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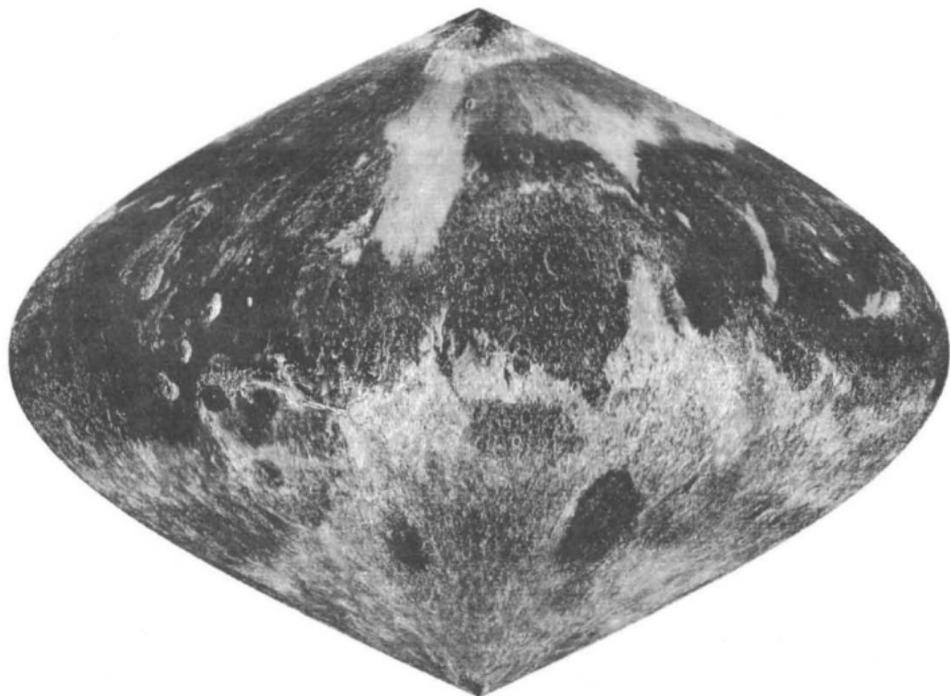
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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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September/October 1996

LIFE ON MARS



Kim Stanley Robinson Interviewed

Andrew Butler on the Mars Trilogy

Kevin McVeigh on *Pacific Edge*

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

EDITORIAL

Fay Weldon, Special Introduction, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (Waterstones/Voyager, 1996, £5.99)

Some years ago, the loonier fringes of LitCrit started getting exercised about the 'Death of the Author'. This is nothing to do with only studying Dead White European Males, but rather the feeling that the Author as Creator, as God, had this tyrannous power to say what was right about His work. A critic could say that the Mars Trilogy is a polemic advocating the colonisation of Mars, and Kim Stanley Robinson could cut them down with a single word. Threatened by this Author-as-God, the critics half-remembered Nietzsche's announcement of God's demise and declared "The Birth of the Reader must be at the cost of the Death of the Author."

Meanwhile it seems that with some authors, the reading can only begin when the author is literally dead. Take Fay Weldon's 'literary hero', Philip K. Dick. In the bad old days, when he was alive, he could only be found 'hid[ing]... between the lurid covers of sci-fi [sic] corner'. Now apparently 'rightly, you will find him out on the literary shelves'. Nice one, Fay, but check your facts. The only Dick you are likely to find on literary shelves even in these enlightened days are his so-called mainstream novels, and even they must be out-of-print.

Weldon makes a bid for Dick's literary respectability in a book which being jointly reprinted by Voyager (HarperCollins) and Waterstones, and which was used as part of their science fiction promotion. Select a lurid title from sci-(agh)-fi corner and you can get two quid off this special edition. Not buy Moby Dick and get P. K. Dick. Not buy two copies of Martin Amis's *The Information* and we'll compensate you with a decent novel, but slum it in s**t* corner and you can get a copy.

Weldon makes a big deal of titles. *Of Do Androids Dream...?* and *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale* she writes "what kind of title is that?", despite their making a whole lot more sense than *Blade Runner*. (At the risk of being childish, we might ask the same question of *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil* or the hokum which was *The Cloning of Joanna May*. So we're childish). She also sees the novel as prophetic - but somehow I don't see Murdoch as in quite the same league as Perky Pat or the Internet as quite the same as colonising outer space. My problems with e-mail as I write this are annoying, but not the same existential crisis as the Eldritch-infected Leo Bulero exercises (although, in the past, these problems have involved there being two versions of me, and so, maybe...).

I fear Weldon sees Dick as an acceptable eccentric - she can overplay his madness and his suffering and his use of amphetamines, but will never really understand his place in the scheme of things. In a couple of hundred words, she mentions Blake (a fair enough comparison) and Huxley and Orwell (missing the point) and Francis Thompson (a "recovered opium addict", as if that really explains Dick), but not van Vogt or Bestor or even Gibson.

Waterstones, on the other hand, see him as a brand name. There is nothing inherently wrong in this, given that their business is to sell books. But should K. W. Jeter's *Blade Runner 2* really be filed under Dick? It's a fine novel, as I said in my review, but should Jeter be disappeared? To find that fine of writer who promised so much with *Dr. Adder*, you have to look under *Star Trek* or Dick, or if you're lucky, you might find something of his in the horror section. Jeter, I guess, is paying his rent, but it still stinks.

The Author is Dead, all right, but that only means there's no one around to complain about how he or she is being sold. Meanwhile we should all go into Waterstones, and ask them why Dick is not on the literary shelves. Go on - I dare you...

And should not let this moment pass, to point out how we carefully engineered an announcement of Martian life being discovered to coincide with this most Martian of issues of *Vector*.

Hull - August 1996

by Andrew Butler

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Cover: An unusual projection of a composite of Viking pictures of Mars showing the entire surface. The picture has been stretched by about 50% on the North-South axis. Picture courtesy of NASA.

VECTOR

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RED PROPHET, GREEN MAN, BLUE ADEPT

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON IN CONVERSATION WITH KEVIN McVEIGH

Few books in recent years have been as eagerly awaited as Kim Stanley Robinson's *Blue Mars*, the completion of an epic trilogy that has already become a landmark in SF. The series as a whole is a fascinating exploration of the social, political and scientific aspects of Martian colonisation provoking so many questions. I interviewed Robinson for *Vector* when *Red Mars* was published, and was able to follow up on that conversation when he visited Britain earlier this year.

KMcV: Given that the series progresses via a planetary congress to culminate in a civil war of the deepest principles of the nation planet, to what extent is it reasonable to view the *Mars* books as a critique of American history, or colonialism generally?

KSR: Well, it does have its commentary I suppose on the way things have gone. There is constant reference back to earlier situations just by the nature of things. Mars' distance from Earth and the relationship it has with Earth is colonial to begin with and then when it reaches independence it echoes all these earlier situations in history but because of the differences it seemed to me that the differences were more important than the similarities. The fact that it is 150 million kilometres away, and the new technologies that I have described as coming into being both alter the situation so radically that the echoes, to my mind, aren't as important as the new stuff going on.

In essence I was forced to consider the problem as being that of making up a new plot and that made it exceptionally hard. It's always easier to fall back on analogies so now that I didn't believe in analogies as useful anymore made it difficult because it was a new story.

Even so, is there a way in which the Turner Thesis [an influential article from the 1870s which states that 'The biggest formative influence on the American character has been the presence of an expanding frontier.'] can be translated to the Martian colonial scenario?

Maybe, though I do think that's very specific to America at the end of the Nineteenth century. I think it's true, but it is very specific to its period.

On Mars I don't think the problem is at all the same, although there are some curious analogies because, with Mars having been populated and colonised and terraformed and become independent, suddenly the rest of the Solar System comes into play in *Blue Mars*. It recomputes everything, the idea that the frontier is back again, and is endlessly expanding so that there can never be an end to it. It takes certain pressures off Mars just as the idea of going up into space would take certain pressures off America. It wouldn't be the 'New World' anymore. So there are some analogies I guess.

It seems to me that by the time we reach *Blue Mars* the extreme Red position, as exemplified by Ann Clayborne, has been more or less marginalised. The debate then is between what you might call terraforming, i.e. making Mars like Earth, and Aereforming, i.e. making a habitable Mars.

I think that's a very good way of putting it. The only thing that keeps the extreme Reds like Ann going in *Blue Mars* is that the radical vertical scale of the Martian landscape is such

that the higher altitudes will always be extremely bare and cold. The Red position can then be taken high and at the higher elevations it actually makes sense so then, as you say, the battle becomes on to level off terraforming at a certain degree of completion and fine tune it so that in the lower elevations of Mars you can have a fairly Earthlike environment whereas at higher altitudes you can get so much higher that you can get back almost to the beginning in terms of what it looks like. It would be almost like nobody had been there at all.

How big an influence was Fredric Jameson [Influential US Marxist critic, involved with Science Fiction Studies in the early days and a populariser of Postmodernist theories in the 1980s]?

(Long Pause) Jameson has been a big influence in the sense that he has been my teacher not only literally, in fact he was my teacher at school but afterwards in his books. He's one of the most important parts of my political education and also my intro to a great number of other thinkers and writers that I first ran into in Jameson's work and have then gone on to read. So especially in regard to my political education I would say that he's one of the critical figures.

He might not like that now. I haven't heard from him about *Blue Mars*. He was very enthusiastic about *Red Mars* and *Green Mars* but he's a very committed Marxist and I have this worry that *Blue Mars* will not be exactly to his taste. It's not a worry that would make me change the book obviously, but I'll be interested to see what he makes of it. He may no longer be happy to be thought of as the political mentor, the results may not be to his liking.

Do you ever encounter any difficulties as a leftist Science Fiction writer?

No, none to speak of. I suppose if I were doing my job right I'd have more problems than I do. It's disturbing enough to certain elements of the American SF community that I'm best off being ignored, so I think I'm ignored by certain people who are made really uncomfortable by that political slant on my work.

There is some criticism of my work that is couched in other terms. In America explicit political debate doesn't happen very often, people are either incapable of it or afraid of it.

But these aren't big problems. There's not an FBI file on me.

Are you sure?

I'm reasonably confident that SF is not regarded as a serious threat. Back in the 1950s when Phillip K Dick was writing these intensely leftist anti-capitalist novels and McCarthy had files on everybody, there was nothing on him.

You picked up the semiotic rectangle concept via

Jameson from A.J. Greimas.

Yes he got it from Greimas and used it to amazing effect in work on Phillip K Dick, on Conrad and in 3 or 4 other situations. As he says, it's a flexible device. It's not like something where you look at a situation and immediately say 'Oh yeah, that's the semantic rectangle.' It takes a bit of working out. It's really a device for helping you to think structurally. It's only after quite a bit of thinking that you can make situations illuminated by this thing.

It was a perfect thing for my character Michel because he's very structuralist and he's fond of complicated theories, and so rather than try to invent some lamebrain Science Fictional complicated theory I have this really quite amazing device of Greimas' to apply to various situations and it's very useful. What it does is take you out of thinking of things as being either/or. If you think of everything as being binary oppositions then the semantic rectangle will say that there's a difference between somethings negative and its contrary and it really the same to say that something's opposed to something and to say that something is not the same.

Then there's the fourth term of the rectangle, as everyone agrees. It's really a whole new thing rather than a solution to the problem. It's a way of making the thing harder, but I've enjoyed my work with that. It's one of the great games.

Speaking of games, it strikes that it's one of the games that you're playing with the critic in that by making explicit this piece about the semantic rectangle, firstly in *Red Mars* where Michel explains about himself as melancholic and John being sanguine etc., and then subsequently developing this throughout the series, you preempt and hence disarm the critic to some extent.

I like that formulation, and there is some of that going on. You can't be a fiction writer for very long without noticing a certain condescension on the part of too many critics who seem to be coming in from Olympian heights to explain to these poor, instinctive, semi-intelligent fiction writers what they really were doing. I think it's not a bad thing to say to them, 'think again.'

Later, if Michel is the big structuralist, then Sax is almost the anti-structuralist. If you consider that one of the tenets of structuralism is that language is necessary for perception of reality, then Sax's aphasia means that he doesn't think in language but he still perceives reality.

Sax, I think of as obviously my image of the scientist, for this trilogy anyway, and as such I think he's very dubious about Michel's theorising as being an imposition of unsupported theory on reality. He has the kind of classical empiricist scientist view, at least to begin with that he begins with the data and tries to make the simplest theory possible that will fit the facts rather than the elaborations that Michel goes into without data support. So, yes, Sax is alarmed at Michel's theorising and is not a structuralist and as you say, in his aphasia he has to come to grapple with what is the relationship between language and reality more of us do. That was a lovely opportunity to write about that because it leads to a kind of poetry in prose. It also leads to thinking about the relationship between sentences and what you're trying to describe. It's really explicit that way.

You use a lot of different voices in these books as a whole, the majority of which come from the First Hundred, or including Coyote, the First Hundred and One. Apart from these, Nirgal and Zo are directly related to them, the only exception is Art. It

seems to me that the reason Art is used in this way in *Blue Mars* is because you couldn't have told Nadia's story at that point from her viewpoint, because she simply wasn't seeing what was happening.

I wanted to bring in some new voices but also I didn't want to overload the structure of my narrative. I needed new voices but I wanted the novel to have a shapeliness that depended on mostly using the voices I'd begun with. Art becomes a way of illuminating Nadia's story and giving a new angle on all of them, but principally on her. Each one of the new voices has a very specific job to do. What I found interesting was so many of these voices began as auctants, as positions necessary to the novel which only later developed into characters who were really voices in my mind of quite amazing distinctions. You know, as if they were people in my life. I felt for them and I missed them when they were gone, it was all quite ridiculous. It was like Calvin & Hobbes, like Calvin when Hobbes has been taken away, so in some ways it's shattering and it's really the Mars companion volume that is keeping me from being depressed about it.

The trilogy as a whole is a dialogic novel, and Bakhtin talks about this in terms of how the character (or characters) take over and there isn't a direct authorial voice character. There are moments throughout when you seem to openly acknowledge this to the reader. I'm thinking of the *shikata ga nai* refrain, and then in *Blue Mars* the scene where they attend a Greek Tragedy and you stress the line 'we acted the way we had to act.'

Bakhtin was brought to my attention by the critic Carol Frankau, after I had finished *Green Mars* and I looked up the essay on the dialogic element in the novel after she mentioned it. I wasn't aware of it before. It seemed to me to be expressing with amazing clarity unconscious theories that I'd had about the novel all along. The form of this book is that it is given over part by part to different voices who are as distinct as I can make them. It's always reinforcing to see a clear theoretical expression of what one's been trying to do and I think it actually helped me in figuring out certain problems in *Blue Mars*.

I always had in mind an italic section I called The Cavalcade of Voices, though I don't think I actually use that phrase in the text. In my own mind that last italic section was The Cavalcade of Voices, a very Bakhtinian finish to things, but it's something I had planned for years and nothing to do with reading Bakhtin ahead of time.

Would you say that any part of the trilogy is a realist novel?

That can mean three or four very different things. I would very often use realist novel as a contradistinction to SF novel, and in that case it wouldn't be right, because they are SF novels.

But if you use realist novels to mean that it is opposed to the fantastic or the impossible as in a fantasy world, it feels real, it could really happen, then yes, I'd say all three are realist novels.

Everything in *Red Mars* seems to be feasible within existing technology.

Red Mars does have the longevity treatment.

Which is the one element which you might consider fantastic until in *Blue Mars* you have the Pulse Drive, which is currently unobtainable.

You have to make a jump. There's a biological jump, and there's a physical jump and those are big jumps. Other than that the text is pretty much straightline extrapolation. There's some Big Science going on, some massive, really successful engineering in there. The space elevator is a problem, the mirrors are a problem, getting the oceans up from a frozen permafrost up onto the surface as a liquid, all these are engineering monster projects that in actual execution would be horrendously difficult but there's no theoretical problems in there.

That was important to me, and I knew I was stretching it with the longevity treatment but I needed that to make the characters see the whole process through. The pulse drive came after long discussions with Charles Sheffield talking about fusion power and that's the most plausible speedy travel he could suggest and he pointed out where I could be sure of the details. Sheffield was an enormous help to me in the hard SF side of things. He's a generous guy to do all that, he likes to help.

I like what he can do to figure out the details himself, being a space scientist and having that grasp of physics to judge the likelihoods and make up things himself. I can't do that, but what I did do was pose scenarios of the sort of things I'd like to do in a general sense, and he would help me work out the details. He and Clarke had done all that work on the space elevator in the 70s and I thought why should an idea that good be allowed to just drop out of SF because it's already been used in one novel (or two)? What really should happen is that it should replace all those rockets off the surface. So I asked him if I could use it, and he was pleased to be consulted. I shocked him a couple of times when I asked which way would it fall if it was going to fall. I saw him look a little alarmed at that, and then, what would it take to bring Phobos down, he looked even more alarmed, and what would it take to put Deimos out of the system and by then he was used to me suggesting alarming things.

If you consider Science Fiction as a literature of ideas then the fact that an idea has already been postulated shouldn't preclude another SF writer coming along to use it because it isn't merely the ideas but the uses and consequences of those ideas.

If it were we wouldn't be doing Time Travel stories anymore. There's consequences and implications to ideas, and some ideas are so good that they ought then to just be like a computer virus that creeps into the rest of the literature afterwards and become givens.

The givens that people take though are often too silly to be taken seriously, for me to believe in them. They make things too easy, like hyperspace warp drives so you can bop around the galaxy like it's your backyard. Those things are

deceptive and lame, they allow people to cheat but there are other things that are such good ideas that they ought to become givens because they are such good ideas.

Do you feel that you ought to ensure that the science is as plausible as possible?

If you're writing a near future realist SF novel like we're talking about here, that connects to our present day, then yes you ought to. If you've got an idea for a Science Fantasy such as I had with *A Short Sharp Shock*, in the far future, then the rules are completely different. You're essentially working in a different genre at that point. That would be the last place where you would want to go into detail of how did all this come to be, with a plausible explanation, it would be absurd.

Memory plays a big part in many of your books.

Yes, I find it the key to our humanity: the fact that we can remember things, it's how we learn. I've always had a very powerful memory for things from my past and a very intense emotional attachment to it. It's all tied in to my life with insomnia, and in my many insomniac hours I've often had the past return quite vividly and with a lot of emotional impact. All this has been an intense impetus for me becoming an artist in the first place.

So to be able to discuss it explicitly that was another gift of these books. By giving these characters the longevity treatment I could go back to the situation in *Ichenge* where you live a long time but you don't remember what you do and I feel there's something so disastrous about this.

Green Mars is unusual in this respect in that Roger Clayborne can remember the majority of his three hundred years.

There may be people who are like a genius in that regard, in that they have an extra powerful memory. In *Blue Mars* Zeyk the Egyptian, (not a First Hundred but an early settler and an important character throughout) he also has a memory with an eidetic quality. This fascinates me, and I've read a lot of books on memory now.

This was the great gift of this book, that it allowed me to talk about so many of the things that are most important to me without stress or strain.

So have you exhausted Mars now?

No I think it's pretty much inexhaustible. I have these plans for a companion volume of Mars stories that I want to write. More folk tales, anecdotes, poems etc., which, well, if they don't come I'm in big trouble.

Kim Stanley Robinson, thank you very much.

I'm glad to do it, thank you.

Since this interview NASA has, famously, announced that there was once life on Mars. By electronic mail, I asked Kim Stanley Robinson a final question: Did he think this made a mission to Mars more likely, and more desirable? Five years ago he had offered certain economic reasons as to why it might be possible, but expressed doubt in the US government's commitment.

I feel that the evidence in the meteorite is very suggestive - it is not a "smoking gun" but the four bits of circumstantial evidence found all in the same spot is enough to justify all the fuss being made. It means that we have more reason than ever to go to Mars and see if we can find fossilised microbial

mats like the stromatolites that we have found here on Earth. Robot rovers can do part of this work, landing and searching the shorelines of the ancient lakebeds we know are there, but human explorers would be able to do much more of this kind of thing. My feeling is that the whole tenor of the game has changed now; before it was a matter of geology, appealing only to people interested in astronomy and geology; now it's become something of interest to everyone, a general curiosity to find out if these cousins of ours really existed, and if so what they were like and what their fate was. It doesn't matter that we're only talking about single-celled organisms, the interest is still there, because of the tremendous affinity of life for life.

L.J. Hurst Reviews Kim Stanley Robinson's *Blue Mars* (Voyager, 1966, 621pp, £15.99)

Blue Mars covers ninety years, manages to encompass not only Mars and all the other planets in the solar system but send off a starship as well, and it begins only one hundred and thirty years from now. When you look at the world we have and how it is governed or mis-governed you might wonder whether this is humankind overstretching itself. As the founders of the new Mars have anti-ageing drugs and live for one or two hundred years you have the possibility that the representatives we would be sending to the stars could be some of the younger politicians of today. So Kim Stanley Robinson is an optimist in more ways than one.

The third volume of his trilogy, *Blue Mars*, begins with most forms of earthly life now resident on Mars. The process of areoforming (Ares is the Greek form of Mars) is almost finished and there is a complete atmosphere and a full series of oceans – river systems are much rarer (piping is preferred). Mountains rise at much steeper gradients and the atmosphere thins more noticeably for those who want to get away to the high places. The human inhabitants have built their societies in tents, which are now becoming redundant, like medieval city walls. On the other hand, unlike the declining medieval cities, these tents are politically discrete units, and the first part of the novel is concerned with the bodies politic and their battles. These split into two: between the parties of Red Mars and Green Mars – where Red means leaving the planet without terraforming, so that its climate is much more extreme, and Green, who support a strong terraforming.

The second political battle concerns the struggles of Mars to be independent of Earth. Readers only get a few glimpses of how bad things are back on Earth – there is incredible overcrowding as the population rises many times, but when one character goes back to Earth (leaving and arriving at both planets via elevators) the worst he sees is that the polar icecaps have melted and Gillingham in Kent has been flooded. Having asserted their independence, and getting it very easily, the Martians then go into a huddle and argue over their constitution. This gets discussed in long detail, with all the enthusiasm you might expect from a country where bestsellers are still published on the Constitutional Debates of the 1770s.

Then, before you know it, the engineers are out and Venus is being terraformed, as are the asteroids and the moons of Jupiter, then the moons of Uranus (which is turned into a mini-sun as the real one provides too little illumination). What is surprising about all this human activity is how little wonder is attributed to the engineers and their effort. For instance, the idea of using one of the distant planets as a small sun is a massive idea in itself, but it gets half a page, or less. Then, for all the space that is given to the discussion of the Martian constitution, it seems as if most of the occupation of the solar bodies and all the changes are made without discussion at all; somehow a group of astronautical engineers or emigrants have managed to arrive and began a major piece of work. There is no Federation, there is no government, Earth is still divided up into states like today, yet somehow planet-forming gets done. How the necessary resources are brought together is never made clear. Robinson gives a number of indirect references to the hard science authors who have predicted how the solar system will change – Clarke and Sheffield are place names, but he does not concentrate on the engineering or the economics, unlike Charles Sheffield, say, who tends to make his protagonists very rich engineers who can afford to build their visions.

At the end of the book Mars is terraformed – all of it is available for human life, and it has the spaces that presumably have disappeared from Earth. It has, though,

wilderness available for barbarity. In the chapter 'Werteswandel', Nirgal, one of the main characters, goes off into the desert and joins a group of hunters:

Nirgal's hands shook as he watched; he could smell the blood; he was salivating. Piles of intestines steamed in the chill air. Magnesium poles were pulled from waistbags and telescoped out, and the decapitated antelope bodies were tied over them by the legs.

By the time this happens Mars has a constitution which allows these individuals their dubious pleasures – and whether he is aware of it or not, Robinson's Martians have brought about something terrible. (If you want to become aware of this difference think of Clive King's *Stig of the Dump*. That has a hunt scene, too, where Stig's friend Barney discovers that Stig is not interested in the fox – he sees the horses and ponies beneath the red-coated riders as a potential dinner. Somehow, that is much more of a revaluation of our values.)

At the same time as I have been reading *Blue Mars*, I have been reading *Climate, History and the Modern World* by H.H. Lamb (the second edition was published by Routledge in 1995). It provides a lot of information, some of which is mentioned in *Blue Mars*; it also provokes some bigger questions, the most important of which is: when you talk about terraforming, or areoforming, – which Terra are you talking about? Are you talking about Earth as it was for thousands of years before 2000 BCE, principally ice-bound, where there was no civilization, possibly because there was no place for civilization? Or the centuries of the Roman Empire, when everything became milder and vines grew in Gaul and Britain for the first time? Or the time of Shakespeare, when the Little Ice-Age had descended again?

The climate you have is going to affect the success of your colonisation – Americans know this, because the early settlers had so many problems. However, as Lamb makes clear, climates have so many variations and so many cycles that the window of civilisation we have enjoyed has perhaps been chance. And in a sense we are lucky that the worst devastation has never been universal. For instance, we all know the political and social consequences of the warm wet weather in Ireland in the 1840s which allowed the potato blight to flourish, but we have mostly forgotten that eight of the harvests failed in Scotland in the 1690s.

Robinson refers to some the freaks, like 1816, the 'Year Without a Summer' in many parts of the world. His Mars has some of these problems, but I think he has failed to appreciate, that in creating a world with an atmosphere, he is going to create a world with a climate. For instance, towards the end of the novel, Nirgal and Maya travel on a schooner through a great sea and flooded fjords, but there is no discussion of the micro-climate which must have sprung up about the sea and mountains, suggesting that Robinson can envisage deserts (he is a Californian) and snowstorms, but he cannot envisage temperate ever-changing climes (Britain, Vancouver or Japan, say). And in a similar way other scientific discoveries get a strange treatment – there is a one-off discussion of sub-viral bodies, which are called 'virroids', but they appear to be prions, which we in Britain are perhaps more familiar with because of B.S.E. Or, later, there is a long suggestion that there has been no scientific discussion of (loss of) memory, ignoring the work of science popularisers such as Oliver Sacks and Harold Klavans.

So, *Blue Mars*, set in the near future is, perhaps rather than an end, a starting point. There may be a *Mars Companion* appearing soon. I hope it will include everything that will allow readers to continue their search.

Heading Toward Utopia:

Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Mars' Trilogy

by Andrew M. Butler

Nowhere on this world were people killing each other, nowhere were they desperate for shelter or food, nowhere were they scared for their kids.

(*Blue Mars* p. 615)

The project which occupied Kim Stanley Robinson before the publication of *Red Mars* (1992) was another trilogy, depicting a number of alternate futures for Orange County, California, which were either utopian or dystopian in nature. In the first two the future was already in place, but the third, *Pacific Edge* (1990) alternates between a fully realised utopia and the struggles of a writer in a dystopia writing a utopian novel. *Pacific Edge* forms a transition between the two trilogies in the way it plays off past and present. The 'Mars' trilogy is about building a utopia, a utopia which turns out to be socialist in nature. (I'm immediately aware that any statement along the lines of the 'Mars' trilogy is about — should be treated with contempt as overambitious; the 'Mars' trilogy is about a good many other things as well.)

Politically, the roots of the trilogy lie in other utopias, including Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1886), William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890) and Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907). All three posit varying shades of socialist futures, and all three are structured around dialogues. In Bellamy's and Morris's works the utopia is described to a visitor to the future. London's novel purports to be a manuscript, complete with academic footnotes questioning and amplifying the main text. All three contain characters who debate and discuss the future world in comparison to the 'present'.

A surprising amount of the 'Mars' trilogy is occupied with dialogue and discussion, as the characters debate the issues of the day. Although the purpose of the original mission is to establish a sustainable Mars colony, and presumably the crew were selected with this aim in mind, much of *Red Mars* is taken up with a debate between those who wish to transform Mars into a second Earth (Greens), and those who wish to keep it unspoiled (Reds). The middle ground is to make Mars habitable, but to build a world without the faults of Earth. Robinson's position in the debate is impossible to ascertain, although it is a transformed version of the middle ground that wins through. Each section of the narrative is focused through the thoughts of a member of the First Hundred or a descendant, with the exception of one section which is focused through Arthur, a spy who becomes an ally of Mars. This technique means that the reader is forced to identify with a number of dialectically opposed opinions and viewpoints.

The utopia which is built is socialist or communist in nature, although, of course, there are different shades of socialism. Morris objected to the machine-dominated future of Bellamy; "a machine life is the best which Bellamy can imagine... his only idea of making labour tolerable is to decrease the amount of it by means of fresh and ever fresh development of machinery." This sentiment has an echo in *Blue Mars* (1996) when Maya says, "This is what our Martian structures lack, they are too big. But this — this was built by human hands, with tools anyone could construct and use"

(202). There is a back-to-basics view here, suspicious of technology, which can also be found in the attitudes of the Reds.

Morris argued that work should be collective, by the people for the people, and 'men make for their neighbours' use as if they were making for themselves, not for a vague market of which they know nothing' (*News* 82). Similar impulses can be found in the 'Mars' trilogy; on his visit to Earth, Nirgal argues that: "Every person [is] free and equal in the sight of all, working together for the good of all. It's that work that makes us most free. No hierarchy is worth acknowledging but this one: the more we give, the greater we become" (*Blue* 142). In *Red Mars* everyone contributes to the establishment of the colony; people have their specialisms, but if work needs to be done then it will be done. Every evening they hold discussions to decide where to go from there.

The first third or so of London's book is a primer in capitalism and socialist ideas. London's revolutionary Everard explains the theory of surplus value using the example of a shoe factory. A hundred dollars' worth of leather goes into a factory, and comes out, through the investment of capital and the work of labour, as two hundred dollars' worth of shoes. This money is then divided up, with fifty dollars going to labour, giving them that amount of money to spend. On a national scale, according to London, four billion dollars' of goods are produced, but only two billion dollars of product can be bought. The rest of the product has to be sold abroad, leading to the company owning assets within the foreign country. That foreign country is in turn developing, and needing to export. But: "The planet is only so large. There are only so many countries in the world. What will happen when every country in the world, down to the smallest and last, with a surplus in their hands, stands confronting every other country with surpluses in their hands?" (*Iron Heel*, p. 101) The answer is presumably economic collapse, but the answer available to Robinson's space-faring characters is that capitalism has to expand into other markets, other projects.

It certainly seems that by the time of the 'Mars' trilogy this stage has been reached on Earth. Given the international nature of the original expedition, a certain *rapprochement* appears to have been made on an international scale. But already in our time the national economies have been left behind by the multi-national or trans-national corporation, so often the Evil Empire beloved of cyberpunk. The TNC cuts across national boundaries, changes head office to suit local tax or company laws and is almost impossible to regulate. Robinson takes this a stage further to the metanational corporation: "A metanational takes over the foreign debt and the internal economy of its client countries... the client government becomes the enforcement agency of the metanational's economic policies" (*Green* p.

482). Rather than arranging its financial affairs to suit a given country, the metanational arranges a given country to suit its financial affairs. This in itself is not necessarily a bad thing – it is in its best interests to keep the good will of its citizens – but a certain amount of freedom is lost.

Later in this section of *Green Mars* – titled “What is to be Done?” in obvious homage to Lenin – the Martian colonists agree that the metanationals should be kept away from Mars. They also agree that “The fruits of an individual’s labour belong to the individual... At the same time human labour on Mars is part of a communal enterprise, given to the common good” (*Green Mars* p. 488). In other words, from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs. Rather than an economic development which will reproduce all the faults of Earth, the Martian colony has to have a biospherical development which is in the interests of the environment and the inhabitants of the environment.

The Martian society is essentially classless, although not without leaders. With the abolition of currency (although various forms of currency are developed) the superstructure of society is altered. As Marx and Engels argue in *The Communist Manifesto*: “The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement [property] vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital” (Marx 66). Such a state has been reached on Mars: “[O]n Mars we have seen both patriarchy and property brought to an end....

Reading List

Edmund Bellamy, *Looking Backward: From the Year 2000-1887*. New York: Doubleday, 1961.

Jack London, *The Iron Heel*. Edited and introduced by I. O. Evans. London: Arco, 1966.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*. Edited by Lewis S. Feuer. London: Fontana, 1969.

William Morris, *News From Nowhere*. Edited by James Redmond. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.

Kim Stanley Robinson – see p. x (*Green Mars*. London: HarperCollins, 1993 paperback edition)

And the land is in the shared stewardship of everyone. We still own personal items as property, but land as property has never happened here. That’s a new social reality, we struggle with it every day” (*Blue* 345).

Certainly women have as much power as men; John Boone may have been a father figure, but it is Nadia who becomes president. The new society tolerates sperm and egg banks where parents become irrelevant, and as the First Hundred enter their second century, the barriers between generations break down. It is quite acceptable to have a sexual relationship with someone young enough to be your grandchild, or old enough to be your grandfather. All of this is achieved without the grubby-mac wish fulfilment one would feel from a lesser writer than Robinson.

Robinson has achieved a great many things in his trilogy; foremost of these is the plausibility and attractiveness of the communist future he creates. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was felt that somehow the West had won, along with capitalism, and yet Robinson (an American) provides a criticism of the capital-based system we have, and offers a viable alternative. His masterstroke is his use of dialogue and debate: a utopian society, particularly a communist one, might seem naïve at this point in history, but by allowing characters to mouth opposing opinions, he deflates such criticism.

The Edge of Utopia? Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Pacific Edge*

by Kev McVeigh

Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Pacific Edge* is generally considered to be the utopian aspect of his “Three Californias” sequence, following the dystopian post-apocalypse *The Wild Shore* and the near-future extrapolation of *The Gold Coast*. However, in Robinson’s approach to these things, it is not possible to make such simple judgements. As part of a loose trilogy, or perhaps more correctly of a triptych, *Pacific Edge* does depict the most idyllic of the three societies. Taken on its own, there are two sides to the novel – ‘Pacific’ and ‘Edge’ – which suggest alternative explanations.

It is possible to consider *Pacific Edge* alone because, whilst the three books consider a common setting – Orange County, California – and one common character – Tom Barnard – they are in no sense contiguous. For a start, the nature of the setting varies: the near-survivalist *The Wild Shore*, the industrial greed of *The Gold Coast* and the social harmony of *Pacific Edge*. Robinson uses Tom as a link with something approaching our society, and he is the closest Robinson comes to a Heinleinian Wise Old Man figure, particularly in *Pacific Edge*. In each book he is effectively the same character; Robinson has said: “he shares the same genetic make-up” (*NOVA Express* # 7, interview), but his rôle varies considerably, and in *Pacific Edge* he is a reluctant participant for much of the time.

The most important way in which *Pacific Edge* differs

from its predecessors, however, is in a structural device which creates the duality between ‘Pacific’ and ‘Edge’. The ‘Orange County’ side of the story is interspersed with brief scenes from elsewhere, notes from the diary of a man interned in a holding camp for those testing HIV+, in a world which is far from utopian. Although comprising just twelve pages of the two-hundred-and-eighty page total, these episodes bear a significance which entirely changes the tone of the novel. It is in these diary scenes that the question of *Pacific Edge*-as-utopia is raised.

The narrator of the prison sequences is a lawyer deported from Switzerland in a general clampdown on foreigners by that country, and he is arrested immediately on his return to the USA. The first of these journal entries is dated 2 March 2012, just over fifty years prior to the events in the main body of the novel (p. 30). Scattered clues throughout these sections reveal the identity of the author as a younger Tom Barnard, and this is confirmed on page 257. As Sherry Coldsmith wrote in her review of *Pacific Edge*: “Tom’s journal entries, written during his youth, tell of a period when it seemed that the postmodern fascism described in *The Gold Coast* was the only possible future” (*SF Eye* # 9, pp. 93-4). Throughout *Pacific Edge*, when the hero Kevin Claiborne encounters political and/or personal difficulties, “It is Tom who provides a counterpoint to Kevin’s frustrations and

sorrows' (*SF Eye* # 9, p. 94).

However, there is an element to these journal entries which raises important questions about how the rest of the novel should be perceived. Tom is writing a book, which turns out to be a utopia: "a stab at succeeding where my real work has failed" (p. 30). "Now I'll change the world in my mind", he writes (p. 31). So, is the story of Kevin and his friends' ecological campaign and opposition to political corruption Tom's *real* future? Or is it the future of Tom's book an imaginary expression of Tom's socialist principles – in Tom's own words: "At least an attempt to clarify my my beliefs, my desires?" Surely then the existence of Tom's journal belies the view that the world of 2012 is the only possible future?

Ultimately, of course, *Pacific Edge* is all fiction, and the relative reality of one section or another is meaningless except where it offers clues to the aims of the author. There are aspects of Tom Barnard in this novel which closely match aspects of Kim Stanley Robinson at the time he was writing *Pacific Edge*. Like Tom's, Robinson's wife was engaged in scientific research in Switzerland and he lived there for two years. Robinson has no qualms about proclaiming himself a socialist; he did so in an interview for *Vector* 176:

I really do what I can in an attempt to salvage what is left of the socialist approach...There are some obvious principles of fair play and justice that are expressed in the socialist utopian dream that are being trampled badly by the looting and pillage of capitalism... [W]e're living in the shambles of a bad century here, and you just have to keep making those little attempts to reconnect. (pp. 7-8).

It seems clear then that Robinson is attempting in *Pacific Edge* to do exactly what Tom Barnard is doing in his book, but with the typical Robinson sense of the duality inherent in every situation. The opening line of the novel, part of Kevin's narrative, offers an example of this: "Despair could never touch a morning like this" (p. 1). If this morning is so beautiful, why introduce even the thought of despair? Is it significant that Tom's journal begins in hope on a day of bad weather?

Consider Tom's thoughts as he begins to write:

I'm writing a utopia in a country that runs as smoothly as Zuri's little blue trams...Conflicts that tear the rest of the world apart are here solved with the coolest kind of rationality...I write in a kind of pocket utopia, a little island of calm in a maddened world. Perhaps it will help make my future seem more plausible to me – perhaps it will even seem possible. (p. 31).

Consider the town of El Modena, where Kevin Claiborne and his friends discuss their problems rationally during public council meetings. Several times references are made to other towns where such things are less amicable, and where ecological or social concerns are secondary to profits. Kevin receives irregular messages from his sister working in Bangladesh, which highlight the fact that so much work still needs to be done. As Tom concludes in his first journal note: "There's no such thing as a pocket utopia" (p. 31). So Tom's model, Switzerland, is recreated on a small scale in Orange County, but with global problems continuing, this is not enough. He goes on to consider what he means by utopia: "What a cheat utopias are... Engineer some fresh start, an island, a new continent. So they don't have to deal with our

history. So the utopias in books are pocket utopias too... They don't speak to us trapped in this world... We have to deal with history as it stands. Must redefine utopia" (p. 81).

If *Pacific Edge* is Robinson's attempt to re-assess and redefine utopia, then the voice he uses must be that of Tom Barnard, and hence Kevin's story is in fact Tom's book. Robinson gives us at least one hint that he is working this way. Tom's journal quotes from the author's journal section of Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection*: "I decide to change Kid Death's hair from black to red", which leads to Tom wondering "How come when I consider revisions it's not 'change Kid Death's hair from black to red' but 'throw out the first draft and start the whole thing over?'" (p. 81). Such an overt reference to another openly metafictional work can only be an explicit confirmation of *Pacific Edge*'s similar status. Later, Tom tells his wife: "I'm thinking of alternating the chapters of fiction with essay chapters which discuss the political and economic problems we need to solve" (p. 103) and goes on to discuss Wells's utopian essays. In which case, *Pacific Edge* can be viewed as layers of reality, with Tom's journal depicting the outer, primary reality, and hence the world of the novel, far from being utopian, is instead a dystopia.

Nevertheless, the novel is *about* utopia. It is about the practical realities of achieving utopia. Hence all the small details about ecologically sound and aesthetically pleasing housing design, about land reclamation, and the legal mechanisms being developed to steer this work. Hence too, Tom's consideration, and rejection, of a range of conventional sf routes to utopia – alternate history, the Great Man theory – as "hot useful" (p. 126). He quotes Marcus: "one of the worst signs of our danger is we can't imagine the route from here to utopia" (p. 127).

For Tom, that point comes when he is imprisoned in the internment camp, and he sees the most truly debilitating effects of his world, and he tears up his notebooks. One of his fellow inmates challenges him and brings paper and pens: "You got to tell what happens here. If you don't tell it, then who will?" (p. 237). And so Tom discovers something new about utopia: "There is a refusal of despair... There is a courage that should shame the rest of us. There is a place where people on the edge of death make jokes, they help each other, they share what they have, they endure. In this hell they make their own 'utopia'" (p. 237). This brings things back to Tom's earlier remarks on redefining utopia: "Utopia is the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous agonizing process, with no end" (p. 82).

Applying this back on to *Pacific Edge*, Kevin's battles with Alfredo over a planning issue demonstrate that even this intellectual idyll has its flaws. Robinson uses discussions of this issue, which might seem trivial as far as fiction's concerns go, to postulate some of the ways that society can be changed. *Pacific Edge* is Kim Stanley Robinson's attempt to show both where we might be headed, and an example of the sort of place we could achieve. It is utopia by the definition Tom adopts, even though Kevin's personal story ends with things going tragically "wrong in an Oresteian sense" (*Vector* 176, p. 8), because there is hope and there is a mechanism for social change towards a more perfect world.

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BSFA Award Winners: *The Unlimited Dream Company*

by K. V. Bailey

If I had to choose a novel central to the body of J. G. Ballard's fiction, this would be it. Chronologically it stands about halfway between *The Drowned World* (1962) and *Rushing Towards Paradise* (1994). In more immediate context, published in 1979, it had been preceded by the claustrophobic *High-Rise* (1975), and by *Concrete Island* (1974), a nightmarish Robinsonade echoing *Crash's* (1973) technologically imaged fusion of sexual energy and cultural nullity. *Concrete Island* ends with the accident-disabled protagonist remaining inhibited from escaping his motorway-barriered prison. But *The Unlimited Dream Company* is quickly succeeded by works having denouements of quite different emphasis from that of *Concrete Island*. These are *Hello America* (1981) and the novella 'Myths of the Near Future' (1982), both of which close with the promise or achievement of near-transcendent liberation. In the former the Flier climbs to 'the generous shoulder of the sun', forsaking a doomed and automated Las Vegas for 'California and the morning gardens of the west', it being 'time for new dreams... the dreams of the first of the Presidents of the Sunlight Fliers.' 'Myths' ends with the freeing at Sheppard's hands of the time-locked plants, insects and birds, and his setting off southward toward all the dreamers and sleepwalkers 'waiting to be woken from the represent into the infinite realm of their time-filled selves'.

Of course, these contraposed motifs of entrapment and liberation are, with varying emphases, present over the range of Ballard's novels and stories, but in *The Unlimited Dream Company* they are constituents of a remarkable dialectic in which the rôle of the novel's (first person) protagonist, Blake, perhaps more than is the case with any such other Ballardian figure, combines elements of hero and shaman. I am here using the word 'hero' in its mythological sense, as in the myth of Osiris or of the Fisher King, while allowing that sense to include the mythological significance of historical, or mistily historical, figures - Charlemagne, King Arthur, Zoroaster, Christ. In an interview, conducted postally by Paul di Filippo (*Science Fiction Eye* 8), Ballard wrote that in the early 1950 he had been 'very impressed by [Joseph Campbell's] *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*'. The impress of this Campbell-delineated archetypal figure is in some degree detectable in many of Ballard's protagonists, from the early Kerens (*The Drowned World*) to the late eighties Mallory (*The Day of Creation* [1987]), but is nowhere more clearly to be observed than in the person of Blake in *The Unlimited Dream Company*.

What are the characteristics and functions of the Campbellian hero? He is a 'symbolic carrier of the destiny of Everyman' in addition to being a cultural archetype, a world-redeemer. Campbell marks out the path which first separates him from the familiar world, leads him to a personal apotheosis, and transmits his new-found understanding of 'unity in multiplicity'. Campbell summarises 'the effect of the successful adventure of the hero' as 'the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world'. I have suggested, too, that Blake may, with his miraculous

power of healing, be viewed as a shaman and his assumption (like Taliesin) of the body of bird or fish capable of magical flights and transformations, is a function of the hero in his mediatory rôle.

After Blake in his stolen light plane crashes into the Thames at Shepperton, he, swimming ashore, is mythically born (or perhaps reborn, returned from the dead) into that mundane commuter community. The Cessna sinks and, until washed out to sea, continues to encase a Blake-the-Aviator skeleton, eventually confused/identified with a river-gravel 'winged man' fossil. So, Blake-in-Shepperton, helpless and near-naked, is clothed and restored by Dr. Miriam St Cloud, one of the circling crowd witnessing his arrival, and by her mother, with whom he soon has sex. He perceives this, however, to be half-incestuous, and their actions to be again mimicking a birth. Realistically it is 'the everywhere of suburbia, the paradigm of nowhere'. Blake does not know what powers had destined him to crash there or to what purpose. Escape is his aim, but that involves surmounting the motorway, and every path he takes becomes a spiral arm curving back on itself and returning him to the town (the labyrinth is a widely occurring symbol of bewildered striving for a spiritual goal). The river proves a like frustrating barrier and it is only in the quasi dream-like, quasi real (or surreal) night experience of flying as a bird and being accompanied lustfully, orgastically, by the towns population, metamorphosed into every avian variety, that he realises that he is eager for the townsfolk to join him, that they 'were also prisoners of this town'. That premonitory experience is followed by a dream/trance in which he swims the Thames as a whale, joined by the population of Shepperton metamorphosed into many species of fish. This in turn precedes an apotheosis in which Shepperton fades into insubstantiality, and he finds himself 'alone in an empty world'. He describes this as the 'first real world, a quiet park in a suburb of an empty universe which I was the first to enter and into which I might lead the inhabitants of that shadow Shepperton I had left behind'. Antlers spring from his head and he rounds up and fecundates the deer, realising himself to be a shape-changing pagan god, lord of the herd, king of the birds, greatest of the fish, master-denizen of the elements - earth, water, air and (through his sexual energy) fire.

'The next day,' Blake records, 'I began to remake Shepperton in my own image.' This is the return of the hero after the moment of apotheosis. In a revelry of scattered sperm he transforms the town into a jungle enclave and sets about teaching the people to fly - flight being metaphor for transcending a mundane mechanical existence. The induction proceeds until many of the neophytes are absorbed, quasi-sexually, into Blake's own body, to achieve or await release there. The progress is interrupted by a rifle shot from Stark, his adversary, at the moment of Blake's marriage to Miriam. Miriam dies, and the wounded hero, paraded on a supermarket trolley, becomes then the object of hate for the crowds who had adored him. Death and decay suffuse the town, flowers, trees, fish, birds, deer, are all infected, while

Blake lies in an earthy tomb prepared by the three crippled children who have throughout been his followers. At the nadir of his suffering, however, he is given reanimating strength bestowed by the creatures dying around him. The forest revives and the restored Blake begins to "give himself away", making whole the crippled children, transferring his strength and his body parts to human wrecks and thus readying them for the apocalyptic flight of "an immense aerial congregation" which ends the book. In its wake Blake absorbs his opponent Stark, resurrects Miriam, his own aviator-skeleton, and even the churchyard dead, making of his body their launching pathway to "the aisles of the sun". Blake stays identified with the winged-man archetypal fossil, anticipating the transformation of all other towns of the Thames Valley (and of the world beyond) when he and they "would merge with the trees and the flowers, with dust and stones, with the whole of the mineral world".

They are many nuances and a few major complexities which do not appear in the above brief account; but I have represented what I see as the novel's basic structure and have invited consideration of it in the light of the hero myth. When, in the postal interview cited earlier, Paul di Filippo asked whether Ballard considered himself religious, he said that he didn't, but to as further speculation as to whether it would be right to detect in his work flavours of Gnosticism and of Zen, he replied that he believes the imagination can break the construct which our senses and nervous systems present. The anarchic mélange of surreal imagery, perversions and metamorphoses encountered in *The Unlimited Dream Company* is undoubtedly an imaginative onslaught on a

mundanely mechanical face of things, a means of attempting that 'breakthrough'.

This mélange, however, would appear merely nihilistic were it not for the presence of an underlying scenario. This is in the essence of an individual's immersion in, and his/her responsible life-odyssey through the existential welter: the same scenario as that underlying the vicissitudes of James Joyce's protean Earwicker (*Finnegans Wake*) and the Dublin wanderings of his Leopold Bloom (*Ulysses*). The quest of Chrétien de Troye's Perceval and the pilgrimages of Bunyan's Christian and Christiana produce situations different from, yet archetypally identifiable with those encountered by Ballard's Kerens and Mallory, and in *The Unlimited Dream Company* by Blake.

The relation of such scenarios to the confluence of imagination and dream imagery is apparent in many instances of world and of genre literature. *Finnegans Wake* is written as a complex eclectic dream, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is Bunyan's dream, the cosmic mind invades that of the hillside sleeper of Stapledon's *Star Maker*. And Ballard, writing from his home in Shepperton a note (reproduced in *Interzone* 106) for the film script of *The Unlimited Dream Company*, has said "...in many ways I think of my imagination as a writer as a continuation of the dream time" and that unconsciously "I was writing a piece of my own autobiography", with particular focus on the transforming activities of the imagination - which is quite in line with Joseph Campbell's contention that the hero is "a symbolic carrier of the destiny of Everyman."

Cognitive Mapping 4: Islands by Paul Kincaid

The man was inside two crevices. There was first the rock, closed and not warm but at least not cold with the coldness of sea or air. The rock was negative. It confined his body so that here and there the shudders were beaten; not soothed but forced inward. He felt pain throughout most of his body but distant pain that was sometimes to be mistaken for fire.

Pincher Martin (1956)
William Golding

When you think of life on a desert island, you get pictures in your mind of cannibals and pirates, of desolation and thirst. But at first it wasn't at all like that for us. It really wasn't bad... Anyone else stranded on a desert island would probably have wanted to die, but for him the nights had never been more beautiful, the wind more gentle, the sea more calm.

I Was Amelia Earhart (1996)
Jane Mendelsohn

Between 1704 and 1709 the Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk was marooned alone in the Juan Fernández Islands in the South Pacific. When he returned to civilisation he became an instant celebrity, his autobiography was published, his story became known throughout Britain, and he was interviewed by the leading journalist of his day, Daniel Defoe. Selkirk's years on the island affected him, he built a cave in his garden where he lived, he sulked and raged at neighbours, he was such a tormented character that he was a menace to strangers and an embarrassment to his family. Yet when Defoe took

his familiar story and transmuted it into the adventures of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) it became the tale of how a true Englishman could master the elements by his resolution and entrepreneurial spirit.

There had been tales of castaways before, Shakespeare's luckless characters were forever being cast upon strange shores and in *The Tempest* (1611) he created a memorable magical isle. But what was different about *Robinson Crusoe* was that the island itself became a protagonist. Before any other human characters intrude upon

his story, Crusoe has already conquered the island, wresting from it a comfortable home, a suit of clothes, a steady supply of foods and luxuries. When Friday comes into his life it is only to extend the conquest, for Crusoe to convert primitive man as well as primitive land to the necessities of civilised life.

Thus *Robinson Crusoe* was not just the exemplar, it was the creator of a small but persistent literary genre, the Robinsonade. Curious in that it is a sub-genre which crosses and re-crosses traditional genre boundaries, a form of fiction that can be at one moment the highest of high fantasy and the next the most realist of mainstream literature, the Robinsonade is a romance which pitches man, in isolation, against his environment. Most commonly, Robinsonades have told the story of characters thrust into some inimical landscape – most usually an island – where they not only survive, but actually re-establish the comforts of their normal lives. This is most noticeable in those Robinsonades that have become established as children's classics, such as *Swiss Family Robinson* by Johann Wyss (1812-13) and *The Coral Island* by R.M. Ballantyne (1857), which celebrate the power of the family to exert its civilising influences whatever it may encounter.

In science fiction, the Robinsonade has been a consistent influence, often explicitly so as in Rex Gordon's *No Man Friday* (1956) or the film *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (1964). The island, whether an actual island or an island in space, an uninhabited planet, is an attractive setting partly for the simple, practical reason that it allows the writer to isolate his protagonist, but also because it allows utopias and anti-utopias to be developed. Adam and Eve on a depopulated planet – a post-atomic Earth, the sole survivors of a crashed spaceship – have recreated society countless times in the pages of science fiction magazines. The rational, can-do spirit exemplified by Crusoe is all that we ever need to rebuild our lives, and the safety and comfort we know today can not be lost forever.

But such optimism has not actually been common in science fiction, in a genre that celebrates the social success of humanity as much as the ingenuity of the individual, the loss of society is generally represented as a dark and threatening event. Islands are as likely to result in the triumph of the primitive as they are in a Crusoe-like triumph of civilisation. H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) is a place where the forces of Darwinism have a dehumanising effect in the isolation an island provides, and though S. Fowler Wright tried to counter that with *The Island of Captain Sparrow* (1928) in which morality stands against nature to load the scales in humanity's favour the more common scientific view has been that nature is triumphant.

Thus William Golding created *Lord of the Flies* (1954) as a direct response to Ballantyne's *Coral Island*: this party of schoolboys marooned in isolation from their society will not allow family values to triumph but will regress to primitivism, violence and superstition. It is a notion echoed in J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High Rise* (1975). Both the traffic island between motorway embankments and the multistorey apartment block are islands in the midst of the sea of uncaring, fast-paced civilisation; they are islands of survival and the establishment of values just as Crusoe's island was, but with the crucial difference that the values are

specifically not those of the protagonist's off-island society.

Implicit in the island as protagonist is the notion that the island becomes in itself a character, and if the hero is to reshape the island to suit himself, then the island becomes a mirror of his psyche. Thus the schoolboys in *Lord of the Flies* conjure their fears from the dead parachutist captured by the trees, while Maitland, swept up like technological flotsam on the *Concrete Island*, finds that it 'was becoming an exact model of his head'. But this is perhaps most explicit in Golding's *Pincher Martin*. The sailor, cradled by the 'negative' rock is dead, though neither we nor he know that yet. His ship has been blown up during the war, and after a wild and disorienting tumble through the Atlantic waters he suddenly finds himself upon an island. It is too small, too barren for him to build any comfort or recreate any civilisation upon it, survival is an end in itself. But the very bleakness of the rock forces his pains in upon himself, and this is a metaphor for the way his memories, his life, are forced in upon him. What *Pincher Martin* is, in its brutal and unrelieved allegorical manner, is a recapitulation of that old saw: the dying man seeing his whole life flash before him. And this is one of the chief ways in which the island has been used in science fiction, its isolation, its small compass providing a physical shape for the mind, the experience of the protagonist. Sometimes, as in Robert Holdstock's 'Mythago Wood' sequence, it is a forest; sometimes, as in John Fowles's *Mantissa* (1982), it is a white room; sometimes, as in Christopher Priest's *A Dream of Wessex* (1977) or *The Affirmation* (1981), it is a dreamscape; sometimes, as in John Christopher's *A Wrinkle in the Skin* (1965), it is an actual island: but the island, real or implied, provides an allegory for the human consciousness, the exploration of its landscape is a working out of the hero's thoughts, feelings, his very humanity.

These examples are, notably, all British. In *Ultimate Island* (1993), Nicholas Ruddick has proposed that the island is one of the central linking threads that characterises British science fiction. It is not exclusively so, Kim Stanley Robinson, for example, in *A Short, Sharp Shock* (1990) takes his protagonist along a narrow sea-girt peninsula on a journey that seems in many ways to recapitulate that of Golding's *Pincher Martin*. But it is true that American science fiction has not used the island as metaphor with anything like the same enthusiasm or the same bitter, allegorical intensity. (We are, after all, an island race; it serves us conveniently as a metaphor for our social as well as our personal and intellectual existence.)

But the American mainstream has continued to use the island in a manner closer to that originally employed by Defoe: as a figure for survival that isn't just personal but also social and moral. In her recent fable, *I Was Amelia Earhart*, Jane Mendelsohn imagines the survival of the flyer who became an almost legendary figure in America between the wars before she and her navigator disappeared in the Pacific on an attempt to fly round the world. But here the island becomes not a battleground for survival but a haven for escape, a place where Amelia does not have to be a heroine, does not have to live up to the legend. The island allows her to live the life she wants for herself; like Ballard's Maitland, it's a simpler life, but like Defoe's Crusoe it's a civilised life.



First Impressions

Reviews of Hardback and Paperback Originals

Edited by Paul Kincaid

Buzz Aldrin & John Barnes

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

Encounter with Tiber Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 560pp, £16.99

This is a book one approaches with respect and anticipation. Buzz Aldrin piloted the lunar module during the first landing on the Moon, John Barnes is an experienced sf writer nominated for various awards, and the book comes with a gratified foreword from Arthur C. Clarke and an impressive list of thanks to the many experts who supplied advice and help. The story is of human advances to the Moon, Mars and the stars, and of two expeditions to Earth by the alien Tiberians seven thousand years before the Christian Era; themes in themselves quintessential to our times. The book is crammed with authoritative technical detail and there are helpful diagrams of starships, spacesuits and orbits, as well as sketches of the Tiberians themselves.

Yes, but is it any good? Well, it pays to be patient; no glib short cuts in this absorbing narrative. The authors are fascinated by the detail of things: the political manoeuvring that gets space adventures funded, the scientific and technical breakthroughs that improve performance, the national and racial rivalries (and prejudices) that motivate and divide the crews. The overall concept, of two races venturing in opposite directions into deep space and interacting over time by indirect means, is very impressive; but this close attention to minutiae also exposes the patchiness of some (though not all) of the characterisation.

This is particularly true of the aliens and of the primitive humans; the authors understand modern humans and go into some depth with many of them. The Tiberians? They're furry and look like cats standing upright on their hind legs; the first ones we meet come from a highly aristocratic regime and are riddled with racial prejudice, the later ones are communistically egalitarian and politically correct. Somehow they always come across as humans in costume; although useful social themes are well rehearsed and their attitude to the primitive humans they find on Earth is characteristic of our own 'advanced' nations too. The primitive humans are only sketched in and their motivations comparatively unexamined; the authors are not terribly interested in them. In a shorter, faster-moving story this would not have mattered so much, but when we are working our way through a mass of technical detail the fact that some of the characters are fading into their outlines tends to be noticed. Perhaps it's because the other aspects of the book are so well done that we begin asking for perfection.

But for those of us who relish hard sf there is plenty of good stuff. Arthur C. Clarke notes the concept of Zero Point Energy, which looks like a good bet for future space travel, and there are Clarkeian echoes also in the copies of the Tiberian Encyclopedia abandoned on the far side of the Moon and on Mars. I very much enjoyed the constant awareness of the foul-up problem: things can go wrong; they do go wrong, very seriously for the Tiberians. Most of the modern humans are more fortunate, but the sense of danger never disappears. Aldrin and his colleagues must have had this drilled into them at every stage of their training and it comes across excellently.

However, it does lead to dialogue like this:

'Not bad flying, if I do say so myself,' he said. 'A procedure I'd never done before, in a ship that was only supposed to aerobreak in an emergency... and I'd just lost more than a unit of blood. I'm just glad that the lander we were operating as a robot didn't need my blood, too; it had more fuel to start with and a full waste-water tank, and we were able to direct a patch-through from where we were to get that processed.'

But I'm being picky. This book is a solid achievement and we can congratulate the authors for a major contribution to this year's sf.

A.A. Attanasio

The Dark Shore

Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 500pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

A very strange and inventive book, and I'm still trying to work out whether it fully works for me or not.

There is a map at the front, plus a literal, self-styled Dark Lord who arises from seemingly nowhere with a horde of cacodemons bent on complete destruction. The cast of assorted characters also includes a displaced Regent, two young Peers of the governing aristocracy, a street urchin with a Manifest Destiny (as various seers keep telling her), a semi-human thief and philosopher, a man with no past, and a sorcerer/assassin, and their individual paths and quests meet and cross as they come together to try and defeat the Dark Lord. In short it has all the trappings of an epic High Fantasy, and we can pretty much write the plot ourselves. So what's to be said?

Well, it starts oddly with a short Prelude which seems to owe more to a ghost story or a tale of witchcraft and the supernatural than any epic fantasy. Then it skips, seemingly across time and space, to an alley in another world (called, with stunning originality, Irth) where the grubby street urchin Tywi does a Good Deed by saving an old man Who Is Not What He Seems from being robbed and thrashed by her companions. Jump cut again as the old man, now revealed as the Lord Regent, Drev, faces the demands of the Dark Lord, Hu'dre Vra, and steps down into self-imposed exile so the remainder of the Council of Seven might find some accommodation with the invader. Cut again, to the streets of Tywi's town of Saxar where three beastmen thieves - Dogbrick, Whipcrow, and the enigmatic Ripcat - are taking advantage of the hiatus to stage a lucrative and dangerous heist before getting out for good.

This is all good scene setting, if following a slightly predictable pattern, and well enough told. The main actors are placed in their settings and the reader's mind, and various links are established between them. Can it all be quite this simple? Well, yes and no. As I said, Attanasio is inventive, and while the basic plot is typical and predictable, wandering

Gregory Benford

Matter's End

Gollancz, 1996, 294pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Barbara Davies

In referring to Gregory Benford's short story collection *In Alien Flesh* (1986), *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* comments: there is 'more than enough material available to fill a second collection of equal merit'. It looks like Gollancz have taken the hint.

Here are 21 stories (and an afterword by the author) of varying length, mood and subject matter, taken from a writing career spanning nearly 30 years. They include 'Stand-In', Benford's first published story - about a unicorn that isn't quite what it seems - which came second in a 1965

contest run by *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Most if not all the stories have been published before - though this isn't made clear in either the afterword or the copyright notices: 'We Could Do Worse', 'Centigrade 233' and 'Matter's End', for example, have all appeared as chapbooks.

From the evidence of this collection, Benford favours condensed 'hard sf' plots for his short fiction, told in a clipped style that makes reading more than two stories at a time hard going. Much better to dip into the book now and then to savour fully the ideas and implications - and there are ideas aplenty. As Benford says: 'This collection emphasizes stories with high idea content, for those as likes 'em'.

The author's interests are wide-ranging. 'We Could Do Worse' is alternate history that asks what would have

about the map through exotic and dangerous landscapes, he throws in some odd twists on the way. There's the destruction of the flying city of Arwar Odawl (freeing two new protagonists into the plot), and the constant magical tide known as Charm which can be channelled for healing or destruction - but not against cacodemons, unfortunately - and that holds entire cities aloft. The Charm tide also draws the souls and, literally, bodies of people into the sky when they die, and forces those without protection from its influence to tie or weight themselves down when they sleep. We're nearly halfway into the book when Attanasio drops in the wonderfully inverted description of weremen, who change under the light of the twin planet/moons.

Oh, and there's a sorcerer on a stick, Ralli Faj, a flayed skin on a pole, who is a thoroughly obscene and nasty creation. The ideas are sometimes more fascinating than the quest/plot seems to have weight to carry. There are a few times when it doesn't work; as in encounters with spiders the size of cows, when the demands of dangerous adventures seem to usurp those of mere physiology. However this is a land saturated with magic, so maybe they find other ways around not collapsing in an asphyxiated tangle of crushed chitin.

But remember that odd Prelude? The hints gradually accrue around the middle of the book as to what the Dark Shore, from where Hu'dre Vra has returned with his demonic army, might actually be, and how it might impinge on the fate of one or more of the other characters in the story. It's also, it has to be said, rather longer than it probably needs to be. A lot of this is down to Attanasio's tendency to adjectival overload in his descriptions, which rapidly become distracting, at times teetering on the edge of Lovecraftian pastiche in the descriptions of crumbling, overgrown ruins and the fetid, noisome (and quite possibly ichorous) growth and decay of jungle and swamps.

I'm not quite sure it all comes together enough to work for me. Others, with perhaps a better feeling for the conventions and demands of epic fantasy, may find Attanasio's imaginative invention an intriguing and satisfying addition to the genre.

happened if Senator Joe McCarthy had become President of the USA. 'Sleepstory' is military space opera set among the Jovian moons. Alien encounters of different kinds occur in 'Dark Sanctuary' and 'Proselytes', the latter a playful tale (with a dark twist) which proposes that the only aliens likely to want to visit Earth are those plugging their own particular brand of religion. Benford is notaverse to the odd joke: 'Centigrade 233' (the equivalent of Fahrenheit 451, of course) proposes a totally different reason for burning books than that proposed by Bradbury. And 'Side Effect', about terraforming on Mars, seems to be little more than a set-up for the last line which refers to the fate of an unfortunate biotech dog (and Benford reassures us: 'yes, I am fond of dogs!')

Since Benford is a working physicist, scientific extrapolation is well represented. 'Mozart on Morphine', for instance, has a scientist making a Nobel Prize-winning discovery about ten-dimensional space while out of his skull on painkillers in hospital - should we recommend this treatment to all researchers? 'Shakers of the Earth' - written, the author stresses, before *Jurassic Park* - uses recovered DNA to recreate the Seisosaur, the largest land animal ever to walk the Earth. There are sociological speculations too: 'Freezeframe' takes the requirement that children should fit into their parents' busy schedules to its logical conclusion. 'Immortal Night' is a take on what it would be like if freedom from cancer was available - at a price far beyond the reach of ordinary pockets. (Reality is becoming more like sf

every day: on BBC1's QED recently, an 80-year-old American millionaire proposed that the 'cure' for aging, when found, should be given first to such as Ronald Reagan and Mrs Thatcher!). 'Nobody Lives on Burton Street' explores a practical way to keep the aggressive elements in society under control.

Without attempting to mention all the stories here, there is something for everyone in this collection. 'Matter's End', my favourite, is a longer, more lyrical treatment of Big Science, in this case quantum mechanics and the 'interconnected nature of the observer and the observed.' A Western scientist flies to Bombay to verify the findings of a particle physics experiment being carried out deep in an Indian gold mine, but verification proves to be the catalyst for radical shifts in reality... Benford conveys the clash of first and third world cultures, the smells and textures of an India in chaos, so vividly I felt I was actually there. I didn't understand everything that was going on, but it still gave me the 'sense of wonder' fix I require from sf.

Gollancz have been disingenuous in quoting *The Guardian* ('The best sf writer now writing') on the dustjacket; even if it were true (which is debatable) most of these stories were written some years ago! And the arbitrary sequence of the stories defies all logic. Presented in the order in which they were written, for example, they could have provided insight into Benford's developing preoccupations and his increasing skill as a writer... Still, these are minor flaws, and there is much here to enjoy and to boggle the mind.

Stephen Bury

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

Interface Michael Joseph, 1996, 583pp, £11.99

How do you follow up an internationally best-selling cyberpunk novel? In Neal Stephenson's case, he cowrote a political thriller with his uncle under a pseudonym. Not that this is immediately obvious from this edition of the book; indeed I'm told the Library of Congress treat Bury as a separate writer and are not bothered that his biographical details are identical to Stephenson's. Stephenson's British publishers are coy about the identity his writing partner, George Jewsbury, whom they fail to name. Rather, amongst general praise for Stephenson, they prefer to quote a review which compares him to Quentin Tarantino. If the analogy is to hold, then we would expect the collaborative portmanteau *Four Rooms* (critically slated) rather than a cyberpunk-flavoured *Bob Roberts*.

Senator William Cozzano suffers a stroke, and is given a revolutionary treatment: a chip is implanted in his brain to replace destroyed neural pathways. This becomes crucial when Cozzano runs for President - his speech can be remote controlled by stimulating the correct part of his brain. Meanwhile, a hundred demographically selected Americans have been given wrist-watch sized televisions, and their reactions to political events can be monitored, and Cozzano's behaviour adjusted accordingly.

How does this fit the Stephenson canon? Cy Ogle, who offers to represent the Cozzano family to the media, and who obviously has his own hidden agenda, is another in the line of asshole protagonists. Wise to media tricks, and certainly with more than a few tricks up his sleeves himself, Ogle is always repellent and always right. Stephenson noted his distrust of the media in the interview in *Vector* 187, and how he does not object when they are fooled. Here they fall hook, line and indeed sinker for any stunt Cy pulls. It is a weakness of the book that there is no journalist character - this is no *All the President's Men*, and Bernstein and Woodward are out of sight.

The information dumps which slowed down the action of *Snow Crash* (and ensured Hiro Protagonist was a rather leisurely action hero) are here in the early chapters. As each new character is introduced, we get their life history. Rather too much of the time, in the first section of the book at least, we are told rather than shown; yet, we are told with such wit that we barely care.

The conspiracy theories which were part of those infodumps are replaced by a single humdinger conspiracy that would rival the Illuminatus. America's financial debt has to be bank-rolled by someone, the money has to come from somewhere, and those someones, the Network, want a return on their investment or they will foreclose on the loan. How better to foreclose on a loan than by a take over? In other words, bankroll a presidential candidate in order to take over the United States... The Network seems to have fingers in every pie, and is probably rich enough to already own several countries. (In cyberpunk, the transnational corporation was often the evil empire, and this seems to be being outgunned by what Kim Stanley Robinson has christened the metanational).

Most significantly, *Snow Crash* had a strong female protagonist who actually got on with the action, and in *Interface* there are another two. Firstly Mary Catherine, Senator Cozzano's neurologist daughter, and secondly Eleanor Richmond, a tough talking, no-nonsense African-American, who had worked for a right-wing senator and

who then joins the election campaign.

Stephenson's contribution is thus obvious, it is less easy to quantify his cowriter's. Certainly the novel is more political than ever before, and less science-fictional. Beyond the chip, which just about elevates itself above the level of the McGuffin, nothing here is impossible with our current state of knowledge. But its next-five-minutes setting had already been used in *Zodiac*. Perhaps he has upped the cynicism, and enlarged the cast of characters.

Although first published in America in 1994, this 1996 British edition hits election year in America (it is the '96 race described in the book) and Britain (one hopes) and is thus very timely. After the various senilities of Reagan, Bush and Quayle, a presidential candidate on autopilot seems to be a relief. And after the abortive campaigns of Perot and the will-he/won't he hesitations of Colin Powell, the possibility of an independent candidate being taken seriously have increased. (It couldn't happen here? Consider why *Joe-90* has not been repeated when other Anderson puppet shows have been, and why one opposition leader looks most convincing as a cuddly toy).

Despite its length, this novel is never less than compulsive reading. The plot's disparate elements weave together satisfyingly, and ultimate fates are sealed with relish, and even with justice. If the ending is obvious from early on, the way it is achieved is a genuine surprise. Until we get Steve Erickson's thoughts on the campaign, this is likely to be the best book you read about the 1996 election.

John Clute

Look at the Evidence

Liverpool University Press, 1996, 465pp, £27.50, £15.95 pb

Reviewed by Chris Amies

In scope, this collection of reviews and articles covers the years 1987-92, so it includes such books as John Crowley's *Aegypt*, Tim Powers's *The Anubis Gate*, three Iain M. Banks 'Culture' novels and a collection, five books by Jonathan Carroll, *The Fetch* and *Lavomdys* by Robert Holdstock, and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Gold Coast*, *Pacific Edge*, *The Wild Shore* and *Red Mars*. This is a fearsome assembly of authors and titles, and Clute often provides an equally ferocious dissection: for reviewing carries two functions: to serve as an advertisement of some kind for new books – a sort of news service – and to allow deeper description and an attempt to interpret – one mind (the reviewer's) pitted against another (the author's). This second function does not require that the reader has not read the book; in fact it may be better if the review is read *after* reading the book it talks about.

How can one review a book of reviews? Not only that, but review a reviewer whose language is so idiosyncratic as to often take centre stage instead of the subject of his scrutiny? Clute's language, especially in the reviews written for *Interzone*, delights in neologism and the play of sound and word; he claims that he is only using 'the right word at the right time' but it can be vexing, exhilarating, or downright bloody annoying. Now, I am not going to feign a cloth ear and claim that everything can be said with a vocabulary of two hundred words; if there are not words for some things then it is the writer's job to make sure there are. Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty said that when he used a word, it meant what he wanted it to mean; to which Alice asked if you could make words mean so many things. The reply Alice got is in the front of practically every book on linguistics: 'The question is, which is to be master, that's all'. Take in the lot of it and invest in a good dictionary, that's the way. Clute insists that every word counts, and as such the words should reward effort, and persistence. The trouble is that if he uses a word frequently ('theodicy', for example), he will – we notice by having read through the assembled *Evidence* – have defined it once, and then not again; which is valid in the context of a collection but not in that of a review read out of conjunction with others. 'Abyssal chthonic resonator', though? What that? He not only do the police in different voices, he do the voices in different voices. If every word is to count, the reader may be heard to say, should every word not be comprehensible to the reader?

There are common themes here, and one of them is an increasing concern with environmental destruction, with 'humankind palping the flensed breasts of the Earth' and

with a vision of a 'factory-farm solitude' of modern Britain. Timely enough, yes, and a lot of modern sf has that underlying theme, that of John Varley's *Steel Beach* where living a natural life is no longer possible because the environment around us has become unnatural. But to assume a literature which by its nature is fabrication has to be seen in this light, is surely to mistake the imaginative for the naturalistic. To quote Australian author Margaret Barbalet in her novel *Steel Beach* (not related to the Varley): 'we shouldn't trust novels to tell us history. We long for a glimpse of the real texture of the past. Novels are woven full of holes.'

No matter how we may jump to conclusions – like the identification of Dracula with Mrs Thatcher in Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula*, a conclusion Clute seizes on in the curiously titled 'Bat Snatcher and the Porcine Undeads' (he does a lot of this) – maybe the conclusion isn't the only one for the book in question, and we are guilty of inductive thought: making the part stand for the whole. This kind of thing may not show up in reviews of two or three books taken at a time in *Interzone* or the *Washington Post* but after a while you begin to see that the same conclusions are going to come up time after time. 'Agenda sf', like *Steel Beach* and Robinson's *Red Mars*, begins to look a likely stance to take, and an important one, and one which will not be let go in the pieces assembled here.

A lot of this collection is baroquely humorous, though; for example describing the Docklands site of the 1995 Eastercon as 'a Monty Python pop-up of the inside of Mark Thatcher's skull'. His knowledge of the genre is after all encyclopaedic; and as well as the review columns there are the round-ups of the years' sf, first of all from the *Orbit SF Yearbook* until it is dispatched without a trial, then from *New Worlds* and the Nebula Awards anthologies, and these round-ups are wise with thirty years' observation and a keen in-depth understanding of the genre that we call home.

What is the nature of the observation? Close. Take, as an example, a review of a book I read recently: *Tours of the Black Clock* by Steve Erickson (Futura, 1989). I found the book lyrically written but baffling, the more so as I'd decided that the mysterious woman who links the stories together and inadvertently changes twentieth-century history was never anything but illusory. Clute describes Erickson's novels as 'Fantasy if America is; like strobe shots of a disaster, [Tours] afforded no full views of the land of dreams, only grasped recollections of nightmare'. He goes on to say: 'Dominating the book, Banning Jaielight and his pornography too easily embody a rhetoric of self-disgust and horror, a rhetoric which comes close to a kind of surrealistic chat about the unspeakable. The fragments which frame this story refract its central erotic obsessions, weltschmerz, lust for meaning, violence.'

That, to me, is clear; and I find no reason to disagree with it. 'The littoral contortuplications of the central image or model of the broken boundless river convey a spread of meaning too broad to clutch the heart, too shallow to drown in.' Littoral contortuplications? But you know what he means; it's as though we had the meaning of meaning without needing the meaning itself. And I found myself grinning unsagely at the line 'a plethora of rogue symbols gnaws constantly at one's keel.' Well, yes. There's an image in the novel where an elderly boatman inconveniently dies, and his successor, unable to find anywhere to bury the old gent,

ties him to the keel of the boat, and - of course - is constantly aware afterwards of riding the boat over bones. One does not need to have read the novel and remember that image to see what Clute is driving at by borrowing the image for the review; in the case of a review that is more than just a 'buy this, don't buy that', the text of the novel and the text of its review can in some way dovetail, the one illuminating the other.

Which is the point. It is no Bible but a series of signposts. It's evidence.

D.G. Compton

Back of Town Blues

Gollanz, 1996, 208pp, £15.99

Reviewed by John Wallace

'An Alec Duncan Mystery' it says on the front: a bit of a giveaway. This is sf only in the broadest sense. It is really a murder mystery set '...just a few minutes into the future'. Don't you hate that phrase? Blurb writers use it a lot, hoping to sound profound. A few minutes into the future I'll be writing a paragraph further down this page, I won't be contemplating the armed police outside, or the huge prison complex on the edge of town. But the blurb isn't Compton's fault.

Back of Town Blues is the follow up to *Justice City*, Compton's bleak view of the justice system in a near-future Liverpool. These novels are both ostensibly police dramas, but what they actually do is use the framework of police drama to paint a picture of life in this near-future Britain. And a depressing picture it is. The vast council estates of Liverpool have degenerated into barely controlled areas where the drug pushers and housebreakers are kings and the police have almost given up the struggle to cope. The authorities have armed the police and the criminals have stepped up their violence in retaliation.

Against this background, we are given a drama in which a woman kills a drug pusher then is found dead herself. Alec

Duncan, a black ex-policeman finds himself with the unenviable task of investigating the death. But in the end the plot is not important, it too is just a backdrop against which the society that has come into being is played out. The contrasts between the haves and have-nots, the official and the unofficial are highlighted as Duncan slips from piece to piece of the puzzle.

As a murder mystery, this is an awful novel. The bits are all there, they can be stuck together to reveal the solution, but the solution, when it is revealed, proves not to have been worth the wait after all. Having said that, there is a school of thought that says that getting there is half the fun. The character of Alec Duncan is well enough drawn, as are those of some of the supporting players, others are just sketches, some are downright caricatures. The writing kept me turning the pages until the end, I was interested enough in Alec to want to see if things would turn out for him, and as far as I am concerned that's important in a book.

A good strong finish is also important though, and that is where this, as a drama, lets itself down. The ending - both the solution to the mystery, and the resolution, or lack of resolution, to Alec Duncan's problem - is profoundly dissatisfying. Or maybe I'm being unfair, maybe such an unremittingly bleak book needs a unsatisfying ending. And that is the problem. I found this book so depressing that I was not entertained. This is social comment, and if that's what you want, then you'll be happy.

Stephen Donaldson

The Gap into Ruin: This Day All Gods Die

Voyager, 1996, 639pp

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

The fifth and final book in the Gap series is not suitable for stand-alone reading. The set of five books began with a single short novel which can be read on its own, followed by four much larger works which tell a single story. Books two, three and four each end on cliff-hangers, and it has taken Donaldson more than two years beyond his original estimate to finish the series. The end result is one of the longest works telling a single story ever published, over 2500 pages in length.

Donaldson's books arouse strong feelings in most people. Whether they like or dislike his work, few people who read it are blasé about it. In general his main characters who are flawed, strange, and even downright repulsive. Though his work is rarely called horror, many of the scenes in the first volume of this series (*The Gap into Conflict: The Real Story*) are pretty graphic and nasty. The writing in the Gap books is much tighter than in the Covenant books, despite the length of the series.

The Gap into Conflict centres on three characters: Morn Hyland, Angus Thermopyle and Nick Succorso, each of them damaged psychologically. By the time of this last volume,

Nick is out of the story, and both Morn and Angus are coming to terms with their damaged psyches. Donaldson's earlier Covenant books were all about the strength gained by someone overcoming flaws in their physical and psychological make-up. *Mordant's Need* was also about the need for problems to be solved by those who see them, and not left for everyone else (who may not see them) to solve. Both these themes are enlarged upon in the Gap series, with Angus Thermopyle's struggle to release himself from the memory of the abuse he suffered as a child finally bearing fruit, and Warden Dios risking his life to solve a problem few others could see and almost no-one else could solve.

The Gap into Ruin doesn't disappoint as the culmination of such a long and complex story, the only problem is Donaldson's attempts to make it hard science fiction rather than allowing it to be Space Opera at its best and grandest. Every time he tries to explain the physics of what is going on, there is a flaw in his arguments which shakes the suspension of disbelief. His characters and his ability to tell a moving story overcome this admirably, but it is a distraction from an otherwise excellent conclusion to an excellent series. Characters die, of course, and it is one of Donaldson's strengths that these deaths affect the reader so much. Death can be necessary and noble, or it can be mean and unimportant, sometimes it can be both, as a noble act turns sour because of the flaws of the person.

Anyone who has read as far as the penultimate volume

will undoubtedly want to finish the series, if only to avoid being left at a cliff-hanger. For those who may have stopped

earlier in the series, I recommend continuing to the end.

Lisa Goldstein

Walking the Labyrinth

TOR, 1996, 254pp, \$21.95

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

In Depression America a journalist goes back stage at a Vaudeville theatre to interview a family of successful stage magicians. They bedazzle him so well that he finds he is not even sure how many people he met. Was this achieved by tricky or real magic? He does not know, and in a sense it does not matter, it is the puzzlement, the ambiguity that counts. Thus, in a scene whose hesitation contains an echo of Christopher Priest's *The Prestige*, Lisa Goldstein opens and sets the tone for her most intriguing and satisfying fantasy since *Tourists*.

Let us spring forward to the present day – at least temporarily, for the body of the book is wrapped in memories, diaries, family albums, every accoutrement of the past we carry with us and which makes the 'present' of the book extend almost seamlessly from the latter years of the last century until the current moment. Molly Travers is a rootless woman in contemporary San Francisco, working at a series of temporary jobs, engaged in an unsatisfying relationship with a writer who is away most of the time. She seems happy with this floating life, until a private detective starts her asking questions about her family, a family she knows little about. And the more she asks, the more questions are raised – even their names are strange: Callan and Thorne, Corrig and Fentrice, until she eventually deconstructs their surname, Allalie: All-a-lie. So where does the truth lie?

The trail takes her to England, and a country house with a curious labyrinth in the cellar. It also takes her to a circle of spiritualists at the end of the last century when it was all the rage: into this upper-class enclave comes a servant girl from the country who may have genuine medium powers, although her most significant pronouncement is an admitted lie. The circle becomes a minor set, though that breaks up in curious and very public circumstances early this century and the survivors – the servant girl having now outraged public decency by marrying her upper-class patron – change their name and head to America where they take to the stage with a magic act that seems to defy explanation.

In and around this might-be-magic is a far more mundane but also more fascinating web of intrigue and betrayal, ancient treacheries and modern murders. There are petty family disputes which escalate across the decades, and disappearances which may or may not be sinister. This intricate novel is constructed of puzzles within puzzles, layers of meaning which are gradually stripped away as Molly finds out more and more about her family, her roots, her identity. But as she walks the labyrinth towards a more firm foundation in her own life, so the reality around her becomes more airy and magical, a delicate balance that only slips towards the end when the demands of story force Goldstein into too obviously resolving the whole thing.

Goldstein's fantasy has always worked best when it has a solid, real-world setting, but in which the magic of the tale serves to question that very solidity. It is this tightrope between public reality and private unreality that made her best works, *The Red Magician*, *The Dream Years* and *Tourists*, now *Walking the Labyrinth* joins that select group.

Robert Holdstock

Ancient Echoes Voyager, 1996, 344pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

'Mythago Wood' appeared first as a short story that won the BSFA Award in 1982. The original story was then expanded into a novel, *Mythago Wood*, which also won the BSFA Award (in 1985), as did its sequel, *Lavondyss*, in 1989. The idea which informs this astonishingly successful sequence did not spring out of nowhere, the fascination with primeval settings and symbols, with a mythic underpinning to our common stock of story, was already there in stories such as 'Earth and Stone' (1980) and even in such overtly science fictional novels as *Earthwind* (1977). Nevertheless, it was with *Mythago Wood* and its sequels, *Lavondyss*, *The Hollowing* (1993) and the novella 'The Bone Forest' (1991), that Holdstock gave the idea almost perfect form and in so doing created one of the most original, powerful and effective fantasies of the last 50 years or so.

Unfortunately, having threaded this dark, sylvan labyrinth into our primal imagination, Holdstock has been unable to find his way out again. The disappointing *Merlin's Wood* (1994) did no more than reposition Mythago Wood in France, while in *Ancient Echoes* one's heart has begun to sink even before Holdstock's made-up word 'mythago' is casually used in a world where it should not belong.

To be fair, *Ancient Echoes* is a far better book than *Merlin's Wood*, and is at least an attempt at a different, more science fictional take on the familiar theme. But when, about a third of the way through the novel, Jack Chatwin steps into the ancient woodland, we know exactly where we are. We have seen that ruined cathedral before, we have followed paths that twist and turn according to no geographical logic, we have camped beside immense icy lakes, we have encountered rugged hairy men and sexy women with the skins and scars and stink of primitive existence. It hardly matters that in this instance the forest is within Jack's dreams, the landscape is still the same.

The book starts promisingly. A mysterious dowser is supervising the excavation of an ancient city, Glanum, underlying the West Country town of Exbury – yet the layout of Glanum does not seem to follow the logic of the landscape. At the same time a young schoolboy, Jack, has vivid dreams of a strange couple fleeing through a threatening woodland, dreams that are so extraordinary his whole body shimmers and he gives off a distinct woodland smell. Jack is also embarking on a tentative affair with the precocious Angela who sees him, at least in part, as an object for her psychological explorations. So far so good. The ghostly overlaying of one city upon another is a particularly haunting effect – so much so that one feels it should have much greater resonance in the

story. Similarly the ludicrous but strangely effective scene in which a ghostly white city rises like a whale out of Dartmoor and carries off the dowsler lashed to its flanks like Captain Ahab tied to Moby Dick promises far more than it delivers.

The affair between Jack and Angela grows into a beautifully judged marriage made uneasy by a spiky jealousy – the sort of vivid, human detail that Holdstock does so well. Then Greyface, one of the characters from Jack's dream, escapes into our reality, but his companion, Greenface, hesitates at the last minute and retreats from the gateway. Greyface threatens Jack's daughter, forcing Jack to go into his own dream to bring Greenface out. By chance, Angela's former lover has a machine that allows just that. But it is at this moment that the novel slithers away from its true course.

The ghostly Glanum, the whale-city under Dartmoor, suggests a ruined urban setting for this adventure; primal city rather than primal woodland. This impression is strengthened when we discover that Greyface and Greenface come from the proto-city of Jericho, that their flight stems from a crime they committed against the rituals of that first city, and that it is because of this that proto-Jericho has become Glanum, a sort of urban Flying Dutchman restlessly wandering through time. Their world is the Middle Eastern desert, or the dusty mud-brick alleyways of a primal city; yet their flight takes them through northern woodland and Jack's quest takes us straight into the forest whose images and legends are so at odds with the urban fantasy that triggers this story. Only at the end does the story come back to walls and streets and towers in a vaguely unsatisfying echo of where this story really belongs.

Robert Holdstock is clearly struggling to get clear of that all-embracing wood, it's only a pity that he could not escape it decisively enough to make this book as rich and original as it promised to be.

Sarah LeFanu

Writing Fantasy Fiction

A&C Black, 1996, 124pp, £8.99

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Writing Fantasy Fiction is the latest writers' guide to be published by A&C Black. Anyone who takes their writing seriously is probably already aware of others in the series; if not, and you are writing fantasy or want to start, then this is the book you need.

Sarah LeFanu was the editor at The Women's Press responsible for their science fiction and fantasy list. She has since edited several anthologies and also teaches creative writing, and her experience in all these fields is evident in her book.

She gives a lot of advice about writing techniques, work practices and exercises, and also information about submitting work and the process of publication: all this is relevant to any kind of writing. For fantasy in particular she looks at plotting, characterisation, and various aspects of world building including naming, language and maps. There are chapters on the specialised areas of children's fantasy, comic fantasy and dark fantasy. She also mentions the BSFA and the British Fantasy Society, so writers who have been working in isolation could be introduced to a whole lot of support, information and like-minded people that they didn't know existed.

But the book doesn't just concentrate on the nuts and bolts of writing, it goes deeper to look at the nature of

fantasy, at the kinds of things that fantasy could do and the reasons we might have for writing it. LeFanu shows how fantasy can reach the depths of the human spirit, to explore experience and arrive at truth; she demonstrates what it can be in the hands of an Ursula Le Guin or a Robert Holdstock. It's possible that any beginning writer might read the book and be daunted at how far they still have to go, but they should also be encouraged by the seriousness with which LeFanu approaches the genre: she believes in its worth and so we can believe in it too.

Obviously, the book is targeted at writers, but it should also be compulsory reading for anyone who thinks that fantasy is just cute elves and dragons. It's impossible to read the book and still be dismissive about the form: LeFanu admits that the stereotypes exist, but she presents a wealth of material to show how much more than this the fantasy genre can be.

If you are a reader new to fantasy, then the book could be a guide for you; for her examples, LeFanu assembles a collection of the best: Le Guin, Holdstock, Pratchett, Tuttle and others. She doesn't mention an enormous number of writers or books, but those she does should be on anyone's reading list.

As a writer, I found this book practically valuable and – if it doesn't sound pretentious – inspiring. I also work for a writers' advice centre and in the short time I've had the book I've already had occasion to recommend it. It's a lively and entertaining read, and I'm sure it's going to be around for a long time.

Ursula K. Le Guin

Four Ways to Forgiveness *Gollancz, 1996, 253pp, £15.99*

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Four Ways to Forgiveness is a collection of linked novellas set on two worlds recently reconciled to the Ekumen, the loosely-bound collection of human-inhabited worlds which forms the background to most of Ursula Le Guin's science fiction. The worlds in question are Werel and Yeowe, the latter having been a colony of the former before a War of Liberation secured its independence. Having been gathered into the Ekumenical fold, Werel is now undergoing its own slow liberalization but it retains the greater part of its traditional social structure, which has long been based on the institution of slavery. Yeowe, having been a world of slaves, has disposed of its owners in the War of Liberation but has retained the radical inequality between the sexes that was previously imposed by the organization of slave society.

The fundamental theme of the book, for which the four novellas serve as illustrative cases, is the difficulty of winning and sustaining freedom from the cruel impositions of society. However, the final story, 'A Woman's

Liberation', is the only one to track the career of its protagonist from woeful slavery through a whole series of frustratingly problematic phases to an emancipation as complete as is feasible. The first story, 'Betrayals', also features an ex-slave, but the process of her liberation is not the subject-matter of the story. The two viewpoint characters in the second story, 'Forgiveness Day', are an Ekumen envoy and a military man from the Owner class. The protagonist of the third, 'A Man of the People', is another envoy, this time from Hain, the world from which humans originally came – a world which has more history than any other and more than many of its inhabitants care to take on board. History – which, for the purposes of these narratives, stands in for the human sciences in general – is a key player on the psychological stages of all the characters, partly determining what they want and what they can want by structuring the horizons of their imagination.

The fact that the book is structured in this way has several consequences. First, and most obviously, it enables Le Guin to make a detailed and painstaking – and hence compelling – case that 'freedom' is not something that slaves lack and other people have. She is able to lay out a whole series of markedly different ways in which freedom can be restricted by unyielding social institutions, by ignorance, and by the burden of the past. Corollary to this multi-stranded argument is the further case that freedom is not easily won, and never attained by a single leap of circumstance or psychology – indeed, it is not something 'won' at all but something which must be constructed piece by piece, rarely without pain. The separation of the stories into novellas rather than intersecting subplots of a novel emphasizes the fact that the freedoms people eventually can and do achieve are by no means the same, even though they have certain key features in common. Although each part of the book does function perfectly well as a separate story, the whole is far more intricate than the sum of the parts.

The underlying thesis which informs the four various stories is succinctly summarised in its title, which is not *Four Ways to Freedom*. Le Guin is quietly and patiently insistent that freedom is not the same as rampant individualism – and, indeed, that social isolation is a restriction as hurtful as any other. All of her protagonists learn that the proper context of freedom is not merely social but intimate; all the stories are love stories, although they do not all end with a pairing, or with the maturation of love within a pairing. Freedom, in these stories, is a matter of reconciliation of wounded individuals to a larger whole, or series of nested wholes. The Ekumen itself (the word, as one of the stories punctiliously points out, means 'household') is the outermost of these wholes, constituting the hopeful entirety of a human race so divided by history as to have forgotten its own collective identity. The forgiveness identified by the title of the book is not the forgiveness which the characters in the stories must occasionally extend to one another – mostly, in fact, they are neither constrained nor enabled to forgive particular individuals – but something much more general: the basis of the tacit social contract which underlies all human society and yet which is far more often honoured in the breach than the observance.

It hardly needs saying that *Four Ways to Forgiveness* is an excellent book; Ursula Le Guin has been long established as one of the genre's most accomplished prose stylists and most thoughtful philosophers. It is, of course, essentially a set of *contes philosophiques*, which uses its sciencefictional apparatus as an experimental convenience rather than a vehicle for futuristic extrapolation. Among modern composers of *contes philosophiques* Le Guin is notable for her acute sensitivity to the internal dimensions of human predicaments, but that sensitivity never descends to sentimentality. Indeed, there is a scrupulous clinicality about her work which refuses all emotional excess even – perhaps particularly – when she is describing such atrocities as those featured in 'A Woman's Liberation'. There are few writers who *measure* the emotional responses of their characters quite as minutely as she does, thus claiming for her work an objectivity which gives it a gloss of authority even when it is not comfortable reading.

It is not altogether surprising that the stories herein have not added to the author's collection of awards, although the stories that defeated them have the unmistakable ring of false coin. As with any very convincing book it entertains its share of paradoxes. One of the formal lessons the four stories insist on offering by repetition is that 'all knowledge is local' but one of the conclusions implicit in their sum is that all local knowledge, however stubborn, must eventually expand in the direction of universality – and ought to hope that it might one day arrive.

Jonathan Nasaw

The World on Blood

Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 361pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

'Hi, my name is Nick, and I'm a recovering vampire.'

Blood is the drug – it heightens one's sense of reality, and it's 'the most powerful aphrodisiac imaginable' – and the members of VA ('What's the V stand for?' 'Very.' 'Very Anonymous?' 'Very') are following the twelve-point plan to beat their addiction. This, I need hardly add, is California.

Nick made his money writing vampire novels; he hasn't written any fiction for twenty years, since one of his boyfriends introduced him to the Real Thing. The aristocratic, cosmopolitan and immensely rich Whistler would be quite enough for Nick to deal with. He is even more mistrustful of Selene, Whistler's closest friend, who is

High Priestess of a Wiccan coven which enjoys an almost symbiotic relationship with the Californian vampire community. None of Rice's sexless eroticism for Nasaw; his vampires are more than happy to trade bodily fluids with the witches. (And yes, of course there are female vampires; *The World on Blood* is neither conservative nor coy when it comes to sex, as so often it does).

Back in the Seventies everything seemed so much simpler. But contemporary California is a festering pit of therapy groups, and vampirism is just another problem to recognise, confront and overcome. The members of VA are a motley crew: the abused punk girl January, Deadhead lawyer Augie, and members of enough minority groups to satisfy even the most politically-correct reader. Every week VA meet and share their experiences of living without blood. It is all most worthy.

Then two things happen: they move their meeting place

to a non-denominational church (thus encountering Betty, the lonely female minister); and Bev, who works in a blood bank, brings in the latest 'suspect' – beautiful Filipina Lourdes, who's been caught stealing a bag of blood in her first week on the night shift. Lourdes pouts prettily and tells them she doesn't want to give up blood; the rest of VA inform her cheerfully that of course she does... Fortunately, one member of the group is similarly minded, and offers Lourdes the perfect excuse for not working day shifts.

So far, so good. The second half of the novel, however, moves away from the bright, brash, subversive romp and towards a more conventional interpretation of the Californian ideal. Vampires playing at happy families? Assessing their relationships and motivations? It could never happen in New Orleans...

Nasaw has some interesting variations on the vampire

myth. In *The World on Blood*, vampirism is inherited rather than transmitted, and vampires can reproduce. Blood is a drug rather than a sole means of sustenance. (On the other hand, there are very few references to food.) The blood-drinking itself is oddly sanitised; the traditional rending and tearing has been replaced, at least in everyday life, by steel syringes and brandy glasses. It's clear that Nasaw knows his subject; there's a neat little précis of the vampire myth and the novel is scattered with genre references – Lourdes, for example, discovered the joys of blood after reading *Interview with the Vampire*.

Despite the bloodletting and the orgasmic sex, there's something uncomfortably cosy about *The World on Blood*. It'd make a great soap: the characters are constantly coming to terms with themselves, and confronting one another in a variety of social tableaux.

Terry Pratchett

Feet of Clay

Gollancz, 1996, 288pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Barbara Davies

Terry Pratchett's nineteenth(!) Discworld novel features the Ankh-Morpork City Watch. Who is murdering harmless old men, and who is trying to poison Lord Vetinari with arsenic? Sir Samuel Vimes and his Watchmen have a complex investigation on their hands.

But what has this to do with 'feet of clay'? The feet belong to the golems, who aren't really alive and whose actions are directed by the 'words of purpose' stored on paper in their hollow heads. Vimes is puzzled. Not only is his investigation not going well, but these 'undead' creatures seem to be trying to commit suicide. And who on earth is the mysterious white golem?

Then, in an apparent plot red herring, the dull-witted and uncouth Corporal Nobbs discovers he is the long lost Earl of Ankh and finds himself forced to hobnob uncomfortably with nobbs. But things are never straight-forward in Discworld and Vimes uncovers a link between Corporal Nobbs's recent ennoblement and the attack on Lord Vetinari, while Constable Angua, in werewolf guise, sniffs out a link between the golems and the murdered old men.

I won't spoil things by revealing any more. The fun and games to be had from the plot twists along the way should more than satisfy the appetites of all Discworld fans. Once again, Pratchett has produced an enjoyable romp where all the plot strands knit seamlessly together. It's full of

memorable characters, puns, sideswipes at sacred cows and sly observations about human (and nonhuman) behaviour. Take, for example, the advice of Angua, the werewolf, to the newly recruited dwarf Cheery Littlebottom who, in spite of a beard, turns out to be female too:

It's like that in the Watch too... You can be any sex you like provided you act male. There's no men and women in the Watch, just a bunch of lads. You'll soon learn the language. Basically it's how much beer you sipped last night, how strong the curry was you had afterwards, and where you were sick. Just think egotistic.

And he's made it all look deceptively easy, preferring to use pacy action and humorous dialogue over lengthy exposition, yet adding enough touches of description to convey setting and atmosphere. No wonder he's so popular with teenagers – his prose slips down a treat.

I didn't find *Feet of Clay* 'screamingly funny', as the back cover blurb suggests, but it did elicit my chortles. My favourite character is the disorganised organiser imp:

Vimes sighed inwardly. He had a notebook. He took notes in it. It was always useful. And then Sybil, gods bless her, had brought him this fifteen-function imp...

In a running joke which never fails to amuse, the imp keeps popping out at inopportune moments with a cheery cry of 'Bing bong bingely beep!' to remind Vimes of nonexistent and inaccurate appointments.

I have no doubt at all that *Feet of Clay* will be welcomed by Pratchett's legions of fans and will shoot straight onto the bestseller lists. But then, what else did you expect me to say?

David Pringle (Ed)

The St James Guide to Fantasy Writers

St James Press, 1996, 711pp

Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

Although the format is the same as that of *Twentieth-Century Science Fiction Writers* (latterly renamed *The St James Guide to Science Fiction Writers*), this encyclopedic volume differs from it in two important respects. In the first place the sf volume covers a wide generic spectrum – from the hard sf of futurological extrapolation to the works of such varied but unmistakable fantasists as H.P. Lovecraft, J.R.R. Tolkien and Thomas Burnett Swann – the fantasy guide has a narrower focus, specifically excluding writers of gothic fiction, ghost stories and horror since these are to be the subjects of a planned later volume. Thus, while Tolkien and Swann find a place, Lovecraft doesn't, nor do Anne Rice, Dan Simmons or Storm Constantine. The other difference is one of non-limitation: there is no mention of the twentieth century. So

the selection makes room for entries on, for example, Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Charles Kingsley and William Morris. The great majority of the more than 400 entries are, however, on twentieth century writers.

The field of fantasy being as large as it is – even after the aforementioned partitioning-off of several sub-genres – 400-plus entries cannot be anything like comprehensive; and the 'mainstream' of fantasy being as wide as it is, there are omissions and inclusions about which one could niggle. Why, for instance, is fantasy in other languages so sparsely represented: room is found (rightly, I'd agree) for so distant, though charming and influential, a figure as Madame d'Aulney, but not for such important twentieth century European fantasists as Saint-Exupéry and Selma Lagerlöf. The very three-part St James entry formula (biography, bibliography, critique) can present problems of inclusion. Include John Masefield for his two children's fantasies, *The Midnight Folk* and *The Box of Delights* (well dealt-with, descriptively and critically, by Andy Sawyer) and you are committed to a bibliography of some 200 other works

occupying three precious but not thematically relevant pages. This does raise the question of the uses of the Guide: the student and researcher may want/need to know that Masfield edited *The Voyages of Dampier* (1906) or that Chesterton wrote *Social Reform Versus Birth Control* (1927); the other potential user, fantasy fan or magpie browser, is less interested.

However, such quibbling gets nowhere. Let me come to the actual pleasures of delving into this volume, for whatever purpose. One item I omitted from the St James formula is the occasional comment by authors on their own work. Here are various and enlightening. Gwyneth Jones, appearing as Ann Halam, says of children's books only that 'the distinction there between "genre" and "mainstream" writing styles is (or was) almost non-existent', and for the rest discusses the fantasy element in her adult fiction. (The distinctive 'magical' component in Halam's juveniles is then, however, properly explored over the signature of Maureen Speller.) Diane Duane is half-apologetic, though insistent, in applying what she calls the buzz-word 'life-enhancing' to her fiction. Colin Greenland describes his fiction as tending to be 'about real people in imaginary worlds... trying to live satisfactory lives under unsatisfactory, unpredictable conditions...' Tom Holt says succinctly and typically: 'Most of my heroes are me in disguise, and nearly all my heroines are called Jane'.

The critical essays are mostly of around 1,000 words, but sometimes run towards 2,000. David Pringle has assembled a team of 46 contributors, some responsible for only a few entries, others taking on large assignments and providing the

main critical substance of the volume. Thus, S.T. Joshi - the bibliographer, with Darrell Schweizer, of Lord Dunsany - writes on a single subject; not surprisingly, that is Lord Dunsany. A specialisation is also apparent in the author of the greatest number of essays (45); Brian Stableford's well-known expertise in the period of literary history which saw the rise of the scientific romance makes him uniquely competent to present such authors as Marie Corelli, Richard Garnett, Oscar Wilde and Andrew Lang. His range is truly eclectic, though: he also has over his signature such a miscellany as Lewis Carroll, Stephen Donaldson, Stella Benson and John Cowper Powys - on whom he writes a brilliant piece giving due place to the late and little known fantasies, *All or Nothing* and the like. Lisa Tuttle, listed as writer and editor of the *Encyclopedia of Feminism*, includes in her six women fantasists Penelope Lively, the wonderful Philippa Pearce (*Tom's Midnight Garden*) and E. Nesbit who, she rightly says, 'was the first truly modern writer for children'. Among other authors and critics contributing essays are Mike Ashley, Gary Westfahl, Chris Gilmore, Paul Kincaid, Paul McAuley, Dave Langford, Sally-Ann Melia and Edward James. The last named has in his remit the towering figure and reputation of Tolkien, and he concludes his essay by identifying him as 'a man deeply out of sympathy with the world of the late 20th century', adding, 'that as much as anything explains the continued ability of *The Lord of the Rings* to attract devoted readers.' Perhaps it is the frequency of such thought-provoking remarks that explains why I can commend this Guide as being a continually rewarding browsing-ground as well as a most useful work of reference.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The Fey: Changeling
Orion, 1996, 514pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

It is five years since the magic-wielding Fey attempted to conquer the Blue Isle - as told in *Sacrifice*, the first volume in this fantasy series. That book ended in an impasse, with neither side able to defeat the other. Most of the Fey were confined to the magical refuge of the Shadowlands, where they are safe from the Holy Water which the Islanders use in their religious ceremonies and which, by chance, they have discovered is the only weapon effective against the invaders.

Jewel - daughter of the Feys' military leader, Rugar, and granddaughter of the Black King - has married Nicholas, son of Alexander, King of the Blue Isle. She hopes that the marriage will bring the two peoples closer together, so that the Blue Isle may become part of the Fey empire with the minimum of bloodshed. So far, her hopes have come to nothing. The Islanders still hate and fear the Fey, including herself, and those Fey who have ventured out of the Shadowlands are shunned by the Islanders and live a wretched existence in an isolated and desolate settlement. Even the birth of her son, Sebastian, fails to unite the two sides.

To Jewel and Nicholas's consternation, Sebastian is a dull, slow-witted child; unknown to them he is a changeling, a golem created out of stone. Their true child, likely to have awesome magical powers, has been spirited away by Rugar and is growing up in the Shadowlands unaware of his real

parents. Now, Jewel is carrying a second child and, having seen her in a Vision, has great hopes for her.

Any hopes for peace are shattered, however, when Rugar resolves to end the stalemate by assassinating Alexander. The death of the king does not result in the unrest that Rugar expected, but Jewel's hopes and plans are thrown into disarray because Nicholas must assume the heavy responsibilities of governing a people with an enemy living in their midst, and deal with the rift that has developed between the Crown and the religious authorities responsible for creating the Holy Water.

Like its predecessor, *Changeling* is an unusual genre fantasy in that the opposing forces are not drawn starkly as Good versus Evil. Ultimately, the reader's sympathies ought to lie with the Islanders who are threatened by the invaders, but Rusch's depiction of at least some of the Fey characters is such that the reader is often forced to view events from a Fey perspective. Both sets of characters act in ways that are unexpected yet credible, given what has gone before. Fey loyal to Rugar are beginning to realise that he has not led them wisely, and some suspect that, contrary to all appearances and expectations, the Islanders may possess magic of their own which could be used to combat the magical powers of the Fey. Various strands of the plot from *Sacrifice* are drawn together and new strands are added; the story advances and reaches a satisfactory conclusion, yet the reader is left wanting to know what will happen to all these people in future. I look forward to the next book in the series.

Harry Turtledove

Worldwar: Upsetting the Balance

Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 468pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

For many readers there may be an element of guilty pleasure

associated with Harry Turtledove's *Worldwar* books: we like to claim that we look for deeper things in our sf, yet when it comes down to it we rather like a good old-fashioned alien invasion story. Here we have a series of books which are exactly what the general public perceives sf to be - Earth being invaded by green lizard men from Mars - and exactly what many fans have tried to argue that it is not. This book

proves the point: the green lizard men who are invading Earth come from the second planet of Tau Ceti. So there.

But what to expect of this particular volume? Its predecessors, amounting to nearly a thousand pages in two hefty volumes, set out how the Race came to invade Earth slap bang in the middle of the Second World War. They explain how Earth wasn't quite the push-over that the Race had been expecting because humanity is capable of achieving change and progress within what, to the aliens, is an unimaginably small timescale; it was inconceivable to them that the humans could have advanced technologically so far in the mere eight hundred years since the first Race probed the planet for colonisation. And so the population of Earth is fighting back, and their resistance is becoming more effective. We know all this from *Worldwar: In the Balance* (1994) and *Worldwar: Tilting the Balance* (1995), and we know that there's at least one book ahead of us. Will this latest volume merely serve to advance the plot, as another reviewer put it, about as far as the average glacier gets between breakfast and elevenses?

There are over a hundred named human characters listed in Dramatis Personae at the front of the book and about the first fifth serves to remind us where they all are and what they're doing. And there are a further twenty five aliens, including the wonderfully named Pshing (sort of evocative of an old-fashioned cash register) and Skoob, who is blissfully ignorant of the fact that he is actually a second-hand bookshop in London. (There are these odd moments when Turtledove's alien language is difficult to take seriously: some

Lizard devices make use of a particular type of light, unfortunately known as *skelkwank*. 'A *flaskelkwank* was something that turned light *skelkwank*: a *skelkwanker*, in other words.' Err, yes...)

Throughout the book we get to see the war from a variety of human and alien viewpoints in all theatres of the conflict. Teerts, the alien fighter pilot, is a prisoner of the Japanese. Moishe Russie, a Jewish leader from Warsaw escapes Lizard-dominated Poland to carry on the struggle from Britain but the British Government come up with a new mission for him. A former baseball player and Great War veteran fights Lizard infantryman in a deadly struggle for the shattered remains of Chicago and in the Soviet Union local troops and their German former opponents (barely) make common cause against the alien invaders.

Lots of pages, lots of action. But does it actually get us anywhere? In simple terms, no. At the beginning of the book, the Race still seem to have a significant technological edge although humanity is finding increasingly sophisticated ways of fighting back: in *World War: Tilting the Balance* the Soviets exploded the first human-made nuclear bomb and all the major powers are working to develop their own. The Lizards are hampered by being a long way from home, in a hostile environment and with limited supplies, and inevitably morale is weakening. By the conclusion of this volume an eventual human victory seems more plausible (setting aside the fact that an eventual human victory is almost inevitable because That's The Way These Things Are) but, hey we've got at least another book to go yet.

Marian Veivers

Bloodlines

Gollanz, 1996, 270pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

Bloodlines explores the myth of Lady Macbeth, and the curse of 'the Scottish play'. The lives of three women intertwine: the actress Abigail West (who's playing Lady Macbeth opposite her husband) Jennet, a country girl in Shakespeare's time, who is being tried for witchcraft; and, earliest of all, Gruoch – the original Lady Macbeth.

Gruoch is perhaps the most interesting of the three: married – or sold – to a old man while still a child, she falls irrevocably in love with Macbeth when he kills her husband and carries her off. Despite the romance, though, this isn't a sanitised Hollywood vision of the eleventh century; it's dark and dirty, and there are enemies at every side. Gruoch may love her rescuer, but she is not blind to his nature – Macbeth is a warrior and a murderer, who will do whatever's necessary to further his ambitions.

Jennet's locked in a cell and tortured until she confesses to witchcraft: her plan to curse the King and his heirs. In vain she protests that the curse is not hers, simply words that her mother told her which she has never understood. Again and again she protests that her handsome lover is not the Devil, despite his graces and his poetic words. She has dreamt, though, that he will live forever; but recounting her dream to her tormentors will not help her case. Already they are building Jennet's pyre, and she remembers her own mother being burnt at the stake.

Abby's life seems idyllic at first, but as she plunges herself into the role of Lady Macbeth her behaviour begins to change – enough to make her husband suspect that she is suffering from mental illness again. Abby adores her

husband, but she can't make him understand that she's not going mad; that the confusion, and the hallucinations, come from the past and not from her own mind.

There are parallels between the women's situations: each loves a man who is beginning to mistrust her, but for whom she would do anything; each is threatened by the unwanted attentions of another man; and each has nightmares and 'waking dreams' of a high staircase, which must be climbed – even though what waits at the top is an unknown, but horrific, sight.

The 'curse' is there from the beginning, although none of the three women understand its meaning or its power until the climax of the novel. The usual, half-joking explanation for the 'curse' on *Macbeth* is that Shakespeare's witches recite a real spell ('eye of newt and toe of frog'). *Bloodlines* suggests a more plausible reason; a curse – or, more accurately, a prediction – handed down from mother to daughter, and concealed in the words of Lady Macbeth herself, rather than in the 'demented rantings' of the witches. The curse won't be broken until someone understands what really happened, almost a thousand years ago.

Bloodlines can be read at several levels. It's a gripping thriller; the three women's narratives are twined together without chapter breaks, and the nature of the curse – and its resolution – are revealed only gradually. In some ways it's a romance: *Bloodlines* could be compared to the novels of Barbara Erskine (who is perhaps the best-known author of this sort of historical fiction, which blends past and present), but Veivers focusses on the darker emotions, and the historical context in which the action takes place. And, while it's definitely a work of fiction, the underlying theories regarding the origins of the play are by no means lightweight. A good read, with an element of intellectual enquiry that's reminiscent of Josephine Tey's *Daughter of Time*.

PULP FICTION

Paperback Reviews
 edited by
Tanya Brown

Sarah Ash

Moths to a Flame

Orion, £4.99, 296pp, 1995

Reviewed by Janet Stephenson

The metamorphosis of the powerful and haunting short story 'Mothmusic' into the novel *Moths to a Flame* has dissipated much of the power. Worse, the haunting quality has been banished by fairly indiscriminate use of dozens of elisions (moonwhite moonpale moonblue shadowblack blossomsweet goosehairs darkcentre), tainting those instances when the coined terms seem both original and appropriate ('The deathly powder clogged his nostrils'; 'slip of petalpaper'); and by the manner in which archaic terms and exotic spellings are used (leathern, dhamel, thylz, zhan). Overall, this irritates more than it charms, and fogs meaning. The role of the Haute Zhudiciar is not that of High Justice, and 'donjon' seems to be used both as fortress and as dungeon. Some usage seems arbitrary - lights are lanterns, lanthorns, lucernae.

The twins Lai and Laili, acolytes of the Goddess, sworn to chastity and to uphold life, are abducted from the Sacred Grove before they can be admitted to the mysteries of the moonmoths. Sold in the City of Perysse, the weakest part of the plot then installs Laili as favoured concubine of the Arkhan; while Lai achieves freedom by might of arms, his abnormally acute reactions trained to rhazir-combat. The twins, however, seem too shallow for the conflict inherent in the adoption of new roles of Melmeth's concubine and as pre-eminent killer to have the impact that such a conflict should, and the story is more enjoyable when it deals with the well-drawn subsidiary characters.

The novel flares to stronger life with the appearance of the moonmoths, *boskh*, the narcotic panacea which coats their wings, and the man who studies it, the Artificer Dr. Arlen Azrhel. Soon the city is in the grip of a pestilence linked to the moths, and Melmeth and many minor characters succumb to *boskh* addiction. The signs of *boskh*-induced metamorphosis are seen. And ultimately, the resolution reveals the dual nature of *boskh*, and its potential for both good and evil.

Stephen Baxter

Ring

Voyager, 1996, 443pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Claire Brierley

Ring is Proper Science Fiction. I could tell that because it has proper science in it - or at least it seemed to me to be proper science. But, despite its mind-expanding content, the science is plausible and comprehensible; Baxter explains cogently and with a light touch what could otherwise be the sort of scientific concepts which make my brain leak out of my ears: the decay and death of the sun; space travel for millions of years to establish a wormhole, a bridge across time; multiple Virtual clones of the dead or lost; and super-light speed travel across a universe dying in an onslaught of anti-matter.

The plot could easily be in danger of sinking beneath the weight of such ideas, but Baxter makes them unobtrusive, albeit intrinsic to the narrative, after the initial explanations. The most central plot takes place on what is, effectively, a generation starship - with the twist that it is seeking not to cross and colonise space, but to cross and link time. This strand holds the somewhat familiar skiffy plot where later generations have forgotten their original purpose, and now carry out rituals which have lost their primary meaning but whose secondary meaning has come to dominate their way of life; but it is enlivened by the longevity of some of the original characters, allowing them to persist into the later stages of this societal development, and develop in turn their own coping mechanisms after partial withdrawal from this new society. The clash which inevitably results benefits from the massive timespans of the novel; as the societies interact and develop, there is enough time here to see history in action.

In this æon-spanning plot it is, unfortunately, this main range of characters whose development seems incomplete; they move and manoeuvre through the plot without making much emotive impact. The jumps between eras on board the ship may contribute to this; the initial discovery of what has changed between each section of the book and how characters have responded to these changes serves the plot well, maintaining pace without losing continuity. But it doesn't assist characterisation; although most characters have some depth they don't all have much actual character, and their motivations are consequently sometimes hard to follow. It may be that this isolation and lack of empathy between reader and characters is a device whose subtlety I am failing to credit - a neat reflection of their own isolation and lack of mutual understanding.

The exception is Liesler, the only character we follow from birth to what is initially a sub-plot, and whose particularly unique life experience makes her stand out in more ways than characterisation. Liesler is a truly artificial intelligence, who (which?) has been given the opportunity to experience human life and growth in condensed form in order to enrich her perspective and perceptions; she is to be dropped into the sun in order to find out how and why it is dying. I found her discoveries and her perceptions to be, indeed, the most vivid and fascinating of the many wonders presented to the human characters in this book.

The other character who really lives on the page is Michael Poole, somewhat ironically as he 'lives' only in essence or as a Virtual representation. The wider plot links to Poole and to the super-technological super-civilisation of the Xeelee, and thus in varying degrees to Baxter's previous novels *Flux*, *Timelike Infinity* and *Raft*. The generation-starship theme is in fact only a prelude to the main development of the plot, and the broader exploration of space, time, matter and technology in a race with a dying universe.

David Brin**Brightness Reef**

Orbit, 1996, 705pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

A complex book by one of the consistently good American writers currently enjoyed by sf readers. This is an Uplift novel, and is the first in a trilogy (the author apologises for this in a curious afterword).

On Jijo, six exiled races live alongside one another, their pasts half-forgotten, their planet a maze of wreckage and legend. The novel details events following the appearance of a ship, a 'blazing cylinder', and tells of future reckonings and dangerous histories. This is lush sf, full of strangely named aliens (well, I suppose they do have to be), bizarre biologies, and lots of words with capital letters, such as Scroll of Danger, Civilisation of the Five Galaxies, Gray Queens. Luckily David Brin is a writer of skill and experience, so all this doesn't get bogged down in the cod fantasy style. However, when reading some passages –

There's the GalSeven tentative case, for instance, but that doesn't work in the past-explicit tense. And the quantum-uncertain declension, in Buyuy-dialect GalThree, is just too weird.

– it is easy to want to skip parts. But since the many entangled sections of the novel are written from the points of view of different creatures, this sort of writing is required. It's not bad, not at all, just rather difficult.

All in all, not an easy read, but one that pulls you in through author skill and sheer cosmic sense-of-alienness. You read this with a wide-screen, letterbox format imagination.

Eric Brown**Blue Shifting**

Pan, 1995, 264pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Ian Sales

Eight stories, of which two are original to this collection. These are stories set among the artists of *Meridian Days*, the nada-continuum pilots of *Engineman*, and some that are neither. Both 'The Death Of Cassandra Quebec' and 'Elegy Perpetuum' are set in Sapphire Oasis, an artists' colony, and both plots revolve around the latest work of an artist despised by his peers.

'Piloting' and 'The Art Of Acceptance' both involve pilots of the nada-continuum, although neither are 'piloting' stories as such. In 'Piloting', Abbie is hired to 'pilot' the brain-dead body of the artist Wellard's daughter for a 'performance' that, it is hoped, will bring him immortality from the Omegas. In 'The Art Of Acceptance' a disfigured street urchin becomes embroiled in a plot by a scientist to enact a gruesome revenge on his ex-wife, a movie star who ran away with another man.

'The Disciples Of Apollo' is unlike the rest of the collection – there are no references to the universes of 'Elegy Perpetuum' or *Engineman*. Like the story that brought Brown to prominence, 'The Time-Lapsed Man', it is a story of acceptance of a condition that will lead to an early death. It is also an original take on spontaneous human combustion.

'Epsilon Dreams' is much like the Sapphire Oasis stories, although set on a colony world. A twisted love-triangle into which the narrator is dragged slowly unravels, but still ends on a happy note – or rather, the most *deserving* character has a happy ending. It is perhaps a trademark of Brown's fiction that only the truly deserving find happiness.

Sadly, the two most disappointing stories in the collection are the two that are original to it. 'The Song Of Summer' isn't really sf – the central device, a pendant that records

holograms, could just as easily have been something more contemporary, and very little would have changed in the story. 'Blue Shifting' is contemporary, but somewhat pointless, describing the 'adventures' of a trio of people who find themselves experiencing the same day over and over again but each time in a different city. It succeeds in capturing the atmosphere of the various places; but that isn't enough to make it rise to the same level as the others in the collection.

Overall, a collection of Eric Brown short stories is by definition a collection of high quality short stories. *Blue Shifting* may not enhance Brown's reputation (most that are aware of him will have already read the collected stories before), but it certainly doesn't decrease it. It's a good collection, a showpiece of Brit-sf, and certainly worth a fiver of anybody's money.

Mary Corran**Fate**

Orion, 1996, 363pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Janet Stephenson

Is life a predetermined journey? And is true friendship possible between a man and a woman? These questions lie at the heart of *Fate*.

Philosophical and reflective in tone, this novel has a tendency to creak under the weight of its feminist agenda – although never shrill, no chance is lost to expound on the invidious position of women in a male dominated society. This slows the narrative, particularly in the early pages. As the book progresses, these themes flow more naturally from interactions between the well drawn characters – Asher, the prickly and likeable protagonist, her estranged and treacherous husband, the circle of women friends with whom she is never quite at home (this is not a novel of cosy sisterhood, but a more ambitious attempt to explore prejudice and control) and Mallory, the childhood playmate who reappears in her adult life as unwanted protector and companion.

Asher is a child of fortune, her 'identical' twin brother having died at birth 'hardly surviving, female children are far stronger than their male counterparts in the early years' bequeathing her a double share of fortune, and immunity to the hexes and wards which hedge about the rest of society. Summoned by the Oracle, she and Mallory are sent on the quest for Vallis, the rightful heiress, who vanished aged five during the conquest of Darrien by the warlike Dominus, and who embodies the luck of her people. If the quest fails, then Darrien's folk will dwindle further, and those at the bottom of the pile (women and slaves) will suffer most – but if the quest succeeds then Asher's deeply held beliefs are called into question. Set on this path by prophecy, must she alter her conviction that she can live her life making her own decisions and her own mistakes?

Raymond E. Feist**Rise of a Merchant Prince:****The Serpentwar Trilogy****Volume 2**

HarperCollins, 1996, 406pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

I haven't read any of Feist's work before, and as he writes epics on a massive scale, to pick up the story here was a bit difficult, especially as many of the characters appear to come from books before this series. I learned from Cherith Baldry's review in *Vector 185* of *Shadow of a Dark Queen*, the

first volume of this new trilogy set on the world of Midkemia in the Riftwar universe of all Feist's previous books (including those with Janny Wurts), that soldier Erik von Darkmoor was the hero of that book. Here the story continues by focusing on Rupert 'Roo' Avery. Roo is an unlovable anti-hero who becomes an extremely wealthy merchant in the city of Krondor in the years prior to the expected invasion by the serpent armies of the evil Emerald Queen, although we learn that Roo's good fortune is in part assured by the Duke of Krondor to help finance the forthcoming war. Secondary threads follow the progress of Erik with half-elven Calis, the 'Eagle Of Krondor', in a new military expedition against the reptilian Pantathians in the southern continent of Novindus, and the activities of the Stardock magicians as they assist the fight against the Emerald Queen and other creatures of darkness. Cherith Baldry hoped that the characters of the alien Saaur might be developed, but that doesn't happen. The Novindus contingent penetrate the most secret stronghold of the Pantathians, discover more about the forces against them, and carry out a lot of destruction. Needless to say, to find out if the people of Krondor and their allies succeed in averting or defeating the invasion by the Serpent Queen, you will have to buy the next book.

This sprawling work could be described as 'fantasy for people who haven't learned why they like it yet', but the story and characterisation were nevertheless interesting enough for it to help me get through a boring plane flight. However, even though I've finished this book now, I wouldn't want to continue to the next without getting more information on the background, so I can't recommend it as a place to start reading Feist.

Ed Gorman

Hawk Moon

Headline, 1995, 305pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Hawk Moon is mislabelled as horror. The events unfolding in its pages are sometimes horrific, but this book is really a thriller/mystery.

Robert Payne is an ex-FBI psychological profiler whose aid is enlisted unofficially by a Native American police officer to help clear her estranged husband of the ritual murder of two young Indian girls.

The action slips back and forth between the modern day crimes being investigated and a series of similar crimes committed at the turn of the century which are being investigated by Cedar Rapids' first woman police officer. The novel works both as a thriller and as a mystery story, enough red herrings being banded about to maintain the suspense, and enough character and action going on to hold the interest.

I recommended this to my mystery-reading wife.

Charles L. Grant

The X-Files: Goblins & Whirlwind

Voyager, 1995, 435pp, £12.99

Reviewed by Maryann DiMarco

As with all works of fiction that are adapted from drama – or vice versa – there are inevitable comparisons between the two. Character development, scenery, and flow of dialogue on film will never completely match the impressions formed while reading. While reading this, I tried desperately to remain objective – Mulder and Scully, not David Duchovny and

Gillian Anderson! – not an easy task.

The two novels, separately published, would be quite impressive: but as a compilation, the plots are practically identical, just with different scenery – car-chases, attempts on Mulder's life, stormy climates, etc. Generally, *Goblins* and *Whirlwind* failed to conjure up the "ooh" feeling one gets when thinking about *The X-Files*. However, a true *X-Files* fan will appreciate the imagination, the technical, the biological, and the mystical elements, and inevitably, the American paranoia involved in the writing of these works.

Goblins is an interesting idea, as usual, and the descriptive narrative flows well. However, there seemed to be something was lacking from this novel; perhaps Mulder's sarcastic humour matched with Scully's doubt and analysis. The introduction of associates Hank and Licia seemed a bit unnecessary (and a bit tiresome) until the 'plot-twist' ending was revealed. It was almost painful to read the final pages of this story, which seemed more a 'cops and robbers' than the usual insightful and thought-provoking ending we've come to recognise in an episode.

Whirlwind is a more typical *X-Files* case; the novel was easier to read and more thought-provoking. There seemed to be more imagination used in writing this story – the 'unknown' was more effective than in *Goblins*. Again, though, the characters were never as colourful as in the television series – you just didn't sense Mulder's passionate drive to uncover the truth, or Scully's need to explain the unexplainable.

Harry Harrison and John Holm

One King's Way

Legend, 1996, 426pp, £5.99

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

The middle volume of a trilogy (*The Hammer and the Cross* came first, and *King and Emperor* is now out in hardcover) is often a marking-time kind of book; but if, as here, the overall scenario is one of alternate history, then it may have a distinct role in making more plausible what was proposed in its predecessor. At the beginning of this volume, the Battle of Hastings has been fought, not in 1066 but in 866, and invading Norsemen and Franks have been repulsed by Shaf Sigvarthsson, co-King (with Alfred) of England. Shaf is in peaceful alliance with Alfred, but has lost a longed-for bride to him. He takes his English fleet pirate-hunting around the Elbe Estuary where, wrecked in battle, he becomes a slave, is freed, gathers about him afresh his Viking followers committed to the 'Way', builds and arms ships, and then, stranded again in sub-arctic Norway, crosses the central Scandinavian mountains to disrupt the human-sacrificial rites of the Uppsala Temple and to kill in single combat the last of the piratical, slave-hunting and peace-destroying Ragnarssons.

So far, so adventurous. Campaigns, whale-hunts, intrigues, escapes, battles and berserk duels are told of as graphically and page-turningly as might be expected of Harry Harrison. Landscapes, customs, and much of the historical background have the ring of authenticity; yet what gives added zest are the twists given to the actual direction of history. The 'Way', dynamically central to this alternative course, is opposed to Christian power now assuming militant form in post-Charlemagne Germany (Westphalia and Saxonia), and is equally opposed to the barbaric aggression of the Ragnarssons. The mantle of unlucky King Olaf falls on the shoulders of Shaf, who has, however, a role and character of considerable ambivalence. One-eyed, there is a superstition that he is Odin's son; he wears the 'pole-ladder' pendant of the 'Way', but carries the sacred lance of the centurion

Longinus (a 'Grail' relic). He also has dreams and visions of both pagan and Christina provenance. As the story ends he appears to have been accepted by Odin, the testing and adversarial All-Father; and the Lance is given up to the Christian German Knights, who believe it to be talismanic of imperial power.

The other significant historical twist is the investing of the 'Way' with anachronistic technologies, all due to its inventive genius, the puny Udd, a kind of Dark Ages Leonardo. He teaches how to make case-hardened steel and how to armour ships with it; he invents (or, in some cases, historically anticipates or re-invents) the crossbow, the watermill and the windmill, the lever-cocked crossbow, the halberd and a rotating-framed catapult for naval use. Given all this, the 'Way' is not only a powerfully motivated but also a powerfully equipped force. With northern lands so furnished and an imperial Germany on the rise, *King and Emperor* promises to move towards an interesting 'alternative' conclusion.

Tom Holt

Djinn Rummy

Orbit, 1996, 277pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Humour is a minefield. One man's meat is almost always another man's poison. I believe there are even those who do not laugh at The Pratchett. It's all a matter of taste.

Or, in the case of much British humour, lack of taste. Potty jokes rule!

I hadn't read any Tom Holt but I'd heard good things about him, so I began *Djinn Rummy* with high expectations. 277 pages later I hadn't laughed once. I hadn't even cracked a smile, even at unintentional gags. I can safely say I found more laughs in *War and Peace* than in this book.

As I said, it is all a matter of taste.

Yet I can't help thinking that even the most inept humorist ought to have been able to wring something from a tale of genius and humans, love and death, the end of the world and milk. Yes, milk, the endless 'milk' jokes. Yet Holt managed to subvert every set-up, avoid every joke and chase up every blind alley in a style which seemed more like a rough sketch than a pared-down narrative.

I couldn't even raise the energy to dislike this book. Maybe you'll laugh. Good luck.

K. W. Jeter

Blade Runner 2: The Edge of Human

Orion, 1996, 340pp, £5.99

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Blade Runner was a movie that hid its origins, and Phillip K. Dick's name appeared only in the end credits. I can't recall seeing his name mentioned in any review; something that changed by the time of *Total Recall*. So I guess that the movie helped, posthumously, to make his name.

The film lost a lot of things; Rick Deckard's wife, the religious consolations of Mercerism, and one of Dick's greatest contributions to the understanding of modern life: kipple. "Kipple is useless objects like junk mail, or match folders after you use the last match".

And the big question is: is *Blade Runner 2* kipple? Because this is a sequel to the film, not the novel. And, given that it was a film in which image was everything - not only does the film look good, it is also about looking at things, and the appearance of things - can that appearance be translated into

a novel?

Jeter has taken off from two points: Rick and Rachel are forcibly returned to Los Angeles from their forest retreat, and Deckard and his former partner Dave Holden have to investigate the sixth replicant who returned to Earth - a character ignored in the movie.

This is definitely not the Deckard of the original novel, and the style is completely different. Even the paragraph length is longer. Deckard is now a complete introvert, forever thinking. On the other hand, the events are true to the movie - bombs, fights, crawling androids.

Finally Deckard escapes off-world with the girl, while Holden goes to Deckard's retreat. Around the cabin are small living things, owls and hawks - as though Jeter had forgotten that this is a world without animals. (In the original *Do Androids Dream* Deckard discovers a toad and then discovers that it's a simulacrum, not the real thing.)

Like the film, Jeter will give you an upbeat ending - something Phil Dick would never have done.

Jenny Jones

The Blue Manor

Vista, 1996, 352pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

The Blue Manor is set in current day Epping Forest. It tells the story of the Blue Manor, its guardians, and the Banniere family who live within it.

The story is told from the viewpoint of Tom who starts work at the Blue Manor as the Gardener, a role with mythological echoes. The Blue Manor was originally built by Rosamund Banniere and is inherited via the female line. It is a place of checks and balances where over the generations each of its inhabitants unknowingly replay similar roles. There are two forces which control, and to an extent protect it; the Leaffer and Dogfrog. The Leaffer is the outside force which controls most of the grounds. It is most tolerant of the Gardener. The Dogfrog lives inside the manor and seeks to control the three inhabitants: there may never be more than three residents. Opposing these two guardians are the Black Crow and Stag Beetle, and those whom they control.

The Blue Manor is a well crafted and atmospheric novel. In the acknowledgment Jenny Jones cites Robert Graves and his White Goddess work and their influence in this book is plain. For most of the novel the terror is subtle or even elegant, and arises from the interaction of the characters rather than overtly supernatural causes. The pace picks up rapidly towards the end and the final denunciations and battle provide a very dramatic and satisfying climax.

Stephen Jones

The Illustrated

Werewolf Movie Guide

Titan Books, 1996, 144pp, £12.99

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

There's an advert on telly at the moment where a bloke thrusts a tin of woodstain at the camera and says, "it does exactly what it says on the tin". *The Illustrated Werewolf Movie Guide* is a bit like that.

Everything you ever wanted to know about the celluloid lives of werewolves, were-creatures and shape-changing beings in general, is contained within: listed, annotated, rated (out of 5) and critically described. It's an encyclopaedia of celluloid were-life. The guide is split into decades from the 1930s onward, but before that starts with the silents. Here we find such delights as *The Cat That Was Changed into A Woman* (*)

from 1909 and all 4 silent versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from 1909 (*), 1910 (*), 1913 (*) and 1925 (*). What is immediately apparent is that the author has not confined himself to genre movies. Any film with shape-transforming people are embraced here, including cartoons like the Disney version of *The Jungle Book* (***), pornography like *Driller* (*), and 'art house' movies like *Altered States* (**), along with loads more versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*) to (***). Of course there are those films that you would expect to find as well: Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* (*****) from 1942, *I Was A Teenage Werewolf* (**) from the fifties and more recently *The Howling* (****). Interestingly Jones chooses to highlight a few films that are not so well known, such as *Island of Lost Souls*, Eric C. Kenton's 1932 version of Wells' *Island of Dr Moreau* (***** and banned in the UK until 1959), and Jean Cocteau's 1946 fantasy *La Belle et La Bête* (*****). Coupled with an introduction and short article by Curt Siodmak, famous pulp screenwriter of classics like *The Wolf Man* (****) and *House of Frankenstein* (***), as well as director of B movies in the forties and fifties with glorious titles along the lines of *Bride of the Gorilla* (*) or *Love Slaves of The Amazon* (not a werewolf flick, unfortunately). I could go on. As I said, it does exactly what it says on the tin.

J. V. Jones

The Baker's Boy

Orbit, 1996, 552pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

J. V. Jones launches herself onto the fantasy scene with her first published novel, *The Baker's Boy*. As always when I read a new author, I begin the book with the renewed hope that this author will bring something fresh and new to the genre. Let's have a look at the plot.

We start with a king in a castle who, surprise surprise, is dying (uh-oh). We have Mellianora, the young daughter of a powerful lord, who is about to be married off to the king's son, naturally doesn't want to be (but then he's a seriously nasty type, so who would?) so predictably runs away from the castle (groan). Then there's Jack, the Baker's Boy from the title, who also runs away from the castle because he's burnt the loaves and is in line for a serious beating from the Baker when he gets in to work. Jack, not surprisingly at all, has not only burnt the loaves, but fixed the whole problem by magic before he runs away - the running away is actually because he doesn't understand what's going on and is frightened he might accidentally kill someone. Throw Tawl - a young Knight who is on a quest to earn his 'circles' and full Knighthood - into the mix, and you have the beginnings of enough characters who've never met before, but eventually must, to start wandering around the world and give the author plenty of scope for description along the way.

Of course, in order to keep this from being even remotely original, you have to have some bad guys, and these positions are more than adequately filled by Baralis, the King's Chancellor, Prince Kylock the King's evil son (who is really Baralis' son but don't tell anyone) and Tavalisk, the food-loving Archbishop.

So that's about it, I'm afraid. Baralis is after both Mellianora and Jack, Melli to prevent her marrying Kylock because he has other plans for him, and Jack because he has magic, and nobody should have magic except Baralis. Tavalisk is up to no good either, his political machinations seeming to coincide with no-one else's in particular. A lot of tramping around ensues, and captures, escapes and near misses abound.

Actually, although this all sounds rather hum-drum, it is well written and there is also a very nice blend of humour

throughout. The regular conversations of two ordinary guards in the King's service, Bodger and Grift, are extremely silly, but great fun. Archbishop Tavalisk and his penchant for food in all its forms provides light relief as well.

Following the disappointment of not actually reading anything new or ground-breaking, *The Baker's Boy* is quite a lot of fun, and is certainly above average compared to some of the more mundane books in this field.

Jeanne Kalogridis

Children of the Vampire

Headline, 1996, 303pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Claire Brierley

This book is a sequel. You can tell, partly because the back jacket features reviews of the first book in the series, *Covenant with the Vampire*, but mostly because the narrative makes it obvious. I tend to dislike this in sequels, since it implies the need to buy the first book in order to fully enjoy the one you're actually reading; I prefer books to be able to stand alone, even if they work best as part of a series.

But *Children of the Vampire* seems to meet both these criteria. It is a good sequel, and a good book; it made me want to read the first one because it would probably be good as well, and because I did want to find out the rest of the story. Its back-references were not overly intrusive, coming across more as essential background to the story in hand than as an advert for the earlier book.

The three books in this series (the third was in progress when this was published) tell the story of the Romanian family whose living members of whom use the surname Tsepesh; the undead tend to be known as Dracul. The series is intended to take the story up to the events of *Dracula*, and this book, at least, has been scrupulous not to contradict anything in Stoker's novel. Indeed, the strands that link these books to *Dracula* are inventive and promise to enrich a re-reading of the earlier book; and they develop as the plot moves on, to the extent that I want to read the third book in this series even more than the first.

The premise of the series is that *Dracula* draws his power from his living family; the eldest son of each generation must be covenanted to him at birth and will die if *Dracula* dies, providing him with the incentive to protect and nurture his ancestor. If *Dracula* makes one of his family undead, it buys him another generation of life but confines him to his family home until the covenant is renewed by the next generation. The rationale for this device is not explained in the second book, but is not unreasonable given the suspension of disbelief already required to enjoy vampire fiction.

In the first book, Arkady Tsepesh has evidently refused to sacrifice the life of his son, Stefan, to *Dracula*; in seeking to kill his ancestor, he has instead been made a vampire himself and has seen his wife and son flee. Finding them may be more of a danger, for them, than leaving them to fend for themselves. Arkady's formerly crippled sister, Zsuzsanna, has also been made a vampire, and has few scruples about serving the interests of her progenitor and her own desires. And yes, these vampires are sexy - apart from *Dracula* himself.

Arkady eventually finds Stefan grown up and his wife Mary grown old, recently widowed again, having married the doctor who saved them and with whom she adopted another son. The narrative is divided between the first person diaries of a number of the principal characters - Arkady, Zsuzsanna, Mary, Stefan and his adoptive brother, Abraham (Bram) van Helsing. Yes, really.

The story has good pace and the characters are well drawn; it is sufficiently gripping and powerful that the twists

work, largely unsignalled. It is also quite deceptive in itself; the story seems more lightweight than it deserves, not least because the narrative flows so easily. This is not a great novel, but it is a good story.

Guy Gavriel Kay

The Lions of Al-Rassan

HarperCollins, 1996, 592pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Cherith Baldrey

The great peninsula of Esperana was once ruled entirely by the Jaddites, a warrior people who worship a God symbolised by the sun. They have been driven into the North by the Asharites, who have set up their own kingdoms. Among both communities live the Kindath, tolerated at best and at home nowhere. South across the straits are the pure desert Asharites, who despise their northern co-religionists as decadent.

At the time of the novel the greatness of the Asharite kingdoms is already past, the loss of so much that was splendid symbolised by the ruins of the beautiful Al-Fontina. The Jaddites are beginning to push down again from the north, and war is imminent.

Jehane, a Kindath physician, accidentally becomes involved in an Asharite atrocity and is driven from her safe existence into a world of politics and war. She encounters the leading warrior of the Jaddites, Rodrigo Belmonte, and his Asharite counterpart, Ammar ibn Khairan. These three form the core of a group of characters who learn to love and respect each other in spite of their political and religious differences. The pan and the power of the novel come from the recognition that nothing is safe; whatever love and honour and laughter can build is at risk from the encroaching darkness. Yet the building goes on, the human spirit survives.

It's easy to see that the setting of this novel is a strange and compelling analogue of medieval Spain. Not alternate history; this is clearly another world, and yet the correspondences between the fantasy and the historical reality give the book great depth and resonance.

I found this novel a moving and engrossing experience. I was completely involved in Kay's fully realised and intensely visual world. Part of me wants to start looking for superlatives to express how good I think it is, but that's not really necessary. Just read it, or you'll never know what you've missed.

Daniel Keys

Flowers for Algernon

Indigo, 1996, 216pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

This is an SF classic, written first as a short story in 1959 and, after initial success, turned into a full-length Nebula-winning novel in 1966. Later it was adapted into an Oscar-winning film (*Charly*) and a stage musical.

Like so many good stories, the basic idea is very simple; it's the way this idea is given believable and moving flesh that makes the difference. Charlie Gordon is a low-grade moron who sweeps the floor in a bakery: bumbling, stupid, eager to please. He becomes the subject of an experimental project in the surgical enhancement of intelligence, and at the beginning cannot match the maze-running skills of an enhanced laboratory mouse, Algernon.

In a few months, Charlie makes staggering progress, learning esoteric language, mastering multiple scholarly disciplines, even writing his own piano concerto; he virtually

takes over his own project, doing the advanced extrapolation and analyses others could not do. And, in the process, he runs into predictable emotional crises.

Then Algernon begins to falter...

Reading it again after thirty years, I was struck by the marvelously detailed logic of the narrative (Charlie is telling his own story in a regular diary), the variety of insights into human character, the emotional richness and depth. This is the story of us all, dumb at first, growing up, doing wonderful things, and then... oh dear.

Well, read it for yourself; and if you've read it already, or read the earlier short story version, or saw the film or the musical, never mind: read the full novel again and marvel.

Pauline Kirk

The Keepers

Virago, 1996, 405pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

For some reason this reminds me of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Perhaps not surprising, in that book are set in a future after some dramatic social or political upheaval, where there is a vast gulf of power and privilege between the haves and the have-nots, and where the roles of women are tightly constrained.

In both books the gulf is biological. In Atwood's story the breakdown and repressive re-entrenchment of 'family values' rests on a plague which renders most women sterile. The few, the Handmaids, who are able to bear children are forced into an appallingly regimented existence to serve as surrogate mothers for the rich and powerful.

In *The Keepers*, upheaval follows a devastating civil war in England. Power falls to the secretive organisation of Keepers, who slowly rebuild the major cities through a regime of austerity and authoritarian control. Power corrupts, and the rule of the Keepers is moving inexorably towards totalitarian control, through rigidly enforced social roles, constant surveillance and compulsory Treatment programs for those suspected of dissident tendencies. Outside the complex of enclosed cities, among the dispossessed and discontents, a network of resistance is stirring towards active rebellion.

Into this, and to Nortown on the moorland borders of city complex, comes Esther Thomas, leading a double life as an obedient wife and mother, and a highly placed member of the shadowy, but fragmentary resistance Movement. More than this, Esther is a sympath, a sort of walking polygraph, with the talent to 'read' people from their emotional state. Into Nortown too, and as Esther's new neighbour, comes Patroner Stephan Lahr, ostensibly charged with launching Nortown's new Showhouse entertainment complex. His relative youth, and his status, both professionally and as a single man with two children, are cause for comment and, among the Movement, a certain amount of suspicion. Meanwhile the Movement is contacted by a rebel band of Keepers, led by a man calling himself Callum, who are looking to fan the covert resistance into active rebellion.

The Keepers, although with strong feminist leaning (nearly all the active and leading operatives of the Movement are women) is a less overtly angry book than *The Handmaid's Tale*. Its tone, in the early part of the book at least, seems more founded in resentment than outrage. In fact, at times it veers into the romantic, an aspect which rather too obviously starts to telegraph its plot and final outcome.

However, as a political thriller, it's nicely paced and well done. Pauline Kirk is a member of the Pennine Poets group and has published four poetry collections and one previous novel. The style of *The Keepers*, though, is surprisingly spare through much of its 400 pages, certainly in contrast to a

couple of very wordy fantasy novels I've just been reading. But then being a poet is supposed to be about selecting the right word, and not three or four closest equivalents. A bit steep at nearly a tenner for a (admittedly chunky) paperback, but recommended.

Dean Koontz

Strange Highways

Headline, 1996, 564pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Andy Mills

Some people believe that the horror genre has contributed to a decline in moral standards. This book should be presented to such people as evidence to the contrary. Throughout this collection there runs a clear moral theme. Koontz's protagonists choose their road, good or evil, and reap their rewards accordingly.

The novel-length title story is a tale of redemption. Joey found out that his brother was a murderer but did nothing, ruining his own life and that of others as a consequence. By miraculous means he is thrown back in time and is offered the opportunity to deal differently with events. It is a fast-paced, cinematic tale. The other twelve stories are a mixed bunch, both in subject (not all are horror) and in quality. By far the best of the collection is the highly-recommended 'Ollie's Hands', a moving tale of a man whose superhuman powers prove to be anything but a gift. Curiously, Koontz's own favourite - 'Twilight of the Dawn' - was one I disliked, mainly because of the too blatantly unsympathetic portrayal of the fanatically atheistic central character. A similar character - except this time he is a religious bigot - appears in 'Kittens', Dean Koontz's first published story. (Koontz provides some interesting slants on some of these stories in his introduction, curiously placed at the end of the book.)

Overall, *Strange Highways* is a most entertaining read; Koontz is an author who writes with verve and clarity. Excellent value for money.

Theodore Krulik

The Complete Amber

Sourcebook

Avonova, 1996, 494pp, \$15.00

Reviewed by Julie Atkin

This American trade paperback is a very comprehensive encyclopaedia and guide to Roger Zelazny's Amber series, covering both the original five books and the second-generation series. It is written in the style of a scribe of Amber, and although I found this a bit twee, I think the style will be appreciated by the people to whom this book will really appeal.

Krulik has been incredibly thorough, covering almost everything ever mentioned in the Amber series. He includes lots of quotations, all of which are attributed to the source novel, so that one gets a guide to where these things occur within the saga.

There is more information included than I would ever want to know (for the record, I loved the original books, but stopped after two of the second series). For example, twenty pages are devoted to Amber itself, with headings of 'The Nature of Amber', 'Geography', 'Legal System', 'Religion', 'Education', and so on.

While I found this interesting, I can't imagine that a casual Amber reader like myself would really get a lot of use from this book. However, Zelazny fans will be enchanted by it, and I imagine that it would be indispensable to anyone involved in Erick Wujcik's Amber role-playing game.

Stephen Laws

Daemonic

NEL, 1996, 488pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

Jack Draegerman, millionaire and ex-horror film director, has built a house, but it's no ordinary house: it's 'The Rock', a towering, black, gothic edifice built in the midst of a crumbling, nameless (UK) city.

Here he invites a group of hand-picked volunteers (his carrot: fifty thousand pounds); the sassy female journalist torn between real human tragedy and the urge to scoop a good story; the fading B movie starlet scared of losing her good looks; the deadbeat coward who is only happy holding a gun; and so on. A small, select band invited for a spot of entertainment; the entertainment being their deaths at the hands of the daemons that Draegerman has released into his bizarre architectural creation.

For *Daemonic* is a latterday haunted house story, a high-tech ghost story for the nineties, and the bulk of the narrative follows Draegerman's unfortunate guests as they attempt to extract themselves from the situation. Meanwhile, outside a handful of their friends attempt to do the reverse - to break in and save them. So the plot lurches between Alistair Maclean and Stephen King and *Thunderbirds*, and consequently roars along at a fair old pace as Draegerman's true motives become apparent. It's all good clean fun, rather daft, and I liked the B-movie atmosphere, the dummy reviews, the cliched set-pieces - but it is too long and could have benefited from being half the length. Still, the moral seems to be that you can't have everything - and indeed you can't.

Tanith Lee

Reigning Cats and

Dogs

Headline, 1996, 304pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

A man is flycycling home from a rendezvous with his mistress when a huge black dog's head appears among the clouds. Another projected advertisement, he thinks; then the fiery gaze meets his, and he begins to fall...

The City of *Reigning Cats and Dogs* is never named, but it has recognisable parallels to Dickensian London; the elite quote *Hamlet*, Egyptian monuments stand on the Embankment, and a 'great domed cathedral' rises above the slums of Black Church. Most of all, though, this is the City of Dreadful Night: "And all about a city hummed and sighed, and he did not know it or its name, nor any name for the blackness of the sky and air, which were night".

Grace is a whore with the gift of healing, who imparts an incomprehensible sense of well-being to her clients. Saul Anger, abused and sold as a child, has risen to head the Brotherhood, a shadowy group of men whose desire is to cleanse the city of sin and corruption. Something sinister has come to the City; it is dog-headed, with glowing eyes, and it kills by perverting time - so that a child may become an impossibly aged crone, and an old man's corpse resembles that of an aborted foetus. Saul fears that the Brotherhood have created this monster, but he does not know how to combat it. It is Balthazar the Jew, to whom two mudlarks have brought a jade statue from the river, who tells Grace of the ritual that must be completed.

Tanith Lee's recent work has tended towards an almost impenetrable Gothic mode, full of blood and stained glass. *Reigning Cats and Dogs* is lighter and less intense that, for example, *Dark Dance*. Lee's wit, and her talent for visual

description, are at their best here; images of cats and dogs recur throughout the novel, and there are a variety of neatly-turned metaphors for corruption and for the juxtaposition of science and squalor. Grace is a typical Lee heroine – “helpless and broken, adrift on the sea of night” – and Saul’s damaged personality echoes that of other male leads in Lee’s novels; their appearances, and the pointed contrast between the two, makes them almost archetypal.

The elements of Egyptian mythology, although fundamental to the plot, are played down in favour of the evocation of a dark and terrible city, surreally Gothic without losing all human perspective. Farce, tragedy, eroticism, and a London that might have been.

Anne McCaffrey

The Girl Who Heard Dragons

Corgi, 1996, 383pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

The Girl Who Heard Dragons is the lead story in this latest collection of shorts from, as the cover blurb says, “the magic pen of Anne McCaffrey”.

Aramina is the daughter of a holdless family on Pern who continually move around in order to eke out a living. Whilst on the move again, running from the self-styled outlaw Lady Holdless Thella, Aramina’s father has an accident whilst changing a broken wheel on their wagon. In her panic, Aramina calls to a passing dragon and its rider for help – thus revealing her lifelong secret, the ability to hear the thought-speech of dragons. Holed up in a cave whilst awaiting help from the dragon and its rider, Aramina and her family are caught up to by Thella and her pack of ruffians. Of course, as is the case in most of McCaffrey’s Pern novels, the cavalry arrives in the shape of several dragons and riders in the nick of time, and Aramina is offered a position at a hold, instead of being imprisoned or having her head chopped off or somesuch as her father has always feared will happen once her secret is out.

Apart from a ten-page introduction to the author called ‘So, You’re Anne McCaffrey’, which is interesting enough if you’re into little snippets and personal experiences, the only other story in this particular collection worthy of note for me is ‘Habit is an Old Horse’.

Apart from the fact it is written by a woman who knows horses inside out, this story of an old retired horse (Knock) who is missing his mistress is deeply touching. His mistress is dying, and Knock stands a lonely vigil opposite her bedroom window, thinking of the times she rode him, and longing for her to come and ride him again. Whether or not Knock knows his mistress is dying is not actually clear throughout, but I like to believe that animals are canner in most respects than we give them credit for, and that he does. Certainly it’s a poignant story about the life-long bond forged between a horse and its rider, and is a little gem of a story for me.

I can’t really say that any of the other stories in this collection made any lasting impression on me whatsoever, but I’m sure the huge army of McCaffrey fans the world over will find much to their taste.

Brent Monahan

The Blood of the Covenant

NEL, 1996, 311pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Vampire books are big just now, fuelled by Anne Rice’s (and

Tom Cruise’s) vampires. This is another one. *The Blood of the Covenant* is a follow up to *The Book of Common Dread* which introduced us to the particular breed of vampire to be found in these books. They are a strange mixture, these ones. Directly inspired by Satanic forces, but with certain physical limitations reminiscent of those of George Martin’s bunch in *Fever Dream*.

But of course the vampires are just a bit of a book. This one also has a Catholic priest who’s a hard-bitten ex-cop, a pair of lovers on the run with a valuable ancient parchment and lots of chases, blood and tension. The action swings from New England to Europe as the lovers look for someone to translate the parchment for them and the Demonic forces attempt to stop them...

This novel faces all of the problems of a second book – the re-telling of preceding events, the moving on and the leaving space to continue the story in the next book – and tackles them very well. The reader is brought up to date in a way that leaves you feeling that you’ve worked it out rather than having had it explained to you, enough ends are tied up so that the ending is not a cliff-hanger, but enough extra bits are added so that there are things that might make it worth your while to buy the next book.

What else? The bloody bits are not too gratuitous; neither evil or good are so omnipotent that you feel that they are too unbelievable and the balance of action against exposition is almost perfect.

So, if you’ve read *The Book of Common Dread* then get this. If you’ve not, but you’re into vampires then consider this series.

Michael Moorcock

A Nomad of the Time Streams

Orion, 1996, 549pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Chris Amies

A Nomad of the Time Streams brings together in one volume the ‘Oswald Bastable’ stories: *The Warlord of the Air*, *The Land Leviathan*, and *The Steel Year*. These novellas are strange Edwardian-baroque constructions, being essentially timeslip fiction as it might have been told by a pre-WW1 novelist, who assumed the Empire would last a thousand years, and that the world of 1970 would be much like that of 1907 – only more so. The collection (I shan’t call it a trilogy; that would be to demean its origins) has the subtitle ‘A Scientific Romance’, so the reader can see what is to come. In each of the three stories Oswald Bastable is witness to barbarism and eventually to a world-shaking apocalypse. And, as the Ukrainian anarchist Makhno says at the end of the sequence, the only way that this repetition of disaster can be avoided is for each one to take personal responsibility for that person’s one life.

Some of the same characters appear in different identities in each novella. This is fairly common with Moorcock, especially here in the ‘Eternal Champion’ sequence; so we have the anarchist Lobkowitz, the Indian Professor Hira, and Captain Korzeniewski who in our world may have taken up writing under the name of Joseph Conrad. Bastable, throughout the sequence, is no passive observer; trying to understand what is happening to him he is wrinkled out of his Imperial complacency and achieves a greater comprehension of the world and the political systems that make it go. He is at first an involuntary wanderer of the time streams, buffeted by disaster from one to another, but a nomad does not wander aimlessly, and during his travels he meets Una Person, a ‘chrononaut’ or time-traveller (and who for some inexplicable reason is referred to in the back cover blurb as

'the red republican cosmonaut', as though she were Valentina Tereshkova). Persson is instrumental in widening his horizons as well as recruiting him into her anarchist league.

H.G. Wells, that indefatigable writer of scientific romances, would have recognised the politics as well as the love of describing vast machines. Airships occur in each of the stories: Bastable is never clear why they occur in each time line that he visits, but the practical airship - with its ability for almost indefinite hover and its more considered pace - is a favourite Moorcock artefact. Then there is the Land Leviathan that the Black Attila, Cicero Hood, builds for his invasion of America; a vast thing like an armed ziggurat on wheels. In *The Steel Year*, the Cossack hetman Djughashvili (who in our timeline was Stalin) represents himself and his power by means of four-metre-high robot effigies of himself, the first of which kills its maker - which may be a reference to the Russian Revolution and the way that those who created it were destroyed by Stalin's purges. The vast machines background stories of human individuals on a darkling plain, where ignorant armies clash by night.

Michael Moorcock

Sailing to Utopia

Orion, 1996, 547pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Moorcock's attitude to his early science fantasy output has undergone a number of changes over the years. A little over a decade ago, he was repudiating it as unreadable genre tosh; with the arrival of the nineties, it began reappearing in uniform omnibus editions, with revised texts and specially-written introductions, as the several volumes of 'The Tale of the Eternal Champion'. One inevitably wonders: is this just marketing, or has his attitude towards his early material undergone another change?

Of course, some of the material isn't 'early' at all - two of the most substantial of the Von Bek stories, *The War Hound and the World's Pain* and *The City in the Autumn Stars*, appeared in 1981 and 1986 - but the bulk of the material that ones thinks of as quintessentially part of the Moorcockian science fantasy oeuvre dates from the very late sixties and the first half of the seventies. Originally, each series was conceived as a discrete entity, with no connection with any of the others; but it was fascinating to see how they grew together as Moorcock went along, building in the cross-references between each of his protagonists' worlds and eventually writing one novel, *The Quest for Tanelorn*, which brought several of them together and rounded off all their stories.

Perhaps it was inevitable that we would one day be presented with revised omnibus editions of these works. But while the links between sword-wielders such as Elric, Corum and Hawkmoon are more or less obvious, and the construction of a meta-narrative which unites them not especially difficult (in the main, they have garbled dreams about one another), it seems to me to be rather straining matters to pull in Oswald Bastable, Jerry Cornelius, Von Bek, the crew from *Dancers at the End of Time*, and almost everyone else that Moorcock has written about as well. This stricture applies in spades to this book, *Sailing to Utopia*, which contains four stories with absolutely no overt or covert connections at all: *The Ice Schooner*, *The Black Corridor*, *The Distant Suns*, and 'Flux'. Moorcock suggests in his introduction that they all have ecological themes, and to a certain extent this is true; but this alone is insufficient to support the proclaimed 'Eternal Champion' linkage between doomed loner Konrad Arflane, wandering the frozen future Earth of *The Ice Schooner*, and the spaceship pilot Ryan, going

slowly bonkers on his way to the planet Munich 15040 in *The Black Corridor*. And shouldn't 'Flux', featuring a character named Von Bek, really have been included in the same volume as the other Von Bek stories? Admittedly, he's a different Von Bek from that of the two novels mentioned earlier, but so was the Von Bek in 'The Pleasure Garden of Felipe Sagittarius' - which *was* included.

But perhaps this is all too negative. I don't want to suggest that these stories are not worthwhile entertainments, and are not worth your time; but I do suggest that if they are approached as 'Eternal Champion' stories first and foremost, they are likely to prove disappointing. They should be read for what they are rather than what the packaging presents them as.

Stephen Palmer

Memory Seed

Orbit, 1996, 405pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Julie Atkin

In Stephen Palmer's first novel, the city of Kray is the only urban area remaining in a world populated almost entirely by women, where the few surviving men are kept in a harem. Kray is soon to succumb to the encroaching waves of choking and poisonous vegetation - the 'green' that has taken over the rest of the world.

Most of the inhabitants have either lapsed into defeatism, or still expect the council in the Citadel to formulate a strategy to rescue them. This is the story of three women who decide to accept responsibility for their own destinies, and tells their struggle for survival - both on a day-to-day basis, and for a possible future.

The novel starts slowly, the multitude of characters' names is initially confusing, and the story occasionally becomes bogged down. However, the main characters come across strongly, and there is an interesting mix of the mystical and the scientific, with serpents, seeresses and goddesses, supercomputers and self-repairing robots, all in casual daily use.

Memory Seed is a promising debut.

Anne Rice

Memnoch the Devil

Arrow, 1996, 401pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

SF fans read stories which explore a theoretical position, and this can as well be a theological one as any other. James Blish explored Satanism and the death of God in *Black Easter*. But Blish was playing; Anne Rice has the Vampire Lestat involved in a total reassessment of Satan's rebellion and the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and the Atonement (*Paradise Lost and Regained*), and she is passionately (some would say, hysterically) involved, not playing at all.

Newcomers to Lestat need to know that, although a vampire, he has increasingly shown more than just a cultivated sensibility; he has a real lurch for saintly and dedicated ladies, for whom he develops a chaste but agonised love. In this novel, his victim is a wealthy crook who finances antiquarian passions through murder and drug-dealing; and of course the victim has a saintly daughter, Dora, an up-and-coming TV evangelist. Lestat promises his victim's ghost that he will look after Dora, and we know he'll be unable to do anything else.

But Lestat is himself being shadowed: by Memnoch himself, a.k.a. Satan, the very devil. Memnoch, trying to recruit Lestat as his lieutenant, takes him on a tour of

Heaven and Hell, and several periods of history, including the temptation of Christ in the Wilderness, and the Crucifixion (*en route* to which Lestat gets to taste Jesus' blood). His case is devastating (but remember, the devil is the prince of lies). God, in Memnoch's account, is blind to the true implications of human suffering, and His so-called sacrifice on the cross worthless because He would know, as God, that He was bound to triumph. The history of the Christian Church is a catalogue of cruelty and misery. Memnoch's rebellion is presented to Lestat as almost a triumph of humanistic principle. Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?

Lestat's response throughout is confused and extreme; he goes from panic to panic. Rejecting both God and the Devil, he returns to his vampire friends, clutching a true holy relic which he presents to Dora - who uses it to attract new Christian converts in their thousands. Was it all a delusion? Was he hoodwinked, and by whom? He will never know.

There are three problems with this book. The writing is well below Anne Rice's usual standard; the emotional tone of the final two-thirds is wearily intense and melodramatic; and the characterisation of God/Jesus is too flat to be believable (I write as an interested agnostic). As a critical gloss on a particular theological doctrine it is stimulating; as a novel it can't quite carry its own emotional weight.

Joel Rosenberg

The Fire Duke: Keepers Of The Hidden Ways Book 1

Avonova, 1996, 488pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

US writers of fantasy who write in the Celtic pastiche genre are presumably pining for roots in their migrating ancestors' homelands. This is the first book of a new Nordic fantasy trilogy from Joel Rosenberg, and prompts the question: what's a nice Jewish boy doing writing about Norse mythology? The answer lies in Rosenberg's past: he grew up in a small town in North Dakota where the inhabitant were mainly descendants of Scandinavian migrants, and where his father was a doctor. In *The Fire Duke*, student Torrie Thorsen returns to his Norsk hometown in North Dakota for a vacation, accompanied by two college friends, girlfriend Maggie and best friend Ian Silverstein (Rosenberg's alter ego?)

Fortunately for folk about to be ejected from our world into a mediaeval one (through a 'Hidden Way'), Torrie, Maggie and Ian are all members of their college fencing team. These skills stand them in good stead when Torrie's mother and Maggie are kidnapped by werewolves and taken through a Hidden Way to a world ruled by Dukes who are the elements incarnate (the Fire Duke is "His Warmth", while the Stone Duke is "His Solidity", etc.), and where the old Norse Gods: Freya, Odin, Loki, etc., may still walk. This is when we learn that Torrie's father, Thorian Thorsen Senior, is a long-time refugee from this world, where he had been the Fire Duke's champion. Being in a bit of a spot, his replacement champion unfortunately having been offed, the Duke has found out where Torrie Senior has been hiding all these years, and sent the werewolves to take hostages to persuade him to take up championing again. Consequently father and son, Ian, and the family's mysterious retainer Uncle Hosea, set off through a Hidden Way to rescue the ladies. Now read on...

I didn't really get much from this book, since "modern Americans land up in mediaeval otherworld and make out real good" has been horribly done to death long since.

Rosenberg tries hard at characterisation, but his characters are still images from a soap opera rather than a more meaningful drama. For example, while Jewish boys are stereotypically mother-ridden, not having a mother, Ian Silverstein suffers doubly by having an overbearing, verbally abusive and disparaging father. (That he becomes the main character in the next book is well-signalled - its title is *The Silver Stone*.)

One redeeming feature is that when dealing with matters North Dakotan, Rosenberg is on firm ground, writing more convincingly. If he'd tried a mainstream rite-of-passage novel set in this Scandinavian outpost of the Mid-West, he might have done better.

Kristine Kathryn

The Fey: Sacrifice

Rusch

Orion, 1996, 550pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Cherith Baldrey

In this novel Rusch introduces us to the Fey, a scrocerous warrior people who are intent on expanding their power until the whole world is under their domination. The next stage of their campaign is focussed on Blue Isle, both for its own sake and as a strategic jumping-off point for further conquest.

Much of the book is written from the point of view of the Fey, particularly Jewel, the grand-daughter of their king. It's a new approach to fantasy to try to get inside the minds of a fundamentally evil race, but I'm not sure it works. If I'm being asked to sympathise with people who draw their power from flesh stripped from a living victim, then there's something wrong somewhere.

The people of Blue Isle are more successful and, for me, more interesting. I was impressed by Alexander, the scholar-king reluctantly forced to fight a war, and by the old high priest who does not want the power of his faith to be used for violence, even to save himself and his people.

This is a long novel and I found it slow-moving, as it maps each stage of the campaign in detail. Some of the descriptions of violence are stomach-turning. I was never involved, and although there is a lot about this book that I respect, ultimately it wasn't for me.

Alan Dean Foster

Star Wars: Splinter of the Mind's Eye

Warner Books, 1996, 297pp, £4.99

Barbara Hambly

Star Wars: Children of the Jedi

Bantam Books, 1996, 395pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Andy Mills

Some series information to kick off with. *Splinter of the Mind's Eye* was written to follow-up the film *Star Wars*. *Children of the Jedi* is set in a period much later in the saga, when Han Solo and Princess Leia are married and have children.

One might expect these books to be a cut above the usual spin-off, given the standing of their authors. Unfortunately this is not the case; both novels are disposable. In the first, Luke and Leia crash on a planet where the Empire has a secret mining operation, and end up chasing after a powerful jewel. The book reads like a juvenile, with some coy references to sexual attraction and one or two rather gory incidents. There's lots of action, much crude plotting and some sloppy writing (such as "Luke experienced an agreeably

crawly sensation, as if someone were lurking just behind him" (p.2). There is one incident which raised a spark of interest in this reader. Following a bloody encounter with stormtroopers, Luke and Leia's allies begin butchering the wounded. Luke is horrified, Leia unconcerned; unfortunately Foster never develops the situation.

Splinter of the Mind's Eye holds the dubious honour of being the first Star Wars spin-off novel and comes from the doyen of sf novelists. Eighteen years on we have *Children of the Jedi* from the pen of a respected fantasy author. In this story a mothballed Imperial ship is resurrected; Luke is trying to battle through on the ship itself; Leia and Han are planet-bound, battling the evil forces which set it in motion. This book is ostensibly more sophisticated than its younger cousin, but it becomes evident that such sophistication is a veneer. The Force acts as *deus ex machina*, whilst Hambly writes as if she is being paid by the word. Unfortunately, many of these are 'alien' nouns, and Hambly (or her sharecroppers) simply has not an iota of the talent for invented vocabulary of a Jack Vance. Also obvious is her non-sf background. A wrecked spaceship engine is repairable with "about thirty meters of number eight cabling, and a dozen data couplers", for instance.

As you may realise, I am recommending neither of these novels; the Foster book does have the advantage in being much shorter, but either would suffice for making the ubiquitous train journey seem longer and more tedious.

George Turner

Beloved Son

Avon Books, 1996, 402pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by Andy Mills

The spaceship Columbus has returned to Earth, over forty years after its departure for Barnard's Star. The astronauts themselves have only aged eight years as they spent much of the voyage in deep sleep. How will the rocket's crew, headed by the Australian Raft, fare back on a changed Earth?

This premise would be enough for most novelists, bearing in mind the axiom that a science fiction story should revolve around one fantastic idea. But in his first sf novel – originally published in 1978 – Turner throws in a bagful more. Earth has been changed by a series of disasters and world order is overseen by Security, the young survivors being guided by Ombudsmen (older advisors). Raft is actually part of a bizarre cloning experiment, and the mad scientists who produced him are still alive and flourishing in a secret society in Australia. Surveillance techniques, and the use of drugs, are advanced.

Beloved Son is nothing if not ambitious, and is certainly chock-full of speculation and debate. But it does show its age (Turner's treatment of his female characters and homosexuality grates two decades on) and it attempts far too much, trying as it does to marry action-adventure with philosophical debate about the nature of society. One cannot but feel that had Turner dumped one or two strands of this book (such as, I have to say, the clones) and instead investigated his future world rather more a slimmer, readable novel would have emerged.

Kurt Vonnegut

The Sirens of Titan

Indigo, 1996, 224pp, £5.99

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

This was Vonnegut's second novel – and you can read it in two or three ways. When it first came out in 1959, you would

have simply thought it very weird. A lot later when Vonnegut had been discovered to be one of the fathers of metafiction, you would have read it as self-conscious fiction. But I reckon you can read it as very black satire – everything that the recent TV version of *Gulliver's Travels* managed to miss out.

'Sirens' is famous for the revelation of its plot – everything in human history has been for just one purpose, so a messenger from the planet Tralfamadore can carry his message across the galaxy. Earth is just an unfortunate pit-stop when the ship breaks down on the way, and everything on Earth is no more than the cosmic AA man's mobile phone – 'the meaning of Stonehenge in Tralfamadorian, when viewed from above, is "replacement part being rushed with all possible speed"'.

However, not everyone knows that they are just a binary digit in this galactic switchgear, and the one man who is close to knowing – Winston Niles Rumfoord – has passed into the chrono-synclastic infundibulum and only materialises in Newport, Rhode Island, once every fifty-nine days. However, presumably using a better-than-average personal organiser, Rumfoord can plan and perform the long torture of Malachi Constant (once the richest man on Earth) and eventually lead him off to become part of an army on Mars; knowing that the Martian army will be wiped out when it attempts to conquer the Earth.

Constant will eventually escape to Titan, be rescued and be returned to Earth by Salo the Tralfamadorian, and then experience another surprise. I leave that one to you.

Oddly enough, ignore the spaceflight and the plot is almost identical to Orwell's *1984*, with Rumfoord standing in for Big Brother. In both books the main characters have no chance – Winston Smith and Malachi Constant have everything stacked against them. Things are the same in *Airstrip One* and the Solar System. Or, as Vonnegut wrote later, 'so it goes'.

Angus Wells

Exile's Children

Orion, 1996, 582pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

There is discord among the People of the Plains. Rannach, son of Racharran, chief of the Commacht clan, wishes to wed Arrhyna, who is also sought by Vachyr of the Tachyn. War between the Commacht and the Tachyn seems inevitable, and yet Morryhn, Dreamer of the Commacht, believes that the danger he has felt in his dreams is greater than the threat of clan warfare. Then the Grannach, the Stone Folk who live inside the hills and guard the way through the mountains, bring word of the approach of seemingly invincible demons who slaughter all who resist them. Morryhn and Racharran try to convince the clans that they must unite against this enemy, but the other chieftains and Dreamers are immune to their arguments.

Meanwhile, in a faraway city, Davyd, a thirteen-year-old thief, is sentenced to a lifetime of servitude in Salvation, a penal colony on the other side of his world. What concerns Davyd most is that the Inquisitors will discover that he is a Dreamer and burn him as a witch, for the government of his land condemns anyone wielding magic other than its own agents. However, when Davyd is befriended by two other convicts, both innocent of the crimes of which they are accused, it seems that the powers which he has kept hidden for so long will give them all the chance of escape.

Exile's Children is a captivating fantasy adventure, with its magical elements of prophetic dreams and hexes, and its two storylines which gradually converge. There are echoes from our own history in the world of the novel, but this does not

detract from the book's overall originality. The words "an epic adventure is only just beginning" on the cover lead me to hope that the book is the first in a series, and will soon be followed by others.

Phillip G. Williamson

Citadel

Legend, 1996, 289pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Colin Bird

This is another tale from Williamson's amiable 'Chronicles Of Firstworld' series, featuring his sorcerer/detective, Ronbas Dinbig. Dinbig hears of strange events in the distant land of Anxau. He hears of the activities of a doppelganger taking his place, causing mayhem and being executed for his troubles by the cruel ruler of Anxau. Dinbig decides to investigate at the same time that his magical guild, the Zan-Chassin, order him to Anxau to report on the possible use of the black arts by the barbarous ruler, Feikerman.

The story takes a turn into intrigue as several other mysteries confound Dinbig's attempts to solve the case. He visits the city of Dehut and finds it in the grip of a power struggle between the insane Feikerman, the armies of Malibeth and the faceless Golden Lamb. Dinbig soon discovers all parties have ulterior motives and he has to juggle a bewildering array of plot elements.

It is this complexity of character interaction that makes Williamson's mysteries so enjoyable. He tells the story with conviction and avoids the pitfalls of more ponderous fantasy novels by keeping the pace brisk. However, there is an excess of contrivance at times and Dinbig takes too passive a role, allowing several of the plot strands to unwind around him rather than actively solving the mystery. But this is a highly readable fantasy novel with a likable anti-hero and I recommend it to the more discerning genre fan.

Don Bassingthwaite *The World of Darkness: Such Pain*

(Boxtree, 1996, 325pp, £5.99)

Sam Chupp *The World of Darkness: Sins of the Fathers*

(Boxtree, 1996, 257pp, £5.99)

Richard Lee Byers *The World of Darkness: Netherworld*

(Boxtree, 1996, 330pp, £5.99)

Stewart von Allmen *The World of Darkness: Conspicuous Consumption*

(Boxtree, 1996, 260pp, £5.99)

Reviewed by John D. Owen

In the beginning, there was the novel, which in turn begat the series with a common character or theme, which became ever more specialised into genre fiction, and that was rife with series. Then along came the movie novelisation, and then the TV show tie-ins. In the search to catch a audience easily distracted from reading mere books for their own sake,

publishers begat the book of the computer or role-playing game. Now, as the latest stage in the trivialisation of the novel, comes the books of the Fantasy Trading Cards, in the shape of White Wolf Game Studio's *The World of Darkness*.

Canadian writer Crawford Killian described this trivialising trend on the Internet recently as 'TM-fiction', the literary equivalent of fast food, and this is an apt description. Just as fast food outlets vary between the nutritious and the nauseous, so does McFiction. The four books reviewed here fall about the midpoint in the scale: not entertaining or original enough to warrant praise, but not so terrible as to induce the literary equivalent of bulimia.

The premise around which all four novels are based is that there are magic creatures like mages, wraiths, vampires and werewolves. No great sparks of originality there. Part of the 'rules' of the universe is the existence of a parallel world, the Umbra, into which characters can magically move if they require, though this is only used two or three times in the four books, seemingly at the authors' whim. Each book has a separate plotline, setting and cast of characters. The creatures even seem to obey different rules: the werewolves in Byers' *Netherworld* are urban punks at heart, while those in Von Allmen's *Conspicuous Consumption* are close relations to Michael J. Fox's *Teen Wolf*; high school kids in small town America. White Wolf obviously let their authors run on a very loose rein.

Of the four books, the best is probably Richard Lee Byers' *Netherworld*, with its central protagonist, an Oriental vampire with savage humour and a strange sense of justice. Here, the author manages to conjure up some genuinely hellish plotlines, even though the overall approach is still very soft-pedal. This is common to all the books, plainly to catch the young teenage market.

The worst of the books is Sam Chupp's *Sins of the Fathers*, a story of a wraith in an afterlife shadowing our world hunting the father he never knew. The plot here proceeds as though Chupp were throwing gaming dice at every decision point, veering wildly from incident to incident, only vaguely having an credible story arc. The characters are paper thin, the writing poor, and the result fairly indigestible.

In between these two extremes falls Don Bassingthwaite's *Such Pain*, in which a young playboy returns to San Francisco to take over his late father's business empire. The heir is also a mage, and he becomes the target for both an treacherous older mage and a group of 'anti-mages' devoted to keeping magic out of circulation, pushing science instead. This one had a curiously old-fashioned feel to it, rather like an updated Dennis Wheatley, without the writing skill.

Lastly comes the most curious piece, Stewart Von Allmen's *Conspicuous Consumption*, which is abysmal on some levels, but intriguing on others. There is some originality in his descriptions of the interactions between the 'family' of werewolves, and in their belief structures. The central characters are well-drawn too. Sadly it is let down by the *Teen Wolf* parallels, and the book peters out in a rather limp finale, with no real climax.

One final point: if the covers are representative of the Fantasy Trading Cards, then White Wolf are onto a loser - the artwork is abysmal, cheap and nasty in the worst possible sense.

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