an alien pretending to be human, invasion by insect men. If the theme is not maintained, the unity of the anthology is lost, and then

what's the point in a theme anthology? An interesting conundrum.

This anthology consists of 15 stories of martial arts. The first thing is that any idea that the editor, Roger Zelazny, might have made 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 of the body, and the authors really ring the changes on this theme.

Equally importantly, this interesting variety 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 an 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, where everybody dies in misery. Joel Richards has written an interesting Zen twist on the theme of alien hunting human in 'Listen'. Richard Lupoff's 'Easy Living' shows how blurred the boundary between reality and fantasy can become for an ex-boxer actor. There are two longer stories in the collection, almost novella length. These are Walter Jon Williams' 'Broadway Johnny', a laugh-out-loud story of Chinese myth and magic, and Steven Barnes' 'Sage Man' a seriously good story based around Native American myth.

Not every story works, Victor Milan'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.



# 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 *technophallism*. 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 masculinist 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 origination 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?



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.

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*.

Bearing in mind the nature of the genre, it can be seen that by treating gender role exploration as mere speculation, SF writers condone the extant situation and act as proponents of the conspiracy against which we, the *sans-culottes* of the Politically Correct revolution, must direct our endeavours.

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 "[it] 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.

At its most obvious, technophallism 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.

Technophallism 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 technophallic 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.

Genre 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.