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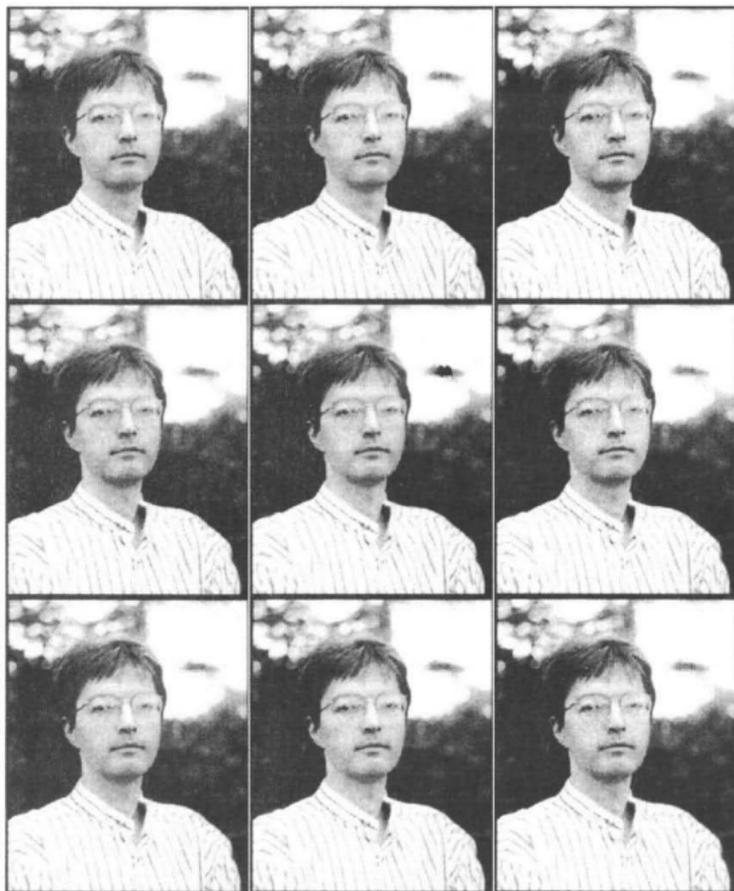
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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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Stephen Palmer Interviewed



Holdstock Bibliography

The Films of Cronenberg

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VECTOR

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EDITORIAL

Machine Messiah

10 people die in car accidents on British roads every day. Another 140 are seriously injured. Half are children. There should be public outrage, calls to ban the machine. Strangely, there is a deafening silence. We all know it could be us, or our children, dying a bloody and agonising death in the national lottery of carnage. But most of the time we apply a selective cognitive dissonance. We cannot maintain our civilisation without the car, and if sometime we cannot live with it, that is a price we have decided it is worth paying.

David Cronenberg's films have always pushed the limits of cinema, but never before has one of his films generated such outrage as *Crash*. The closest was the controversy over *Videodrome* (1982), and herein lies a clue. It has been over the two great twentieth century technological additions, the tv set and the automobile, that Cronenberg has provoked the greatest wrath of the sanctimonious and the censorious. These icons have penetrated every aspect about consciousness, our identity; that on both occasions Cronenberg has confused the machine with outré sexuality has only compounded the fracture.

In its fusion of sex, death, disability and car accidents, *Crash* touch nerves. The moving image has from the birth of cinema eroticised the moving vehicle. All night, tv commercial features smart, successful men, beautiful, seductive women, and sleek, fetishised cars. In this videodrome church of the new flesh, it is no mere subtlety which preaches - buy this car, and a woman as beautiful as this will want to fuck you. The videodrome superhighway of satellite tv beams or cables in images (viewable by any child) far more pornographic; far more exploitative than any of Cronenberg's work, so extreme in fact that a few years ago they might have earned anyone peddling them a place at a House of Correction. And the man in charge of this SkyNet also has a hands-on interest in the rabid tabloids which have called for the heads of 'pornographers-in-chief' James Ferman and David Cronenberg.

The most controversial scenes in *Crash* are so because they take the implications of adverts to their logical conclusions. They place a beautiful woman, played by Rosanna Arquette, in sexual situations. The controversy comes from her being disabled. Not only is she sex and disability still taboo, but this beautiful woman became disabled in a car accident. To the able-bodied, car driving, commercial-consuming audience, the image of Ms. Arquette in callipers, arousing James Spader, to desire is profoundly uncomfortable as to be branded sick and offensive. It must be cut, and the reason? - to protect the disabled.

Yet the disabled are the most realistic about such matters. The flesh falls as all in the end, a lesson which the disabled learn first. Cronenberg's films have repeatedly presented scenarios in which the flesh fails, changes, transforms and betrays, exposing the illusion which is the mind/body duality naked and raw, leaving a mind trapped, alienated in decaying skin, bone and all the other bloody bits we'd rather not think about too often. For a culture without spiritual belief, which teaches that the mind is all, it is such a terrifying message that the most usual response is denial. Cronenberg may be a prophet of the coming technological apocalypse, and we all know what traditionally happens to prophets.

Modern sf, the cinema and the automobile all appeared at the same time, almost exactly a century ago. Perhaps it was inevitable that they would come together in such a spectacular millennial collision, their destinies having been inextricably intertwined from the beginning. Movies and sf have glorified the car, which has transformed the world, even changing the way we see movies; the cinema is no longer a high street Picture Palace, but a collection of utilitarian boxes in a car park on the edge of a dual-carriageway.

There is no longer any such thing as society. The world atomised, physically divided, linked by the mediascape. We lived in isolated units, family and friend scattered across the infrastructure, separated from work, school, shops, entertainment, not knowing our neighbours, fearful of strangers we pass in the street. The body snatchers may as well have taken over: the centre cannot hold.

Crash strikes at core beliefs.

While the resources of SpaceShip Earth are plundered to feed the ravenous automobile, and while the greenhouse wars and pollution levels spiral, the ozone layer collapses, teenagers joyride, twentysomethings ram-raid and serial killer cruise the highways, more law-abiding citizens pay realistic homage to their metal boxes each Sunday morning, shabby leather in hand, than now go to church or claim to believe in the Christian God. In recognition of this fact, last year Coventry Cathedral held a special service in celebration of the automobile. One was even driven down the aisle to the altar rail.

God is Dead. Unless He goes to church in a car. And therein lies Cronenberg's sin. There is no violence in *Crash*. The sex is no more explicit than in many art movies routinely shown on tv. Yet still many people who haven't even seen it want to ban it. The strength of their fervour is religious. *Crash* offends against an auto-worshipping belief system. It shows the cracks waiting to open up and swallow us. Better by far to blame all the ills of our culture on a Canadian filmmaker.

The irony - as so often - is that if no one had complained, *Crash* would likely have vanished as quickly as *Naked Lunch* and *M. Butterfly*, Cronenberg's two previous art movies did, leaving the nation's great unwashed almost entirely uncorrupted. Now they will flock to see it in drives, doubtless leaving a sexually frenzied litter of autobobris and shattered torsos in their wake on their way back home from the local multiplex.

Here endeth the sermon...

Now, let us pray:

Ye believe in the power of the almighty automobile. We trust it will deliver us safely, keep us from all harm, protect us from evil, take us to buy our daily bread. Please, almighty machine, ban this blasphemous film...

February 1997

by Gary Dalkin

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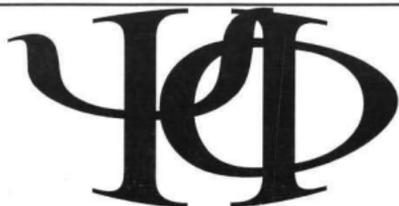
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LETTERS TO VECTOR

Firstly, a rightly irate email from Focus editor and Orbiter supreme Carol Ann Green:

I don't know who's responsible for this: but some kind soul has just pointed out that the address shown for me in Vector 190 is my old address of 5 Raglan Avenue, Raglan Street. Seeing as how it changed in May to Flat 3, 141 Princes Avenue, Hull, and everyone got change of address notices etc. plus it's been in Focus and Matrix, do you think I could have it right in Vector? I am keeping my mail forwarding going for a long while, as my old address is on so much literature, but it would help to have the correct address in the current issues of the magazine.

Very many apologies for this, and for the fact that this was not corrected for 191. You did indeed tell us of the move to Flat 3, 141 Princes Avenue, Hull.

Vector 190 also raised the hackles of Mal Washington:

Prejudice is revolting from whichever side of the minority-majority divide it originates. In his article 'Queer New World' [Vector 190], reviewing a book of unfiled scripts by the late Derek Jarman, Bob Ford reveals himself to be prejudiced, and, with Jarman himself, ignorant.

Ford describes Jarman's script *Sod 'Em* as 'part a denunciation of all things heterosoc, part a queer defiance and reappropriation of Sodom...'. Ford does not find this grounds for condemnation, indeed he praises Jarman's 'visions', recording that we 'are the richer for them.' Well pardon me, but I am utterly sick of the prevailing double-standard of political correctness, whereby privileged minorities feel it is their right to demonstrate the sort of bigotry which would result in a thorough condemnation were it to be directed in the opposite direction. If any heterosexual author wrote a denunciation of all thing homosexual he would be, metaphorically lynched. I do not think Vector should pander to Ford's acceptable divisiveness.

As for his ignorance... If either Jarman or Ford had taken the trouble to read the Bible, they would know that the crime of the men of Sodom was not homosexuality as such, but group homosexual rape. Which is not the sort of thing anyone would wish to reappropriate. Jarman was not anyway an SF film-maker, but merely a purveyor of pretentious, badly-made, muddled, incoherent 'art flicks'. Had he been heterosexual he would have been laughed off the screen.

As for Bob Ford, his narrowness of mind is contrary to the spirit of SF. This is a man who can by his own admission only empathise with characters of his own sexuality: 'Independence Day lost all interest for me after Harvey Fierstein was killed off.' I think the BSFA should lose all interest in Bob Ford

Mal Washington, Glasgow

Bob Ford replies:

I will admit to a certain laxness of tone which might have led to Washington's outburst. The use of the 'we' is perhaps an overstatement of the audience I'm referring to. Or maybe I slipped into the royal we. But white, male, heterosexuals may wish to consider how most minorities go through the three stages of looking for acceptance, then equality, then give in on this and seek for a separate existence. We gays are the richer because we have been shown that we do not have to be passive recipients of

abuse, that we can fight back – and that we can live happily ever after and not have to commit suicide.

Yes *ID4* lost my interest after the disappearance of Fierstein's character, but that was not a lot of interest in the first place. It was simply the interest generated by seeing a favourite actor in an otherwise imbecilic film. But even this was not a particularly good performance – the major frisson being caused by the fact that he was involved with a character called 'David', the name of his adopted son in *Torch Song Trilogy*.

Would a heterosexual writer who wrote in Jarman's terms but with the 'normal' – or rather common – sexuality be 'metaphorically lynched'? Personally I'm more worried about actual lynchings or muggings of those of my acquaintance who have shown affection to their partners in the wrong place, or looked at someone in the wrong way, or for no reason at all. Or who have faced hypnosis or electric shock treatments or prison – or, worst of all, the patronising sympathy – for their sexuality. When the age of consent is equal, when our partnerships are recognised and not condemned as 'pretend family units' and when we can show the same public affection to each other as heterosexuals, then I will consider the idea of privilege.

Whatever the correct derivation of 'Sodom', it is certainly used as a term of abuse against gays. Like 'queer', we can take control of the meaning by applying it to ourselves. Reappropriation after the appropriation by heterosoc. Of course rape is wrong. Any non-consensual sexual act is wrong. But before I get into a long discussion of Biblical terminology, I will allow the BSFA to forget me.

The editors reply: Every time someone brings up sexual morality as suggested by the Old Testament, we feel the urge to mention the prohibitions about eating shellfish. Bob Ford has since directed me to John Boswell's Christianity, social tolerance and homosexuality : gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century for discussion of the relevant Biblical passages allegedly about homosexuality.

If anyone wishes to write an article demolishing Jarman's reputation, then we would be happy to receive it. Vector is partly a platform for strong – and hopefully reasoned – opinion. It would thus be a shame if we are to lose Bob Ford from our pages. He will certainly appear once more, with a piece for the BSFA Award-winners sequence which has been in our files for about a year.

A sharp-eyed correction now:

I'm sure Tanya Brown is generally doing a fine job with editing Paperback Inferno [surely Pulp Fiction? — AMB], and deserves all our praise for doing the unglamorous bit hidden away at the back of Vector, but perhaps she should get someone who knows about cinema to scan any film-related reviews.

In his review of *The Crow: City of Angel* novelisation, Liam Proven writes 'Brandon (Lee) arguably had never received the success he had earned, although *Hard Boiled* received some acclaim.' Certainly it did, but not for anything to do with the late Mr Lee, because he wasn't in it. In fact *Hard Boiled* was John Woo's swansong to the Hong Kong action cinema before he went Hollywood and went soft. It starred, as ever, the rather thin Mr Fat.

Prior to *The Crow*, Brandon Lee appeared in a TV show entitled *Kung Fu: The Next Generation*. Then, it says, on page 56 of the December 1992 issue of *Empire*, 'an obscure Cantonese martial arts flick', followed by *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (1991) and *Rapid Fire* (1992). Then, tragically, he died.

Finally, a mystery. What happened to page 33-36 of Vector 191?

Keep up the good work!

Allex O'Connor, Truro

Thanks for this correction. We are reminded of The New Yorker where teams of fact checkers are employed to confirm every single fact. So for the record, [it appears that you should] add *Laser Mission* aka *Soldier of Fortune* (1990), *Legacy of Rage* (1986) and further tv work *Ohara* (1987) and *Kung Fu: The Movie* (1986) to Brandon Lee's chronology.

Please send all letters to either of our Features Editors

The BSFA Award Winners

Robert Holdstock – *Mythago Wood* (1984 – awarded 1985) by Andrew M. Butler

The wood holds a rather special place in the British imagination: Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest, Jack-in-the-Green, Mirkwood, the Forest of Arden, the woods outside Athens on a Midsummer's Night and even the Hundred Acre Wood. Many times they are places of danger in fairy tales: where Red Riding Hood's Grandmother lives, where Hansel and Gretel are abandoned and where Goldilocks goes for early morning strolls. And it was a wood which cemented Robert Holdstock's critical and popular reputation.

Originally *Mythago Wood* was a short story which deals with its protagonist Steven Huxley returning from the Second World to ascertain what is going on with his father and his brother Christian. The father has become fascinated with ancient beings which seemed to be appearing mysteriously in a wood next to his house. He calls these entities mythagos – myth imagos – and believes that they are generated from the collective unconsciousness of humanity. Thus a folk hero such as Robin Hood or King Arthur takes on flesh in the confines and around the edges of the wood. The father falls in love with Guiwenneth, a female mythago, and attempts to create further entities by stimulating his brain with electricity. The father dies shortly before his younger son arrives home. The two sons in turn fall in love with Guiwinneth, and dispute whom she belongs to.

The novel incorporates the majority of the story and continues where it left off. After Christian has disappeared into the woodland, the younger son, Steve, begins to investigate the phenomena of the wood, but finds that he is unable to penetrate further than its edges. There is some space and time distortion effect occurring; when Christian emerges from the woods he has been experience a longer period of time than those outside.

Steve enlists the help of another veteran, Keeton, to fly over the wood and take aerial photographs of the interior. Keeton, by coincidence, has had a strange encounter himself with a patch of ancient woodland. Having crashed his plane during the war, he has vague memories of faces within it before he was captured by the Germans. Keeton thus has his own demons to exorcise, and is willing to join Steve on a journey into the interior of Ryehope Wood.

As a novel, *Mythago Wood* is a generic hybrid. The space/time dilation effect of the wood, the mysterious appearance of figures from the past and the odd impact of the wood on Keeton's aeroplane point toward fantasy. The hideous appearance and nature of the Urscumug – a mythago with the face of Steve and Christian's father – suggest horror. Finally the

discussion of left/right brain splits and the use of electrodes to attempt to create mythagos classifies the novel as science fiction.

But there is another example of hybridity at work: between Freudian and Jungian psychology. The mythagos are Jungian archetypes – warrior women, outlaw heroes and wise men. The journey to the heart of the forest is another; such journeys whether Marlow's up the river Congo in *Heart of Darkness* or Frodo's to the Cracks of Doom are explorations of the self. In pursuing, or being pursued by, his brother, Steve is confronting a darker version of himself, is confronting his shadow.

However, there is also a Freudian element to the plot, in Steve's battles with father figures. In the classic Oedipal drama, the male child is attracted to the mother but does not act upon his desires because of the potentially castrating presence of the father. When one of the parents is absent, or the threat of castration is removed, the child risks being psychologically damaged.

The mother in *Mythago Wood* is curiously sidelined. It seems likely that Edward Huxley neglects his wife in his studies; indeed in dairy extract we learn: "Jennifer [is] already concerned and distraught by my absences" (p. 43). As he becomes more obsessed by Guiwinneth, so Jennifer Huxley is more neglected. This leads to a decline in her health: "J arrived in the study and was very distraught. The boys have begun to be upset by J's decline. She is very ill. When the girl laughed at her, J almost hysterical, but left the study rather than confront the woman she thinks I am betraying her for... when S and C around, she remains coldly silent, functioning as a mother but no longer as a wife" (pp. 115-6). As their father's attentions are transferred from Jennifer to Guiwinneth (Guiwinneth, as a version of Gwyneth, derives from the same roots as Jennifer), so in turn are Christian and Steve's Oedipal urges. When battling for Guiwinneth, it is Urscumug, a mythago created by their father, that they have to confront. Indeed, in the encounter at the end of the first part of the novel, Steve noted that "The Urscumug opened its mouth to roar, and my father seemed to leer at me" (p. 66).

Mythago Wood was a breakthrough novel for Holdstock in terms of acclaim and audience. It is a richly imagined novel, with convincing characters who demand our sympathy. The wood itself has continued to feature in Holdstock's work; indeed the first sequel, *Lavondyss*, went on to win the BSFA award as well.

Robert Holdstock: A Selected Annotated Bibliography

Commentary by Gary Dalkin, additional bibliographic research by Andrew M. Butler

1. Novels

The first three novels, excluding *Necromancer*, are sf, and very much part of British sf of their era. They will be enjoyed by anyone with a liking for the 1970s novels of Richard Cowper, Christopher Priest and Christopher Evans. The best is *Where Time Winds Blow*, a haunting and atmospheric story which, like the later Mythago books features displacements in time as a catalysing force. *Necromancer* is an exception, Holdstock's only non-pseudonymous horror novel, although he has written short stories in a similar vein.

Mythago Wood was the first novel of what has proved to be Holdstock's best and most popular work, the sequence of stories centred around the enigmatic Ryhogo Wood. The sequence actually first started with the publication of the short story "Mythago Wood" (*The Magazine of Fantasy of Science Fiction*, September 1981). Holdstock then expanded this into the novel of the same name. Two further volumes, *Lavondyss* and *The Hollowing* achieve the miraculous feat of improving upon an already exceptional predecessor. Only the novella-length prequel "The Bone Forest", which first appeared in *Interzone* 46 and was reprinted as the title story of Holdstock's second collection, has so far proved a disappointment. At only a fraction of the length of any of the novel it appears rather flat and is, curiously, overlong.

Holdstock's two most recent novels, *Merlin's Wood* and *Ancient Echoes*, are peripheral to the Mythago sequence, but are so similar in style and theme that they must be considered close relations.

Bulman and *Bulman 2: One of Our Pigeons is Missing* are novelisations based on the short-lived ITV crime-drama series of 1984-5. The scripts were written by Murray Smith and based on a character created by Kenneth Royce. *Bulman* starred Michael Elphick before he found greater popularity in *Boon*. Obviously these novels are unlikely to be reprinted, and have little or no relation to Holdstock the sf/fantasy writer.

However, a third novelisation, *The Emerald Forest*, adapted from Rospo Pallenberg's script has recently been adopted into the official Holdstock canon. Originally Published by Penguin in 1985, with a still from the film on the front cover, the current edition is from HarperCollins and features a Geoff Taylor painting, bringing it in line with the sequence started with *Mythago Wood*. This unusual move is, in this case, entirely fitting. Rarely have a novelist and film-maker shared such similar and enduring concerns. The love of tree which runs through Holdstock's work can be found, together with a similar sense of the mystical, in almost all of Boorman's films, from *Hell in the Pacific* (1968), through *Deliverance* (1972) and *Excalibur* (1981) to *Beyond Rangoon* (1995).

Eye Among the Blind (London: Faber & Faber, 1976).

Earthwind (London: Faber & Faber, 1977).

Necromancer (London: Futura, 1978).

Where Time Winds Blow (London: Faber & Faber, 1981).

Bulman (London: Futura, 1984).

Mythago Wood (London: Gollancz, 1984).

Bulman 2: One of Our Pigeons is Missing (London: Futura, 1984).

The Emerald Forest (Harmmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985).

Lavondyss: Journey to an Unknown Region (London: Gollancz, 1988).

The Fetch (London: Orbit, 1991).

The Hollowing (London: HarperCollins, 1993).

Merlin's Wood or the Vista of Magic (London: HarperCollins, 1994).

Ancient Echoes (London: HarperCollins, 1996).

2. Short Fiction

Robert Holdstock has written a considerable amount of short fiction, some of which is collected in *In the Valley of the Statues and Other Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982) (designated *) and *The Bone Forest* (London: Grafton, 1991) (designated †).

In the Valley of the Statues is probably the stronger of the two volumes, reprinting the original version of *Mythago Wood*, the excellent title story, "The Touch of a Vanished Hand", "Travellers", "The Graveyard Cross", "A Small Event" "Ashes" and the original version of "Earth and Stone".

In addition to the title novel, *The Bone Forest* also contains "Thorn", "The Shapechanger", "The Boy Who Jumped the Rapids", "Time of the Tree", "Magic Man", "Scarrowfell" and "The Time Beyond Age". Of these, although it is quite atypical of his later writing, "The Time Beyond Age" is almost certainly the single most powerful and memorable story Holdstock has produced. It recounts a laboratory experiment in human aging, and is more quietly chilling than any horror story.

After winning the World Fantasy Award, "The Ragthorn" was slightly revised and appeared in *Interzone* 74. *Interzone* 84 featured an extract from *Merlin's Wood*, with an ended appended, although this does not count as a separate story. When the novel was published, Holdstock included two previously published stories, in a section at the back of the book "Other Tales". These were "The Silverling" and a revised version of "Earth and Stone", which had already been collected in the out-of-print *In the Valley of the Statues*.

* "Pauper's Plot", *New Worlds* 184, Vol 52 (November 1968).

* "The Darkness", *New Writings in Horror and the Supernatural* 2, edited by David A. Sutton (London: Sphere, 1972).

* "Microcosm", *New Writings in SF* 20, edited by John Carnell (London: Dobson, 1972).

* "Ashes" [Originally "Ash, Ash"], *Stopwatch*, edited by George Hay (London: NEL, 1974).

* "The Graveyard Cross", *Supernova* 1, edited by Philip Pollock (London: Faber and Faber, 1976).

† "Magic Man", *Frighteners* 2, edited by Mary Danby (London: Fontana Books, 1976).

* "On the Inside", *New Writings in SF* 28, edited by Kenneth Bulmer (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1976).

† "The Time Beyond Age: A Journey", *Supernova* 1, edited by Philip Pollock (London: Faber and Faber, 1976).

Reprinted in *Stars of Albion*, edited by Robert P. Holdstock and Christopher Priest (London: Pan, 1979).

- * "Travellers", *Andromeda 1*, edited by Peter Weston (London: Futura, 1976).
- * "A Small Event", *Andromeda 2*, edited by Peter Weston (London: Futura, 1977).
- * "The Touch of a Vanished Hand", *Vortex Science Fiction* (January 1977).
- * "The Quiet Girl", *The 19th Pan Book of Horror Stories*, edited by Herbert van Thal (London: Pan, 1978). Reprinted in *Dark Voices*, edited by Stephen Jones and Clarence Paget (London: Pan, 1990).
- * "High Pressure", *Pulsar 2*, edited by George Hay (Harmondsworth: Middlesex: Penguin, 1979).
- * "In the Valley of the Statues", *Aries 1*, edited by John Grant (London: David and Charles, 1979).
- * "Earth and Stone", *Interfaces*, edited by Ursula K. Le Guin and Virginia Kidd (New York: Ace, 1980. Revised reprint in *Merlin's Wood* (London: HarperCollins, 1994).
- * "Mythago Wood", *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* September 1981.
- * "Ocean of Sound", *Peter Davison's Book of Alien Monsters*, edited by Peter Davison (London: Sparrow, 1982).
- † "The Boy Who Jumped the Rapids", *Beyond Lands of Never* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984).
- † "Thorn", *Birmingham SF Group*, (1984). Reprinted in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (October 1986).
- * "The Other Place", *Fantasycon X Programme Booklet*, edited by Stephen Jones and Jo Fletcher (1985).
- † "Scarrowfell", *Other Edens*, edited by Christopher Evans and Robert Holdstock (London: Unwin, 1987).
- * "A Letter from Robert Holdstock", *The Drabble Project*, edited by Rob Meades and David B. Wake (Birmingham: Becon Publications, 1988).
- † "Time of the Tree", *Gaslight and Ghosts*, edited by Stephen Jones and Jo Fletcher (World Fantasy Con/Robinson Publications 1988). Reprinted in *Zenith*, edited by David S. Garnett (London: Sphere, 1989).
- † "The Shapechanger", *GM Magazine* (1989).
- † "The Bone Forest", *Interzone 45* (March 1991).
- * "The Raghthorn" (with Garry D. Kilworth), *A Whisper of Blood*, edited by Ellen Datlow, (New York: Morrow, 1991). Reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Fifth Annual Collection*, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, (New York: St. Martin's, 1992) and *Interzone 74* (August 1993).
- * "The Silvering", *Narrow Houses*, edited by Peter Crowther (London: Little, Brown, 1992). Reprinted in *Merlin's Wood* (London: HarperCollins, 1994).
- * "Having His Leg Pulled", *Dark Voices 5*, edited by David Sutton and Stephen Jones (London: Pan, 1993).
- * "The Charisma Trees", *New Worlds 4*, edited by David S. Garnett (London: Gollancz, 1994).
- * "Merlin's Wood", (extract) *Interzone 84* (June 1994).

3 Pseudonymous Novels

Robert Holdstock has written around twenty, possibly more, novels under various pseudonyms. Known pseudonyms are Robert Black, Ken Blake, Chris Carlsen, Steve Eisler (non-fiction), Robert Falcon and Richard Kirk. These books tend to be either conventional fantasy or novelisations, such as those of *The Professionals* tv series. Of most interest is probably the six volumes of *The Nighthunter* series by Falcon, later collected in three volumes as by Holdstock. This supernatural adventure/horror sequence is tangentially related to *The Fetch*.

As Robert Black:

Legend of the Werewolf (London: Sphere, 1976).
The Satanists (London: Sphere, 1978).
Death Angel (New York [?]: Pageant, 1988).

As Ken Blake, *The Professionals*

Cry Wolf (London: Sphere, 1981).
Operation Susie (London: Sphere, 1982).
The Untouchables (London: Sphere, 1982).
You'll Be All Right (London: Sphere, 1982).

(Based on episodes in the fifth series, broadcast 9 January 1983, 14 November 1982, 16 January 1983, 21 November 1982 respectively. However all bar *Cry Wolf* were actually filmed as part of series four)

As Chris Carlsen, Berserker series:

The Bull Chief (London: Sphere, 1977)
Shadow of the Wolf (London: Sphere, 1977)
The Horned Warrior (London: Sphere, 1979)

As Robert Falcon, Night Hunter series

The Stalking (London: Arrow, 1983).
The Talisman (London: Arrow, 1983).
The Ghost Dance (London: Arrow, 1983).
The Shrine (London: Arrow, 1984).
The Hexing (London: Arrow, 1984).
The Labyrinth (London: Arrow, 1987).

Volumes one and two, three and four, and five and six have also been issued in pairs under the titles *The Stalking* [1987], *The Ghost Dance* [1987] and *The Hexing and The Labyrinth* [1989, not seen] and subtitled *A Night Hunter Collection Volume I, II and III* respectively. Author given is Robert Holdstock writing as Robert Falcon.)

As Richard Kirk, Raven series:

(with Angus Wells) *Swordmistress of Chaos* (London: Corgi, 1978).
A Time of Ghosts (London: Corgi, 1978).
Lords of the Shadows (London: Corgi, 1979).

4. Other Works

Robert Holdstock has edited the anthology *Star of Albion* with Christopher Priest (London: Pan, 1979) and the three *Other Edens* volumes with Christopher Evans (London: Unwin, 1987, 1988, 1989). He has also written the linking text for several large format illustrated books, in collaboration with editor Malcolm Edwards. These include *Alien Landscapes*, *Lost Realms* (1984), *Magician*, *Realms of Fantasy* and *Tour of the Universe*. He has also written a novelisation of a computer game: *Elite: The Dark Wheel* (Cambridge: Acornsoft, 1984)

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 Special thanks to Chris Terran

A Very British Tradition

An interview with Stephen Palmer by Gary Dalkin

First time novelist Steve Palmer is married and also has an ambient group called Mooch, who will hopefully be releasing a new cd Falling Metal Grille this year. He also has a full time job. He says his wife is very understanding... Vector "spoke" to Steve, via the medium of the Internet.

Long-term members of the BSFA will recall that you've frequently contributed articles and reviews to *Vector* over the years. You appear to have moved straight from non-fiction fan-writing to becoming a fully fledged novelist. This is pretty unusual. Was *Memory Seed* your first fiction, or is there a trunk full of stories we haven't seen yet?

I first started reading sf in my early teens. When I was seventeen I wrote a short novel, but then did nothing until I began writing proper in 1986. There followed a massive spurge of writing as I discovered the joys of creating new worlds and stories. One of those early novels was *Kray*, that eventually became *Memory Seed*.

I think there must be a van load of stories by now. My greatest difficulty in writing is trying to control the excess of ideas. I find it almost impossible to settle down and decide, "this is the next novel I'm going to write", because there are so many other things I want to do. My bookcase is crammed full of folders with novels ready to write – completely planned out, plotted, etc. *Memory Seed*, or *Kray* as it was then, was the fifth novel I wrote, and the first draft of that appeared in 1988. After that, I did other novels, then suddenly decided to write a second draft in 1992. That was the draft that caught the attention of my editor Tim Holman at Orbit, but by the time we had managed to settle down and discuss it I had written a third, more radical draft, which is the version that metamorphosed into the published novel. So it has had quite a long history...

Memory Seed is a very British novel, in the sense that it follows a long line of post-apocalyptic, environmentally-aware works. How far do you feel you are working in a British tradition? What are your influences?

Yes, I do feel I'm working as a very British author in a very British tradition; or perhaps that should be 'European author', in the sense of having a European rather than an American point of view. I find a lot of American sf impossible to read, though of course there are exceptions. I think the cliché of British sf being depressing and almost negative, as compared to the bright and brash American style, is true, but I think that pessimism reflects a certain realism. An argument could be made that American sf, with its techno-fixes and inevitably happy endings, is rather unrealistic, in the wider sense of the word. I'd rather be occasionally grim than perpetually happy, if you know what I mean...

As for influences, I would say my greatest influence, if I had to choose just one, was Jack Vance, who is unique amongst all writers. Other influences include Mary Gentle, Gene Wolfe, Brian Stableford, Brian Aldiss, Gwyneth Jones, William Gibson, and a few non-sf authors such as Mervyn Peake and Tolkien. While I was not directly influenced by the classic Wyndham disaster novels when I wrote *Memory Seed*, I do love those novels, and re-read them occasionally.

There are hints that the novel may or may not be set on Earth in the distant future. Was there a particularly reason for this ambiguity about just where the book takes place?

Memory Seed is set on Earth. In fact, it's set in a very specific place on the British coastline that can be guessed from clues in the novel. I wanted to present a city that was connected with our culture by the thinnest of threads – hints of language and symbol – to heighten the effect of *Kray* being a final, remote outpost. Some reviewers have found this lack of history in the novel a bit of a disappointment, which is fair enough, but the effect was deliberate. I wanted the reader to be more engrossed in the story than details of where-and-when. Besides, the novel is already quite exuberant in terms of detail, and more background would have cluttered things further.

There's two unfortunate possibilities (for humanity anyway) that either we might destroy our environment or Gaia-like, nature will strike back and eradicate humanity, restoring a harmony which has been lost. Are you hopeful that we can still preserve the natural world alongside technology, or have we, like the inhabitants of *Memory Seed*, gone too far?

It's so difficult to say. I don't think that humanity has yet gone too far, but I have a feeling that it will at some point in the future. The liberal forces opposing the massive weight of corporate Western power are still comparatively weak. The evidence of history suggests that only when it is too late does humanity sit up and take notice of the dreadful things going on around it. This is to be expected, though. I think human beings are still quite a primitive lot, especially in terms of what they understand of the world around them, and also how they understand it. Humanity is still narcissistic. It finds looking beyond its own narrow confines quite difficult. Because it is split into many factions, there is far less scope for concerted action against the damage being done by Western economics (and, now, the Far Eastern variety) than there could be.

The experience of 1989 [*When the Green Party took 25 % of the vote in the European elections – GD*] was, I think, a purely media event, though doubtless many people genuinely felt passionate about the green issues that came to the fore. I know I did! However, I had been interested in green thinking before that date. My guess is that the damage will be done, and humanity will notice too late. It seems to me that the chance of technology working alongside nature is very slim. Technology has a very particular mind-set. It is computational, unemotional, a system that works for itself only.

J.K. Galbraith gave the classic definition when he described the technostucture, by which he meant the system of economic growth fuelled by technological advance. The technostucture is responsible for the obsession with growth that we have these days. Hardly anybody questions it. Why do we need this constant growth? Why is it that the goal of corporations is no longer the making of the largest profit possible, but constant, sustainable growth? If you look at natural systems, their growth is characterised by an initial period of stable growth followed by a cessation at some fixed point. Economic growth is entirely different. It is often exponential, and there is never a final level at which it should stop. That is what makes it so dangerous. And the really dangerous thing is that the resources used by modern corporations are not infinite. They are natural resources, which have a finite value.

In *Memory Seed* I wanted to present a scenario where the Earth

becomes angry. I sometimes wish it could happen... People need a slap in the face. Or should it be a kick in the shins? We've become so desensitised these days to the truth of what is going on around us that many people would need the latter option to awaken them.

There is also a decidedly feminist slant – in fact in several of your articles for *Vector* you seem to think rather better of women than men. Would you consider yourself a feminist?

Yes I am a feminist. I am happy to do anything to change five thousand years of cultural domination by men. It's a wholly bad thing. I am not advocating a matriarchy, though I suspect that would be a better option than a patriarchy, rather a humane social system where men and women were treated equally. It's not much to ask. The first two drafts of *Memory Seed* were normal in their male-female ratios; it was only in the third draft that I hit on the idea of the all-women city. I wanted to write a novel where women were the 'invisible norm', just as men are today. I wanted the male characters to be seen as the different ones – as women are today. And I wanted this to be experienced by the inhabitants of Kray as so normal they hardly ever questioned it. (It is deKray himself who makes most of the comments on the imbalance.)

Also I was inspired by a terrifying *Horizon* TV programme on the feminisation of animals, which is apparently being caused by polluting chemicals that mimic oestrogen. And there's the really quite frightening drop in male fertility in the Western world.

It's quite hard being a feminist man. I sometimes wonder if I have the right to utilise women characters as I do, since the only experience I have of women is what I have developed as a man – i.e. from the outside. I can never really know what it is like to be a woman 'from the inside'. But I think women and women's culture represent the best hope for the future, since male culture is largely redundant. Really, what women's culture represents is human culture. It is men who, by and large, are dehumanised, while the women by virtue of their inferior position in patriarchy are allowed to develop normal human functions, such as emotional response, compassion, etc.

In the novel I've just finished, *Muezzinland*, the three main characters are black women, from Ghana... I think in using characters not in my immediate experience I'm trying to sound out some boundaries; it would be so easy to use white male characters, but so pedestrian and unchallenging!

Most unusually, there is only one male character in *Memory Seed*. How far was this a critique of the traditional sf plot of men taking the action roles, and women forming the love interest or asking dumb questions?

At first, I wasn't sure if having the lone man, deKray, would work, but as I got into writing the third draft I knew it would. I just loved the idea of having all these women living in the city, even the 'extras', and just the one man mentioned. It was a critique of traditional roles. I wanted almost to write men out of the picture. I wanted to portray deKray as a minor with only a little control over his own life – not being able to carry arms, perceived as inferior, and all the rest of it. The boot on the other foot! If it happened in reality I think we could learn a lot.

For example, men are uniquely qualified for being unable to communicate, and yet they do practically all the negotiating in the world today. Isn't that wrong? If women were allowed to negotiate land deals, war settlements, etc., there would be a lot more success in the world. I'm not saying all women are perfect, but at least they have the ability to talk to one another. I really hate the way women are portrayed in standard media fare, and in books. I find male characters quite difficult to write, because it seems to me that to make them realistic for the twentieth century sf reader – who is quite likely to be a man – I have to limit them. I want to write about human people, and for that the best template is female. If I'm sitting down trying to think whether a character should be a man or a woman, eight times out of ten it's the latter.

The cover art of *Memory Seed* is quite striking. By chance I saw some alternative art done by an ex-colleague of yours, which was printed in a computer magazine. Do you have any feelings about this, and are you happy with the way the novel has been presented?

In fact he is not an ex-colleague! George Cairns still works with me here at the University of Luton. He is an excellent artist, and I did love the picture he created based on *Memory Seed*. I gave him some extracts of the typescript before it was published to go on. He has it now on his website <http://www.luton.ac.uk/george.cairns>, from which you can get to my website at <http://www.geocities.com/Area51/2162>. I suspect we will be seeing a lot more of George's artwork in the coming years, on the covers of sf novels.

As for the actual cover of *Memory Seed*, I thought it was great. It was done by Duncan Spilling, who is also doing the next cover, for *Glass*. The greatest covers are works of art in themselves, as with Mike Van Houten's *Lyonesse III* cover, and the four done by Bruce Pennington for *The Book of the New Sun*. Even the sales team at Little, Brown were pleased about the *Memory Seed* cover – it garnered a lot of praise.

In your review in *Vector* 187 of *Aliens: Earth Hive & Nightmare Asylum*, it is clear that you don't approve of sequels: "It always seemed to me that even the film sequels to *Alien* were something of a waste of time (quite apart from being crap films) [...] Why people can't let a good idea stay as it is I don't know. Actually I do: money." Yet your next novel, *Glass*, is a sequel to *Memory Seed*. This raises the obvious question – is it only written to make money?

Strictly speaking, *Glass* is not the sequel to *Memory Seed*, though I have described it as such to a couple of people. It is only a sequel in the sense of taking place in the same universe, and happening after *Memory Seed*. It will be presented as a stand-alone novel, and no knowledge of *Memory Seed* is required to read it. Readers who have read *Memory Seed* will notice echoes of that book, however, as a consequence of it being set in the same universe. I wrote the first draft of *Glass* before I had the offer from Orbit; that novel was written in 1993-4. *Glass* will almost certainly be the last novel I write in that particular universe. I want to go on to other things, though I know I will be returning to ecological themes again. I'm currently researching for a pair of far-future sf novels with an ecological and psychological base – a story that follows one character as they try to understand the Earth in its entirety, a task that would involve changing their mental condition.

Finally, and this will probably only make sense to those who have read *Memory Seed*, what have you got against cats?

I love cats! We have a cat, Daisy, that we dote upon. If she is out for a long time we start worrying. If she is sprawled over half the sofa, we don't move her, rather we sit squashed together in the other half, like sardines... We recently acquired a video for her, showing lots of mice, birds, etc. It's rather sad, really. We originally owned Daisy's sister, Ivy, but owing to constrained space where we live we had to have her rehomed a few months after we got her. We were both in floods of tears that day. In *Memory Seed* I just had this idea to reverse the cat thing, so they became thoroughly evil beasts, which of course cats can be. They, and the Temple of Felis, appeared in the original draft – they were a very early Krayan characteristic. The image of people going round shooting cats like vermin is quite a strong one, as most people like cats, and I knew it had to stay in the novel.

[*Glass will be published later this year by Orbit – GD*]

A Cronenology

David Cronenberg's Feature Films from *Shivers* to *M. Butterfly*

1975: *Shivers*, aka *The Parasite Murders*, aka *They Came From Within* - 87 mins. Produced by Ivan (*Ghostbusters* and *Twins*) Reitman. Starring Barbara Steel. A mad scientist creates a sexual parasite creature which infects the inhabitants of an isolated luxury apartment. Victims wander around like *Night of the Living Dead* zombies and try to have sex with the survivors. As events escalate the time cycle accelerates, giving the film a nightmarish feel of inextricable apocalypse. A perverse precursor to *Alien*, this is tense, bizarre, almost entirely unerotic, and sometimes very silly. Look out for the 1970s style Y-Fronts! An original work, but perhaps only because no other film-maker could ever have seen the purpose in making it.

1976: *Rabid* aka *Rage* - 91 mins. Stars Marilyn Chambers. A rare example of a hardcore porn star taking a leading role in legitimate cinema: Marilyn Chambers was the star of the notorious *Behind the Green Door* (1972). More stylishly made than *Shivers*, and with a bigger budget, *Rabid* is no more than a remake of Cronenberg's first feature. A phallic parasite implanted in the heroine's armpit causes her to exhibit a frenzy of blood lust. Soon much of the population of a major Canadian city is infected, and martial law declared. Perhaps slightly more conventional than *Shivers* and therefore more 'enjoyable'.

1979: *Fast Company* - 91 mins. William Smith, John Saxon. A film inspired by Cronenberg's love for drag racing, high in adrenaline and corrupt behaviour - murder and extortion, for starters. Often ignored in the Cronenberg canon, but is a highly effective exploitation flick. His plans to follow *Crash* with *Red Cars* perhaps suggest this deserves another look.

1979: *The Brood* - 91 mins. Cronenberg's first film with real movies star: Oliver Reed and Samantha Eggar, and the first for which Howard Shore, his long time collaborator, wrote the score. Reed plays a mad scientist whose psychological theories lead people to physically manifest the children of their rage. The results are very messy indeed. So distasteful did many critics find this film that it received the worst reviews of Cronenberg's career. Others like to claim it offers a distaff commentary upon the typical Hollywood dysfunctional family pics of the time - *Kramer vs Kramer* and *Ordinary People*.

1980: *Scanners* - 103 mins. Jennifer O'Neill, Patrick McGeehan, Michael Ironside. By far Cronenberg's best film up to this date, partly because of the strength of the cast and production values, but also because it is the first to have a real plot, rather than a series of increasingly bloody events. That said, the mix of explosive psychokinetic powers, conspiracy and political machinations plays much like an alienated, less romanticised, version of DePalma's *The Fury* (1978).

1982: *Videodrome* - 87 mins. James Woods, Debbie Harry. As an inside view of a mental breakdown, through increasing paranoia to bloody murder, this contains astonishing images and more imagination than any art film on the same theme. Taken as if it's incoherent nonsense. However viewed, the film is so detached and analytical, it is almost impossible to become involved - this is probably a good thing, as the otherwise the imagery is so extreme it would be unwatchable. The plot? A coded signal in a snuff pirate video channel causes a tv executive to hallucinate, commit murder and suicide.

1983: *The Dead Zone* - 103 mins. Christopher Walken, Brooke Adams, Tom Skerrit, Herbert Lom. Cronenberg's most mainstream film, adapted from the Stephen King novel. Recovering from a coma after five years, a teacher discovers he can foresee the future. After helping police find a serial killer, he determines to assassinate the politician he knows will become President and start WWII. Set against winter snows, the film is icily romantic, bleak and melancholy. It is Cronenberg's first film working from material originated by a writer other than himself, and by far his most conventional, least personal film. It does capture much of the intensity of King's work.

1986: *The Fly* - 100 mins. Jeff Goldblum, Geena Davis. After a Stephen King adaptation, a remake of a 1950s schlock horror classic made it look as if Cronenberg had sold his vision to the Hollywood Machine. In fact he succeeded in delivering a powerfully visceral yet remarkably moving love story: Woman meets Man who turns into Fly. The final scene of the fusion of man, fly and machine are both as extreme and as powerful as anything to come from a mainstream studio (20th Century Fox).

1988: *Dead Ringers* - 115 mins. Jeremy Irons, Genevieve Bujold. In his first film to contain no fantastical elements, and with two outstanding performances by Irons as twin gynaecologists divided by their relationships with Bujold, Cronenberg gained serious critical recognition for the first time. State of the 1988 Art FX enable Irons to interact with himself seamlessly, and the film has a dramatic power Cronenberg's previous work has lacked. The existentialist motifs remain the same.

1991: *Naked Lunch* - 115 mins. Adapted from the supposedly unfilmable William S. Burroughs drug 'novel' and starring Peter Weller, Judy Davis, Ian Holm, Julian Sands and Roy Scheider. A writer takes bag powder and undergoes ever stranger hallucinations. Eventually reality breaks down completely, and he ends up in the Interzone. After the critical success of *Dead Ringers* this was promoted as an upmarket arthouse film, though it plays like a less controlled and imaginative *Videodrome* dragged out to inordinate length. Very tedious and a major disappointment.

1993: *M. Butterfly* - 101 mins. Jeremy Irons. In which Cronenberg abandons the extremes of his previous work for a low key, 'realistic' drama (based on a hit play) telling the story of a western diplomat who marries an oriental woman, who after twenty years proves to be a man. Amazingly, this is based on real events. With no appeal to his established audience, and gaining generally poor reviews from the 'quality' press, the film was a commercial disaster. Perhaps not coincidentally, it is the only Cronenberg film not to have an 18 certificate.

The BSFA Award Winners

Bob Shaw *Orbitsville*, (1975 -awarded 1976)

by Bob Ford

It is often said – and I must admit I can't think of any names right now – that in science fiction ideas are the character. Not for us the intimacies of Mrs Brown or the complexities of Hamlet, for us the joys of a warp drive and, most appropriately here, slow glass. I would go further: the idea is often the antagonist.

Take the subgenre of sf which is centred on BDOs: Big Dumb Objects. Be it a ringworld, a discworld or a hypercubeworld, the artefact is there, challenging our space travelling hero, demanding understanding and putting difficulties in his way. Just as we learn about the hero through his battles with the moustache-twirling villain, so through an exploration of a new world do we learn precisely what stuff our hero is made of.

The new world here is a case in point. *Orbitsville* opens, or may as well open, in the court of Queen Elizabeth, where Good Queen Bess would spend a last few minutes with her explorers before they sailed off into the ocean in search of new lands, new treasures. (And new ways, it must be said, of annoying the Spaniards. And let it also be said, that many of these explorers, Drake included, were no better than pirates; take this as irrelevant revisionism or as a limitation to the goodness of our heroes, whoever they are.) *Orbitsville*, a Dyson Sphere – a sphere so large that it contains a star inside it – offers a new colony which is billions of time larger than overpopulated Earth. Its very size, its frontierness, is a challenge to the hero in itself. (And a challenge to the author: can he encapsulate this brave new world with its wonders in a single volume, or will he succumb to the temptation of the franchise?).

Of course, it is an ambivalent antagonist. The BDO is a helper as well as a hinderer. The problems that the hero faces can either be overcome by his own resources and cunning, or through his use of the resources the BDO provides. This is nothing new in literature: the father who threatens and gives life, the old sage who will give limited advice, the Oracle whose prophecies will only be worked out too late.

In *Orbitsville* we also have a human villain, whose actions (or rather, the hero's fear of her actions) set the plot in motion, spark the discovery of the BDO, and allow the unravelling of the hero's character. Elizabeth Lindstrom cannot see Vince Garamond at once, and he is left to baby-sit her son. Garamond's attention is distracted, the boy gets into mischief and

falls to his death before our hero can save him. Pausing only to pick up his wife and son (thus flagging a climax with second falling child, but also a redemption), Garamond sets off with his crew into unexplored space.

The discovery of new land – where so many explorations had failed before – is fortuitous in several ways, not least because it means that Lindstrom must be careful in her public treatment of Garamond. But revenge (for this has become an Elizabethan brew of revenge tragedy in waiting) is a dish best eaten cold. Lindstrom engineers an accident which means Garamond's ship will crash into the (out)side of the planet. Our hero, ever resourceful, steers the ship so that it hits the hole, as it were, and the ship crash-lands somewhere in the interior. Any sane person would now give up and settle as best they could, but Garamond is determined to find his way back to base, and confront Lindstrom. The BDO offers more obstacles, not least in its size, as well as aid in unusual ways.

Trawling back through the archives, I find Tom Shippey's review in *Foundation*. He notes Shaw's density of invention, and how one of these ideas alone would be enough for a novel. (And suddenly I flash back to a talk Shaw gave in 1988, where he complained that *The Day of the Triffids* used *two* ideas in plants and blindness – was Shaw agreeing that this was bad? rejecting the charge? – or did I miss the joke?). "A theme like *Orbitsville*, perhaps, demands a series, not a novel" wrote Shippey. Sequels, indeed, belatedly followed. These, I felt, were dilutions: however good they were, they could not rekindle that original shock of wonder.

Shippey challenges the maths of the new land, points out in eleven generations it will be full to overcrowding. He queries the FTL drive, and notes how Einstein must have been rejected. This reminds me of a later Shavian trilogy, where π was three – or, in short, Whatever Would Make The Science Work. If these are fantasies, rather than hard sf, I care not, for the heart is in the discovery, the conflict, the fall from grace and redemption of the hero.

Bob Ford last annoyed readers with an article on Derek Jarman.



Cognitive Mapping 7: Invisibility

by Paul Kincaid

When Sue reveals her invisibility to Richard Grey in *The Glamour*, she sums up everything that invisibility is used to mean in science fiction. Though it feels like the ultimate in hiding, it is in reality an exposure. Every character in science fiction who has been invisible has changed into someone other than their normal self, into a Mr Hyde. Thus Sue, when visible, is quiet, shy, retiring, a mousy creature whose very mouseiness is what attracts Richard to her. When invisible, however, she is freed from the constraints of civilization, hidden desires are exposed and she becomes sexually voracious, a change in character that contributes to their eventual break-up.

But more is lost than gained by this absence of corporeality. Every science fiction writer who has taken up invisibility as a theme has come up against the same philosophical conclusion: that our identity and our substance are somehow conjoined, that only by being corporeal can we also be real. Time and again, no matter how the characters may relish the power of their invisibility, they eventually discover its curse. If stories of invisibility are not always tragedies, they always end up as tales of loss.

When H.G. Wells introduced *The Invisible Man* in 1897 it might have been supposed that this variation on a theme of Jekyll and Hyde would be as fertile as any of his other works from this period in the development of science fiction. It did indeed inspire a lot of films and television programmes, more, one suspects, for the special effects opportunities offered by the invisible central character than for anything else. But although the underlying theme of scientific hubris, the scientist who becomes his own experimental subject, has continued to be a popular topic, invisibility as such has proved to be far less popular. While individual writers have repeatedly turned to certain set topics, from drugs to identity, and themes, from alien invasion to space exploration, few if any have used invisibility more than once.

The invisible hero is visibly alienated from his society, the two sides of his character are revealed, and in the end he cannot persist in the forced isolation. Thus Wells's hero faces an inevitable descent through crime to death, and few other writers have found enough variety in the subject to avoid straightforward recapitulation of Wells's original.

It has, at various times, proved an apt subject for comedy, notably in Thorne Smith's *Skin and Bones* in which an innocuous experimenter, appropriately named Bland, finds one of his experiments going wrong and he periodically becomes invisible except for his skeleton. The novel has great fun with the inconvenient transformations: a barber who has shaved him unwraps the towel from around Bland's face to find a skull grinning up at him, a prostitute wakes beside her latest client to find a skeleton in her bed. Even so, the book follows the typical pattern of stories of invisibility: the change awakens a hidden strand in Bland's character which, being a Thorne Smith novel, involves copious amounts of sex and alcohol. In the scene quoted, for example, where Bland, in skeletal form, has been assumed to be dead, the transformation provides an excuse for corpse, undertaker and priest to get drunk. Nevertheless, although

release from social constraint (invisibility) allows the escape from one's inhibitions – which is always

to be encouraged in the novels of Thorne Smith – invisibility itself is an inevitable obstacle to the enjoyment of this new, uninhibited state and so there is the inevitable downfall.

Only when writers noticed that separating the individual from his society in this way also presented an opportunity for social satire did invisibility again start to occur in serious science fiction. Both Robert Silverberg ("To See the Invisible Man" [1962]) and Gardner Dozois ("The Visible Man" [1975]) use invisibility in different ways as a form of punishment. Silverberg's criminal is treated as if he does not exist, a state which he at first exploits voyeuristically but which is quickly shown to be one of increasing vulnerability;

Dozois's criminal can be seen but cannot see the people around him, an enforced alienation that is highly destructive. During the '60s and '70s in particular, alienation was a common theme in science fiction – which makes it surprising that the alienation of invisibility was not more commonly used – but society was always the Grail, so that being shut away from one's society by one form of invisibility or another was the ultimate evil.

But it was Christopher Priest who explored that form of alienation most thoroughly, in his chilling novel *The Glamour*. There is nothing magical about the invisibility in this novel; it is not the product of rays or potions but is in fact a function of society. The glamorous ones, who lead a dirty, diseased and isolated existence in the interstices of our society, are those that society as a whole simply chooses not to see. (Neil Gaiman employs a similar form of invisibility in *Neverwhere* [1996], in which the poor, homeless and cast-off people who are the denizens of the world under London simply cannot be seen by, or interact with, people in the world above: a potent if obvious metaphor for the plight of the homeless.)

As with so much of Priest's recent work, *The Glamour* is an examination of a disintegrating personality – though, like both *The Affirmation* (1981) and *The Prestige* (1995), it also rests on complex questions of fiction and reality – and *The Glamour* resonates with a tale of amnesia and false memory, so that throughout the book there are constant metaphors for not seeing and not being seen. Grey, the amnesiac, makes the world, or has his world made, in various different ways until he gradually approaches one that makes sense. Without memory, reality is not fixed and absolute, but something to be recreated by fixing together stray and not always reliable memories. Those who are deeply glamorous, like Grey's rival Niall, on the other hand, are by their very invisibility detaching themselves from the world; they are unmaking reality. In this instance, therefore, invisibility becomes more than ever a perfect metaphor for alienation, but we see that it damages far more than the individual. By becoming invisible we do not become insubstantial, but rather the world itself loses substance.

Thus speaking, the minister squared his narrow shoulders and walked over to the coffin. Interested, Mr Brown followed him. Charlie contented himself with waiting in the background. As the Rev. Watts peered down at the skeleton of Mr Bland, partially concealed behind his formidable beard, one fleshless hand shot up and seized the minister by the lapel of his coat. With a sharp intake of breath the Rev. Watts leaped back and collapsed into a chair.

"Be calm," said the skeleton, sitting up in the coffin. "Pull yourself together. Mr Brown, give the parson a drink."

Scarcely realizing what he was doing, the Rev. Watts accepted a stiff shot of applejack, which he poured into his shaken and still quivering body.

"Have another?" asked Mr Brown.

"Pour it out," gasped the Rev. Watts, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I'll take it when I stop burning. What is it, embalming fluid?"

Skin and Bones (1933) – Thorne Smith

She became invisible.

Richard continued to stare at the place she had been, so she moved away, unseen by him, and walked to the other side of the bed.

It was invariably like this when the glamour was consented to. It was like stripping in front of strangers, like those dreams of nakedness in public places, like sexual fantasies of total vulnerability and helplessness. Yet invisibility was secure, a concealment and a hiding, a power and a curse. The half-guilty surge of sexual arousal, the sweet desire of unprotected surrender, the sacrifice of privacy, the exposure of hidden desire, the realization that it had started and could not be stopped.

The Glamour (1984, revised version 1996) – Christopher Priest



First Impressions

Reviews of Hardback and Paperback Originals

Edited by Paul Kincaid

Simon Archer & Stan Nicholls *Gerry Anderson: The Authorised Biography*

Legend, 1996, 228pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

It's undeniable that Gerry Anderson has been a major influence on a generation, indeed on several generations. For some, this may have had a practical manifestation: as a child, Alan Bond watched the horizontal take-off of *Fireball XLS* and this may have influenced his subsequent work on the reusable space craft *HOTOL*. For others, it merely left fond childhood memories of the sort that inspired the committee of the 1995 World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow to invite Gerry Anderson to be one of their Guests of Honour. Everybody, or so it seems, loves supermarionation.

This biography – started by Archer and, following his death in 1993 in a road accident, completed by Nicholls – works its way through Anderson's various television and film projects, from the early days of *Twizzle* and *Four Feather Falls*, through the heights of success with *Thunderbirds*, the live action work with *UFO* and *Space: 1999* and, following some fallow years, his return with *Space Precinct*. It offers an interesting insight into the mechanics of making a television programme, covering the administrative and financial aspects as well as the creative angle (such as the intriguing fact that, in *Thunderbirds*, the dialogue was recorded before filming took place), which makes the whole process seem rather

jolly, although the lurking presence of second wife Sylvia Anderson serves as a reminder that it wasn't all sweetness and light.

It is apparent that Archer, at least, is very much a fan of Anderson's work. Most of the programmes are describe in glowing terms, stressing the highly advanced techniques used which placed Anderson at the forefront of special effects technology. Anderson refers again and again to the importance of believability in his programmes and claims levels of plot sophistication that raise the them above the level of mere children's television. Viewers of, say, *Space: 1999*, might be hard-pushed to find such sophistication, and readers who have seen Anderson's 1960s programmes again within the last few years may not recognise the descriptions herein. The usually held view is that the appeal of *Thunderbirds* and the like is largely nostalgic, and while they can be viewed and enjoyed today this can only be done if you keep a firm eye on when and for whom they were produced. The authors of this book make a credible attempt to place Anderson's work in the context of its time, by attempting to demonstrate that he really was one of the leaders in a number of fields, in effects and tie-in marketing in particular, and this is perhaps more significant than whether his work has stood the test of time. Ultimately, Anderson's work is best summed up by a quote from his wife Mary: 'Your films are unique ... they're in a class of their own.' It is this sense that the biography seeks to convey.

Poppy Z. Brite

Exquisite Corpse
Orion, 1996, 244pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

There is something particularly nauseating about the idea of eating something that's still alive. Isn't there? If the thought doesn't bother you, then you may find this book unexceptionable.

'Imagine meeting Nilsen & Dahmer in a bar, being invited home for coffee ...' No, thanks. Brite's previous novels, *Lost Souls* (1992) and *Drawing Blood* (1993), were investigations of human horror redeemed by their exploration of the supernatural: *Exquisite Corpse*, however, remains firmly rooted in the mundane – if 'mundane' is the right word for the Grand Guignol concoction of serial murder, necrophilia, cannibalism and sadistic sex that Brite presents this time round.

Within the first few pages we are presented with Andrew, the imprisoned serial killer, musing on the aesthetics of slaughter:

I killed most of the twenty-three by cutting ... because I appreciated the beautiful objects that their bodies were, the bright ribbons of blood coursing over the velvet of their skin, the feel of their muscles parting like soft butter.

After a dramatic escape – which, if the protagonist were more sympathetic and likable, might be heroic – Andrew makes his way from the bars of Soho to sultry New Orleans, a favourite setting of Brite's. There he encounters Jay, who hunts the bars and streets of the city rather like the vampires of *Lost Souls*. It is a meeting of souls: as Brite, rather slyly, puts it, 'Jay had never had a live friend before, and he wasn't sure what to do with one.' The two talk for hours, exploring the shared horrors of their natures: what is important, however, is that neither of them feel that they are monsters. As Andrew puts it, 'I emerged from the womb with no morals, and no one has been able to instil any in me since ... I had done nothing wrong. I had spent my life feeling like a species of one. Monster, mutation, Nietzschean superman – I could perceive no difference.'

The 'extraordinary love' of Jay and Andrew is balanced by the relationship between Tran, a young Vietnamese boy whose family have just discovered that he's gay and thrown him out, and Luke, his former lover, who is HIV-positive and divides his time between vitriolic radio broadcasts on WHIV (a pirate radio station run by and for HIV-positive men) and frantically trying to finish the novel that he realises will be his last. Luke's tirades are directed at the rampantly homophobic right wing politicians of the Deep South, and the 'breeders' who bring more and more children into the world, and regard homosexuals as an aberration and a threat. Tran still loves Luke; 'I'd like him to have a good life ... but all I can wish him now is a decent death'. Lost in New Orleans, without obvious roots, he is easy prey for Andrew and Jay, whose mutual regard can only be consummated with the sharing of a victim.

It's not as straightforward as that, of course. Brite weaves

together the two parallel love stories (Luke and Tran's mainly in the form of flashbacks) into a helix, which spirals towards a denouement which is not as pointless as one might expect. Brite continues the theme, found in both her previous novels, of love as redemption; it is clear early in the novel, however, that there can be no happy endings.

This is a shocking novel, and also a flawed one. Brite could do more to contrast the helpless rage felt by Luke at his disease, with the feelings of Jay and David's equally helpless victims; both are consequences of a casual approach to pleasure. And, while at least one character grows and changes during the novel, a great deal of blood is spilt before he can prove himself. No one has a decent death.

The nastiness is not pointless: but one might ask whether it's desirable to be able to empathise with someone who can lovingly describe the taste and texture of human flesh 'lightly fried in butter'. And the butchery – although far from casual – pervades the novel; the overall effect is deadening, like watching a Tarantino film. Brite's style is humourless (for which, in this context, one should be thankful), and her characters tend towards a poetic profundity which is faintly nauseating; Andrew describes AIDS, for example, as 'this malady borne on the fluids of love', and waxes lyrical about the sensations which he experiences on seeing the first drop of blood on a victim's skin.

The French playwright Antonin Artaud defined the notion of the 'theatre of cruelty' – theatre that disturbs the spectator, frees unconscious repressions and allows the spectator to see himself as he really is. Artaud stressed that, on the level of performance, 'it is not the cruelty we can exercise upon each other by hacking at each other's bodies ... but the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us.' Brite's 'novel of cruelty' focusses on the cruelty which people exercise upon one another – and upon the 'monsters' who derive pleasure from such cruelty. It is unpleasantly easy to understand the killers' motivation; Jay and David are shown as human beings, not just ciphers of cruelty. It is when their victim's point of view is shown that the reader is jolted into revulsion.

If Brite is trying to shock, she succeeds; if she is attempting an exploration of the dark side of human nature, she treats it too superficially to be taken seriously. There's a passage when Luke is recalling the reviews of his first novel, *Faith in Poison*, which might describe the way Poppy Brite expects *Exquisite Corpse* to be received:

The praise was lavish but slightly shell-shocked, as if Lucas Ransom had begun by massaging the reader's brain stem, then delivered a quick sharp blow to the back of the neck. The disparagement was similar, but with an aggrieved tone, as if the novel had deeply and personally offended the reviewers. Lucas was pleased by both reactions. He had no use for middle ground.

There is no middle ground for this novel. It is, in places, profoundly unpleasant: I am not a particularly squeamish reader, but there were parts of *Exquisite Corpse* that I regret ever having read. Read objectively, it might be intriguing – but I'm not sure that I would want to be able to be objective about such a book.

Ben Bova

Moonrise (Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 613pp, £16.99)

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Moonrise is divided into three sections. The first is set in the aftermath of an attempt on the life of Paul Stavenger, a senior executive with Masterson Aerospace, the corporation which runs America's privatised moonbase. As Paul struggles to make his way across the lunar surface to a safe haven, we learn the events, in flashback, which led to his current desperate situation.

Gregory Masterson II commits suicide (or perhaps is murdered) while Paul is in bed with Gregory's wife, Joanna. Paul and Joanna marry and together they rule the Masterson corporation, sidelining Gregory III, the expected heir to the corporate throne. Gregory III is furious, blames Paul for his father's death, and shacks up with Melissa who had previously been sleeping with his father before having an affair with Paul. If all this sounds like *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, that's because it is: neither characters nor plot rise above the level of TV soap opera of the glossy American kind, while the writing struggles to achieve even bare competency.

After the murder attempt we jump eighteen years into the future and to part two.

Douglas Masterson is now our hero, while Gregory III schemes to shut the base down. The moonbase depends on nanotechnology for its survival, but an alliance of the New Morality back on Earth is about to achieve a complete ban on the technology. Meanwhile, a rival Japanese moonbase is introduced, but only to provide some competition and a race to claim water rights at the lunar South Pole. A solar flare and more murderous jealousy result in further danger, while there are also plans to build a new generation of 'clipperships' on the moon from nano-engineered diamond, and a rival scheme to develop plasma-fusion energy.

In the final part business and family rivalries come to a thunderously melodramatic head, with the lives of everyone in the moonbase endangered by two characters who have finally gone quite barking mad.

I have several problems with this book, quite apart from the fact that the writing is poor, the characters badly drawn and much of the action painfully contrived. There is the sheer length: rarely have I read a book so obviously padded out to 'blockbuster' proportions. Almost every piece of information is delivered several times, characters have long discussions which reach scant conclusions and, even worse, expand the narrative by telling each other things they already know (or should know given the circumstances). Long descriptive passages fail to evoke any sense of either wonder or danger, which is in itself quite an achievement given the lunar setting.

However, my major difficulties lie with Bova's underlying assumptions. In having a single family company run a private moonbase he is returning to the sf conventions of a much older age, a time when we could believe in lone heroes taming the high frontier. The sheer costs of running such an enterprise make the idea of such sole control quite absurd, it is as if Bova is still writing in the time of classic Heinlein. More problematic still is Bova's idea that a global moral backlash could ever be enough to prescribe a technology as powerful and potentially lucrative as nanotechnology. He presents the issue in astonishingly simplistic terms: you are either in favour or you are a lying, murdering, hypocritical, ignorant religious fanatic. That there might be legitimate concerns regarding such powerful technology seems to escape his notice entirely; at one point Douglas thinks: 'I'll be a target for every brain-dead New Morality zealot who can get his hands on a gun', and this because his life has been saved by illegal nano-surgery.

But then, to Bova technology is an unqualified good. He seems unaware of such events as the Chernobyl disaster or Three Mile Island, so he can have Joanna say: 'It's like the fear the public had of the old nuclear power plants. It's irrational, but it's very real.' The truth is that in the real world one dangerous but valuable technology after another has been introduced, the commercial pressure to do so is too great to be resisted, so there will be safeguards but they won't always be quite sufficient. There is no reason to think that the introduction of nanotechnology will be any different. For Bova to characterise anyone who warns of the danger as a mindless luddite is insulting, and he also credits the luddites with far more power than they will ever wield.

All that said, the plot mechanisms which drive the last part of the book collapse, as they are dependent upon the moon breaking away from the Earth so as to continue as a bastion for the outlawed technology. The author's entire premise is rendered nonsensical.

One final gripe: there is no indication anywhere other than on the title page that this is but the first volume of a series. To say the least, this is deceptive: if I am going to embark on a series that could well run into thousands of pages I want to be informed of the fact in advance. As it is I can only stand amazed that the back cover carries fulsome praise from Arthur C. Clarke and Ray Bradbury.

Storm Constantine *Dancer for the World's Death*

Inception, 1996, 36pp, £3.50

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Ever since Storm Constantine burst onto the scene with her *Wraeththu* books, she has shown herself to be a writer with a unique voice, able to create exotic and memorable characters and atmospheric landscapes.

Dancer for the World's Death is a short story every bit as imaginative as her novels. Lariel Farbuinnen is apprenticed to the terpsichore Firfirieth, one of an ancient line of dancers who are also priests and seers. The charismatic Firfirieth has proved a difficult master and Lariel sometimes suspects that he is touched by madness. Now Firfirieth is convinced that he has discovered the key to, and the whereabouts of, a gateway to another world, one of many worlds abandoned

by Lariel's people aeons past during the centuries-long war against their enemies, the denizens of the abyss. Lariel's people, the Muinish, are now confined to one world, but it is dying and the terpsichores believe that they must lead the Muinish back to the worlds that were once theirs. Lariel has no wish to follow Firfirieth to another world where unknown dangers may lurk, but he has no choice.

Though there is less space to set the scene in a short story than in a novel, Constantine speedily establishes her characters and the worlds through which they move. When Lariel follows Firfirieth through the gateway, the place in which they find themselves and the events that follow are very powerfully described, making this an engrossing read.

(*Dancer for the World's Death*, signed and numbered in a limited edition of 300, is available from Inception, 44 White Way, Kidlington, Oxon, OX5 2XA.)

Amitav Ghosh

The Calcutta Chromosome (Picador, 1996, 309pp, £15.99)

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

This intriguing novel, initially published earlier this year by Ravi Dayal in New Delhi, links past, present and future in an intricately-structured scientific detective story. The solution to the mystery is not so much a matter of who 'dunnit' – although there is a significant element of that – as a matter of exactly what it was that they were trying to do. If it is the nature of this solution which defines the genre of the novel, it qualifies both as science fiction and as metaphysical fantasy, for what is at stake is not so much the secret *per se* as the process of its revelation. (To explain more fully might, alas, be to give away too much – but it is the whole nature rather than merely the genre of the novel that is defined by its careful use of numinous and tantalising hints and its polite refusal of fully-laboured explanations.)

The protagonist of *The Calcutta Chromosome* is an Egyptian-born clerk named Antar whose menial task it is, in the New York of the not-so-distant future, to watch over the work of a supercomputer named Ava. One day, that information flow casts up an item of flotsam which recalls a day in 1995 when Antar briefly met L. Murugan, an expert on the work done a century earlier by Ronald Ross, the British medical man who first explained how the malarial parasite was transmitted by *Anopheles* mosquitoes. Having recalled that meeting Antar, aided by the trusty Ava, sets out to discover exactly what became of Murugan, who vanished from human ken after visiting Calcutta in pursuit of his own quest to figure out exactly how – and why – Ross was enabled to make his discovery.

We live in a time of conspiracy theories, when it is easy to find considerable fascination in reappraisals of the historical record which allow us glimpses of some further, hidden, reality. Ghosh is by no means as ambitious in his contribution to this modern mythos as Umberto Eco – who offered an engaging account of an extraordinarily elaborate and far-ranging conspiracy in *Foucault's Pendulum* – but his more tightly-organized scheme is complicated by its intricate convolutions, and has the additional point of interest of readjusting the balance of Imperialist history.

In the orthodox account, it required the Victorian gentleman Ross to solve the problem which was the enduring curse of the greater part of the Third World, thus justifying the colonization and subjugation of India by its new Emperors. In this ironic rival version, Ross is not merely *guided* to the truth by indigenes he disdains even to notice but also *deflected* from a deeper truth of a profound and peculiar nature. While Ross receives the vulgar gift of a mechanism (subsequently augmented by a Nobel prize and a knighthood), the givers of that gift press on towards a goal that is far more elusive but ultimately far more precious: a goal founded in a distinctively Indian view of the world, which cannot easily be assimilated to the Western/scientific *weltanschauung*.

By virtue of the way in which it neatly folds past and present together through the medium of an academic enquiry, *The Calcutta Chromosome* can be linked to recent works by A.S. Byatt and to Tom Stoppard's magnificent play *Arcadia*. Here, however, neatness is only one aspect of the folding process, which embraces the future as well as the present and the past and contrives a complexity of which an expert in origami would surely be proud. The novel does so, however, without any prejudice to its readability; it is a challenging text in its way, but not in the rather exhausting way that *Foucault's Pendulum* was challenging. Each individual phase of the story is perfectly clear and rapidly paced; every chapter is related with grace and economy.

On the basis of an admittedly-haphazard sampling process it seems to me that 1996 has been an unusually good year for science fiction. Several fine endeavours emanating from within the genre (*Holy Fire*, *Voyage and Idoru*, to name but three) have been supplemented by some well-constructed and intellectually-adventurous contributions by writers from without (including Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* and George Gaylord Simpson's posthumous *The Dechronization of Sam Magruder*). *The Calcutta Chromosome* extends the latter list still further, and may well be in a position to vie for awards within the field if it attracts sufficient attention here. I hope the publishers will see fit to submit it to the consideration of the jurors for the Clarke and Campbell Awards.

William Gibson

Idoru (Viking, 1996, 292pp, £16.00)

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

As his occasional journalism as well as his fiction makes clear, William Gibson thinks that all important events of the future will take place in the Asian Pacific rim. In *Idoru* one consequence of this is that the female lead, Chia, leaves her home in Seattle to travel to Tokyo; for although she is a feisty 14-year-old with her own personalised laptop computer, in the end she and her friends want the physical details, not the virtual ones. Chia's journey across the Pacific allows Gibson to introduce a bit of old-fashioned spy story skulduggery, but that apart almost everything (the location excepted) is virtual.

The book tells two stories in parallel: the first traces Chia's journey, as she attempts to discover what is going to happen to Rez, her popstar hero, now he has announced his plans to marry an *idoru*. Rez is half of the band Lo/Rez and has been the biggest thing in pop worship for longer than Chia's life, yet old as he is he still attracts a youth following. Now even the screaming fans wonder if the choice of a virtual bride doesn't indicate he is losing something. His *idoru* is called Rei Toei and she exists only in a computer, though her reality, as far as anything can measure it, is growing, and people all over Japan know her from her appearances on billboards.

The second story is that of Colin Laney, a data miner, who up until now has used his almost uncanny skills on digging up the dirt on minor celebrities for a sleazeball television programme. Now, racked by guilt because his investigations drove a woman to suicide, he is being used by Rez's bodyguards to investigate the world of Rei Toei.

Idoru is a thriller, and though it depends on the forefront of technology for its thesis – all the characters are constantly switching on computers, accessing data, sending e-mail messages, trying to conflate information – it is not especially technical, and lacks invention in other ways. Love hotels are introduced as a freak, though surely we have all heard of them; in the hotel toilet everything is high-tech, controlled by buttons marked in Japanese which Chia cannot understand; and the cars on the road are little Japanese runabouts. In fact, Gibson is surprised that Japan is so Japanese – he keeps pointing out that the writing is Japanese, as if the natives as well as Anglo-Saxons should expect everything to be in English.

The question of data mining is much more interesting, and I guess a lot of people would like a job like Colin Laney's. We are all aware of what is involved because the effect is being set out in every aspect of our lives. For instance, the loyalty cards issued by supermarkets have an immediate purpose of holding shoppers by offering them discounts, but also allow the buying patterns of individuals to be identified in order to exploit them. If those supermarkets could match their data with that of other commercial organisations, or even government departments, what bigger pictures could they form of us?

Gibson's *idoru*, though, is the opposite. Laney found out more and more about an individual, by putting together the records they had created as they went about their daily life. Now, if there were records placed in those databases without any one having done anything except insert a record, then a new life would be created. The more records that could be generated in more and more computers would make the reality of that data subject greater all the time. If a computer generated image of her could be built, as well as virtual rooms (or images of real buildings held on a computer) for her to inhabit, then the relationship with the world we know would be almost complete. What began during the Second World War with the construction of characters such as Colonel Britton and William Martin (The Man Who Never Was) could reach a new level of influence.

However, rather than investigate these possibilities, Gibson has written a low key thriller in which the ultimate cause of the action is a search by Russian gangsters for an item which entered Japan when Chia was stupid enough to carry someone else's luggage through customs. Of course, your analysis of the data may lead you to different conclusions.

Harry Harrison & John Holm *King and Emperor*
Legend, 1996, 452pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

This is the third and, presumably, final volume in Harrison and Holm's *Hammer and the Cross* trilogy (or has it now become a series?). I mention John Holm because he is the mysterious co-author of this series whose name has not appeared on the cover of these books since the first volume, although he is credited as co-author on the title page.

Shef, co-King of England along with Alfred, has settled down to rule in his capital in the North, Stamford, whilst Alfred rules the South from Winchester. Based in the marshes, Shef and his loyal followers, a mixture of Vikings, Swedes, Danes, Finns and Englishmen, continue their search for new knowledge – for only with knowledge can Shef hope to hold onto the peace he has won for England so far. After a disastrous attempt to fly by one of his subjects, a dream is born, and following a visit by an Arab emissary who promises knowledge regarding flight (which the Arabs claim to have achieved), Shef is lured to the Mediterranean with his restless army.

Striking an uneasy alliance with the Caliph of Cordova, Shef agrees to aid the Arabs in their battle for naval supremacy over the Greeks – who have a secret weapon of their own: Greek Fire. Following a first encounter with Greek Fire and the loss of many of the Caliph's naval force, Shef and his ships retreat, abandoning the Arabs to their own devices. They head for Septimania, a haven in which to

continue the search for answers regarding flight, and of course, the Fire.

Not so very far away, Bruno, Emperor of the Franks, the Germans, the Italians and the Burgundians, is searching for a holy Christian relic – namely the Graal. Already possessing the Lance that was used to spear Jesus on the cross, Bruno seeks the ultimate relic of his faith. Aided by the English Deacon, Erkenbert, Bruno has finally come within reach of the Graal, and lays siege for its recovery. It is at this point that a strange twist of fate enables Shef to steal the Graal from under Bruno's nose, and two old enemies are again set on a course that must end this time in the death of one or the other.

Once more, Harrison and Holm have produced a rivetting novel set in the late 9th Century. The various religions – Christian, Moslem and Norse – and their differences are the backbone of the novel, and a lot of research into the various customs and beliefs gives the setting solidity and believability. Interestingly, none of the religions are favoured over the others by the authors, and a sense of the turmoil caused solely by different beliefs is present throughout.

King and Emperor could be read as a stand-alone novel, but I would recommend reading all three in this series if you are an historical fantasy buff. It's certainly a cut above the average. I do, however, hope the story ends here and that the authors will not feel the need to follow the exploits of a certain son, born at the end of this novel to one of the major characters.

Garry Kilworth *A Midsummer's Nightmare*
Bantam Press, 1996, 325pp, £14.99

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

I've read more than one novel recently which revisits one of

Shakespeare's plays. In this one, Garry Kilworth imagines that the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, driven out of their home – not A Wood Not Far From Athens, but Sherwood Forest – by the pollution of the twentieth century, travel to the New Forest where they hope to settle

in peace. Their movement releases magic into the world and awakes all the legendary creatures that we thought were dead and gone, including the evil Morgan le Fay.

The fairies travel in a bus, driven by Titania who has been taught how by an enthralled human, Sid, a 'rude mechanical'. En route, she steals a baby – not for the first time – who turns out to be the last descendant of Guenevere and Lancelot. Morgan knows that if she can kidnap the baby and sacrifice her at Stonehenge on Midsummer's Day, she can augment her magic, drag the country back into the Middle Ages, and get rid of all this tiresome technology.

Within this basic plot, Kilworth also gives us the stories of some of the human characters who come into contact with the fairies. Some fall in love, others make new decisions about their lives, all achieve their happy ending, for this is, after all, a comedy.

All through the novel I was asking myself whether the mixture of Shakespeare and the Arthurian legend really works: nipping Arthurians like myself will point out that Guenevere and Lancelot had no descendants. But it is all good fun, and on the level Kilworth is using it's unfair to ask awkward questions.

Most of the pleasure of this novel comes from the impact of the fairies and the other supernatural creatures on the modern world, which isn't always what we might expect. Most of the humans they meet go to some lengths to explain them away without admitting they are fairies: the New Age Travellers who fall in with them on their way to the Midsummer festival at Stonehenge cope best with the fairies, while more conventional members of society have difficulty. I enjoyed Morgan's encounter with the policeman at

Stonehenge, and the efforts of other police to search the fairies' bus.

Kilworth is also good at making us believe in fairies. At least, these fairies. They have their own codes of behaviour, so that in our terms they might seem irrationally cruel or kind, powerful at one moment and childish the next. Puck, whom Kilworth presents as half-fairy, half-human, convincingly has a foot in both camps. I'm prepared to accept that if fairies existed they would be very like this.

Where the novel falls down is partly in the structure and partly the style. It is necessarily episodic in the way that the fairies journey from one encounter to the next, but the main plot about the baby hangs together. Within it, though, there are several episodes, like Morgan's encounter with Herne the Hunter, which seem to be there just so that Kilworth can bring in another figure out of legend. There's a long visit to the Welsh fairies, also, which holds up the action and provides only a minimal contribution to the plot.

As for style, though Kilworth weaves in cleverly a lot of quotations or near-quotations from the play, he also uses a narrator viewpoint instead of strong viewpoint characters, which made me feel I was being told what I should think instead of being brought fully into his world. This is particularly obvious in the way he defends Traveller lifestyle; while I might agree with the sentiment, it is awkwardly expressed.

That apart, though, this is a fun read and I'd be sorry to have missed it. For goodness sake, though, read the play first if you don't already know it, otherwise you'll miss a lot of the jokes and allusions.

Garry Kilworth

The Roof of Voyaging Orbit, 1996, 426pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Barbara Davies

To say Garry Kilworth is prolific is an understatement – he seems to bring out a new book every other month. *The Roof of Voyaging* is the first volume of his new fantasy series, *The Navigator Kings*, which uses as its setting Polynesia and its associated myths and legends.

The great navigator, Kupe, while pursuing an octopus by canoe, comes across an island he names 'The Land-of-Mists'. It is, in fact, Britain and while lying off its rocky coast he witnesses Dorcha, a Scots woman, try to kill Seumas, the Pict who killed her husband. The attempt plunges both Dorcha and Seumas into the sea, where they are picked up by Kupe and his men and taken back to Raiatea.

Everything in Raiatea is different: climate, housing, food, relationships between the sexes, attitudes to masculinity, homosexuality, animals, cleanliness – it takes some getting used to, and a homesick Seumas finds it much harder than Dorcha. The gentle Polynesians, 'darker men with brighter souls', are much more to her taste than her own race who seem 'to feel the need for constant aggression'. For nearly eight years Seumas and Dorcha live quietly, adapting to the ways of the islanders; all the while Seumas lusts after Dorcha, but her hatred of him remains undimmed. Then everything changes.

The King of Borabora and Raiatea is dying and there is a risk of civil war between his sons, Tutapu and Tangia. To avoid assassination by his paranoid older brother and seek a kingdom of his own, Tangia secretly constructs three great canoes and flees with his followers. Seumas chooses to go with them, leaving Dorcha facing a life that is suddenly and unexpectedly bleak.

At first it looks like Tangia is going to get away with it, even though he has abducted Princess Kula who was to be his brother's wife. Then Tutapu finds that his brother took one of the sacred totems. Losing a minor deity would have been bearable, but by mistake Tangia took the vital God of Hope. Angered, Tutapu sets off in pursuit, and Dorcha goes with him.

The rest of the book follows the voyages of the warring factions and the hazards they face, such as the Isle of Rapacious Women. Numerous Polynesian deities, wanting to aid their favourites, intervene from time to time. Eventually, inevitably, the brothers come face to face in battle, and Dorcha and Seumas meet once again.

You may be wondering how a canoe could possibly travel all the way from Polynesia to the British Isles. Kilworth is not averse to changing facts when it suits him and here, he unapologetically swaps Britain with New Zealand. This piece of chutzpah pays off handsomely, for the contrast between early British and Polynesian peoples and cultures makes for fascinating reading. Seumas's initial reaction to the Polynesians – he thinks they're too arrogant and full of themselves, too feminine, pretty and unblemished, too quick to touch one another – holds a mirror up to our own more repressed culture.

As you'd expect from Kilworth, plot, characterisation, dialogue, viewpoint and pace are expertly handled. I liked the ambiguity about whether phenomena such as storms at sea were natural or caused by the caprices of the gods. Boy-girl, the camp transvestite who has a crush on Seumas, is great fun, and I grew rather fond of Seumas's dog, Dirk. Kilworth heroically resists, for the most part, the temptation to infodump: I know a hell of a lot more about Polynesia than I did before reading *The Roof of Voyaging*, but the learning process was entertaining and completely painless! The third volume of *The Navigator Kings* will be set in 'The Land-of-Mists' – it should be fascinating to see Britain through these alien eyes.

Richard La Plante

Tegné: Soul Warrior
TOR Books, 1996, 349pp, £14.99

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

In the late eighties and early nineties, Richard La Plante wrote a series of books about a central character called Tegné were written. Tor have just re-released the first of these: *Soul Warrior*.

Richard La Plante is a karate expert, as is obvious from the martial arts basis of the book, he may be able to punch his way through inch-thick steel plate for all I know, but he couldn't write himself, or his characters, out of a paper bag. He should have stuck the the thrillers which were his previous literary output, and Tor should have left the unlamented Tegné books barking on the shelves of the second-hand stores.

'There is a strange and deep wisdom to Tegné. I would call it metafiction, and I would pronounce Richard La Plante its one high master' is the quote on the cover from William Kotzwinkle, the 'bestselling author' of that well-known literary gem, *ET, The Extraterrestrial*. Pronounce away, William, it won't redeem the author from the Eight Deadly Words: 'I Don't Care What Happens To These People'. Incredible meta-fiction *Soul Warrior* may be (whatever meta-fiction is), but it's no prize-winner in the fiction stakes. Overblown language and an attempt at an epic style which merely makes for dull reading are what await the poor reader

Frank Lovece

The X-Files Declassified
Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 419pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

With the third series of *The X-Files* now on British TV, here comes another book cashing in on the enormous, some would say too enormous, success of the spooky, conspiracy-obsessed television feast. There can be no doubt that *The X-Files* is well made TV with above average production values. It is entertaining, and many, many people watch it, some for reasons other than the leading female role. However *The X-Files Declassified* is not as entertaining. It is yet another product with a gigantic 'X', shiny against a matte cover, that is meant to look incredibly sophisticated, when in fact it has the appearance of being printed off the internet...

It covers some new ground and lots of old ground. For example, the episode guide is useful if you want to catch episodes you particularly liked during re-runs, but who in

of this book: the Karate Kid meets the Mongol Hordes while godlike beings watch over everything. Occasional attempts at humour fall completely flat, while the sex scenes are mundane at best and silly at worst. The violence arouses no strong emotions at all, though the lack of emotional involvement with the characters is probably the root cause of this.

The whole story is fairly obvious from the beginning, there is little suspense to keep up interest in the action: there is a boy-thief whom Tegné keeps trying to reform and failing. This fails to engage the emotions of the reader because the characters are little more than straw men on which to hang the philosophical musings of a martial arts expert who thinks fantasy gives him the scope he needs to bring his wisdom to the world. In fact, fantastic fiction merely gives him enough rope to hang himself. Confusing chops and changes between reality and dreams interleave with the inner musings of a cardboard cutout drawn in impressionist style. The descriptions of savagery and sex are by turns boring and ridiculous, while attempts to include some political intrigue with the blood, sweat and tears merely heighten the sense that this is completely unreal and could never happen. The suspension of disbelief is never strong enough to stop the reader feeling like he's being lectured on eastern philosophy by someone boring enough to send a hyperactive person on speed to sleep.

In brief, one to avoid.

their right mind (and that is the key phrase to consider) wants to know what number plates featured in what episodes? Just flicking through a few pages gives a pretty good idea of who is going to part with a crisp brown one in their local WH Smiths. Sad people. Sad, lonely people.

What is the point of nit-picking through each episode to work out what time each scene occurred? The most interesting parts of the book are the biographies of the cast. There are points of information here that will not have been encountered in the dozens of magazine articles about Moulty and Sullied, but ultimately it is a case of take it or leave it. The latter option is the best choice. You won't need this book to help you enjoy the show, unless, that is, your friends are the type of people to be impressed when you announce during an episode that, 'An Erlenmeyer flask is a conical laboratory container... named after the German chemist Richard August Carl Emil Erlenmeyer.' In summary, avoid like any plague featured during the series.

Ken MacLeod

The Stone Canal (Legend, 1996, 322pp, £15.99)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Ken MacLeod's first novel, *The Star Fraction*, was runner-up for the 1996 Arthur C. Clarke Award. I haven't read the other finalists, but despite its cyberpunk origin and its implausible explanations for the Balkanisation of early-21st-century Britain, I did enjoy that book - particularly its satire of both libertarianism's and socialism's most cherished ideals, and its culminating ironic genuflection to Trotskyism's fantasies of insurrectionary general strikes and armed popular uprisings to overthrow the state. MacLeod's grasp of this ideology surely derives from student days spent selling *Socialist Worker* - or even, given his references to the Fourth International, the Workers' Revolutionary Party's *Newsline* - on cold Saturday mornings rather than mere academic study; but it has a firm theoretical base as well. The novel's alliance between socialist revolutionaries and pro-space agitators seems strange, but is thoroughly Marxian in concept: the emancipation of the working class via the liberatory potential of an advanced technology which enables a literal escape from capitalist oppression.

But perhaps one shouldn't read too much of the author into his characters, for if *The Star Fraction* has a left-wing outlook, *The Stone Canal* has the opposite. It is the biography of Jonathan Wilde, the off-stage *eminence grise* anarchist philosopher of the earlier novel, who here begins as a student anarchist in the Bakunin or Proudhon

mould but gradually drifts rightwards into a position more akin to Ayn Rand's. In the process he establishes a front organisation, backed by industrial and financial interests, to lobby for a renewal of the space endeavour as insurance against possible future environmental or social collapse. These sections, told in flashback, alternate with a story set on the 'New Mars' of a hundred years hence where a reborn Wilde confronts the apparently immortal William Reid, a longstanding (at least in the twentieth century) friend who, like him, mixed in ultra-left politics before becoming more 'respectable' and joining the pro-space faction. Reid is now pursuing Wilde and his allies for the return of a 'gynoid', a robotically-enhanced biological entity in the form of Wilde's former wife, Annette. As this chase unfolds, however, so its purpose in misdirecting the reader becomes apparent. The real story is in the flashback, which has the space movement (led by Reid following Wilde's death) eventually constructing a wormhole in Jovian orbit which allows humanity to set out for the stars. I greatly enjoyed the political bits, but I found this grafted-on chunk of science fiction wish-fulfilment deeply unsatisfying.

Part of this is due to the obvious mismatch between the closely realised present and near-future world, and the necessarily sketchier outline of events a hundred years from now. Part, however, is attributable to MacLeod's assumption – common to much extrapolative sf – that the accelerating rate of technological progress characteristic of the post-Second World War era will continue, and that within a decade or so it will be possible to extend our lifetimes by injecting nanomachines into our bloodstreams to repair organic damage, then to secure immortality by uploading our consciousness into computer memory another decade or so later. Despite the speculation which surrounds these ideas, no-one knows or is likely to soon know how they might be realised – yet if they are to be realised in MacLeod's time-frame, historical precedent tells us that the first vestiges of the necessary technologies, not to mention the scientific understanding which precedes technological invention, must already be apparent. They are not. I rather suspect – despite what I said earlier about not mistaking authors for their works – that MacLeod's characters' desire to 'make it to the ships' is MacLeod's own, derived from a hope that technology's supposedly inevitable forward march will deliver what politicians have clearly given up on. Hence the wish-fulfilment; hence the novel's unlikelihood.

The concluding chapters feature at least two McGuffins that are both shuffled off with blink-and-you'll-miss-them perfunctoriness, and are rather disappointing. Nevertheless, one looks forward to further novels by MacLeod. Few sf authors exhibit much political awareness; to find one as intimately familiar with politics as he, is a rare pleasure. The only other such author I can name is Iain Banks. One day they will collaborate, and we'll all die of jealousy.

George R.R. Martin

A Game of Thrones

Voyager, 1996, 695pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

George R.R. Martin's return to the field after a number of years editing the *Wild Cards* and *New Voices* anthologies is nothing if not ambitious. *A Game of Thrones* appears with all the distinguishing features of the fantasy blockbuster, as Book One of *A Song of Fire and Ice*. Those distinguishing features include a map, cunningly divided into The North and The South, an Appendix listing a cast of Cecil B. DeMille proportions, and the obligatory jacket blurb announcing 'the most imaginative, ambitious and compelling fantasy epic since *Lord of the Rings*' and Martin as yet another 'true heir' to Tolkien.

This sort of gushing hype does no favours to anybody, least of all Martin. It merely confirms the view that publicity copywriting at HarperCollinsEpicFantasy has only the most tenuous links to the editorial process, and lives in its own world of instant packaging clichés. *A Game of Thrones* deserves better.

The action opens on the borders of Winterfell, where Lord Eddard Stark administers the King's Justice to a crazed and frost-bitten deserter from the Night's Watch, who guard the Great Wall against the forests of the North. With him are his sons, Bran and Robb, and their half brother, Eddard's bastard, Jon. After the execution, Jon discovers a dead direwolf and her five still-living cubs, five cubs for the three sons and two daughters of House Stark, whose banner is the direwolf. It is only as they prepare to ride away that Jon discovers the sixth pup, an albino cast out from the litter, which he takes as his own.

This sort of start is, it has to be admitted, not very subtle. We are not going to be surprised that the destinies of the

children are going to be formed in no small part by their relationships to the adopted wolf cubs.

Eddard Stark, meanwhile, has other worries. The King's Hand has died suddenly and King Robert is riding to Winterfell to offer Stark the position. This will take Eddard away from his lands in the north to the uncomfortable rivalries and intrigues of the court, and in service of a king who has changed into a spendthrift and pleasure seeker. Before he is due to leave, the family is split further as Eddard's bastard, Jon, is sent, in what amounts to permanent exile, to train for the Night's Watch on the northern Wall, and Bran falls (or is pushed) from one of towers of Winterfell and will, if he survives, be a cripple for the rest of his days.

Leaving his wife Catelyn and his eldest son Robb in charge of Winterfell, with Bran still in a coma and little Rickon too young to travel, Eddard takes his two daughters, Arya and Sansa to take up his appointment as the King's Hand. Eddard's rigid notion of honour is totally misplaced among the intrigues of court, and between Arya's headstrong nature and Sansa's cotton-headed dreams of becoming a fairytale princess, everything goes terribly wrong. On Robert's sudden death, the *Game of Thrones* moves from murder and betrayal to open warfare between the pretenders of House Lannister and the allies of House Stark. Elsewhere, both in the north and across the seas, older threats to the Kingdom are starting to gather. Meanwhile, the slow grind of seasons, generations long, is turning inexorably back again to the bitter cold of Winter.

This is all pretty much the stuff of widescreen epic fantasy, well delivered and competently told. Martin manages to keep track of a sizeable cast, although, as a number of plot threads start to develop independently towards the end, things become more episodic, underlined by Martin's technique of alternating chapters between a number of major viewpoint characters. But you do need to be aware that this is Book One in a series, and it finishes, if not on a cliff-hanger

then with enough threads left hanging to carry the action through into the next volume.

There, between the coming of Winter and the rebirth of

the Dragon Kingdom in exile across the seas, the *Song of Fire and Ice* promises to emerge more fully.

Alan Moore

Voice of the Fire (Gollancz, 1996, 320pp, £9.99)

Reviewed by Chris Amies

Science fiction has traditionally associated itself with space; with journeys through an unimaginable universe in a specific but perhaps indefinite time. What if place remains constant but the journey is through time, where the traveller instead of moving stays in one place and the vista of history thunders past, layer upon layer of accretions?

In *Voice of the Fire*, Alan Moore has drawn a three-dimensional map of his home town, Northampton, and its environs where the third dimension is not spatial, but time. He describes an area whose past is both mythic and real, because real historical personages have lived and died for ideals that may well have been mythical. The narrator of the first story, 'Hob's Hog', speaks a language which is barely recognisable as English – this being four thousand years BC, the language of these ancestral people would have been something unimaginable, but language in a story is a matter of perception and the strange perceptual shifts of the orphan boy are echoed in his speech. For him, reality and myth are the same, and the 'shagfoal' – a huge creature that sometimes seems like a black dog – is part of the real world to him. In later stories it becomes myth, and in the 18th century story of witchcraft, 'Partners in Knitting', it is specifically invoked as part of a demonic pact, along with a stoat-like creature with human hands which suggests the legendary Gef or the 'Brown Jenkin' figure in H.P. Lovecraft's 'Dreams in the Witch-House'. The stories concern murder, treachery, madness, deception, and more murder. The fire burns.

The other mythical figure who strides this world like a colossus is the horned man, the shaman, Herne the Hunter. In the longest story, 'The Cremation Fields', he is specifically a village witch-doctor, Olun, who has a map of the village tattooed on his body so that the village 'is too much a part of me. Its sicknesses are mine'. The figure since tamed, the fearsome myth of Herne and the Wild Hunt has become reduced to Santa Claus and his reindeer, but the weight of history is too great to allow the modern age to dispense so easily with myth as it does with buildings, for example Northampton's fine old structures like the New Theatre and Notre Dame School, whose wanton demolition elicits a sudden spurt of rage from Moore in the final story, 'Phipps' Fire Escape', which serves as a coda, explanation and maybe expiation of the whole book.

That mythographer of the built world, Iain Sinclair, puts in an appearance in 'Phipps' Fire Escape', too. Like Sinclair, Moore is interested in those who 'expressed contours of the spirit world in terms of stone and mortar', like Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress*, the first to 'chart the land of spirit and imagination lying under Middle England', and Robert de Senlis who built a round church, which he explained as not allowing the Devil a corner to hide in. Though in 'Limping to Jerusalem' Moore suggests that de Senlis had far stranger reasons in mind, given to him by the Masons who had the idea of building as a symbol of Divine revelation: 'The impulse is identical, to bind the site in word of symbol ... this is our lexicon ... conjure the world and populace invisible'. In *Voice of the Fire*, 'the dreamtime of each town or city is an essence that precedes the form'.

The book has an end, but the story that it tells can not; although the present century has done much to destroy sense of place by prettifying history and conveniently forgetting its mythic resonance, and seems to be the first era to destroy more than it built. As, in the last years of the 20th century, we surround ourselves with an overload of information – images coming so fast and so random that they cannot make sense, 'our culture passing from a fluid to a vaporous state' – the closing message, like the pulse beamed back by a space probe passing out of our solar system, is one of confusion but also expectation. 'All ideas are real ideas. A heavy language is engendered and employed to fix these images as marker buoys within the mind.' This is a book of signs and wonders.

Terry Pratchett

Hogfather

Gollancz, 1996, 285pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The latest Discworld novel has to be science fiction's greatest contribution to the festive season.

In Ankh-Morpork it is Hogswatch night and, of course, the Hogfather is out on his hog-drawn sleigh delivering toys to all the children who have been good. The Hogfather is a fat, jolly man in a red coat – except this year, if you look hard, despite what your brain is telling you your eyes report something else: the Hogfather seems to be tall, exceptionally thin, and doesn't carry a sack but a scythe. And why does he TALK IN CAPITALS? Readers of previous Discworld novels will know exactly who is coming down the chimney – but if there is anyone who has yet to discover the delights of the most achingly hilarious fantasy novels ever written*, well read this book and find out!

But what has happened to the real Hogfather? Susan, a governess with a most practical turn of mind (bogeymen hiding under the bed are soon dispatched with the aid of a poker) who also happens to be Death's granddaughter, is coerced into searching for him. Otherwise, she is reliably informed by Death himself, the sun will not rise next morning.

What has, in fact, happened is that certain entities have taken out a contract on the Hogfather with the Guild of Assassins. These entities refuse to divulge their names, but as they are 'the people with three million dollars' who deposit the said amount in the Guild's vaults, the Assassins don't ask too many questions. Instead they hand the contract to one of their more troublesome members, Mr Teatime (pronounced Teh-ah-tim-eh):

who saw things differently from other people, and one of the ways that he saw things differently from other people was in seeing people as things (later, Lord Downey of the Guild said, 'We took pity on him

because he'd lost both parents at an early age. I think that, on reflection, we should have wondered a bit more about that).

One of the delights of a Discworld novel is meeting new characters such as Mr Teatime, and newly created (literally) characters such as the Cheerful Fairy with her joke book and collection of clothes for charades, and the Verruca Gnome and, particularly, the Oh God of Hangovers. Of course, another delight is renewing acquaintance with old characters like Death and his horse Binky, the wizards of the Unseen University, and that grim squeaker, the Death of Rats.

Like its predecessors, *Hogfather* is very, very funny. Defining why a book is funny is (probably) harder than trying to define what makes a book fantasy or science fiction, so you'll just have to trust me on this, but I defy anyone to read *Hogfather* without laughing aloud. The book is also very, very clever. The plot gallops along, diving down side streets and doubling back on itself, yet it retains its own

unique logic and, against all the odds, manages to tie all its tenuous strands together in the end.

Along the way there are some amazing, mind-bogglingly funny scenes – such as when the Hogfather (impersonated by YOU KNOW WHO) arrives in a department store Grotto and starts giving the children the toys they actually want. Incidentally, in *Hogfather* you will also find out just what the Tooth Fairy (or Fairies, since the whole operation is run on a sort of franchise basis) does with all those teeth. Even as I write, *Hogfather* has deservedly shot to the top of the bestseller lists, so be Good and, with any luck, come Hogwatch you'll find this book in your stocking.

*The existence of readers who have not yet opened a Discworld novel (even in the special congruent reality created for the Hogfather where normal rules are suspended) is generally agreed to be an impossibility.

William Shatner

Tek Money

Simon & Schuster, 1996, 289pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Tek Money, the latest in the Tek War series written by ex-Captain Kirk, William Shatner (although Ron Goulart gets a credit in the dedication), is one of those sf novels that are really something else in disguise. This is a stab at a hard-nosed detective yarn, the many sf elements are really just a backdrop for the action, put in so that we know this is genuinely the future. The storyline, with its evil drug runners and double-dealing, could have been played out any time and place.

The thing is, this is not a very good book. The story is sketchy and definitely clichéd; the drug-runner/terrorist connection has been done to death in innumerable TV shows; the characters are eerily familiar: Jake Cardigan is Jim

Kirk merged with T.J. Hooker, and isn't Gomez, with his continual lapses into stage Spanish, just Chekov in disguise?

Normally, familiar characters or familiar plots aren't a crime; after all, there are hundreds of fantasy books out there with 'Gandalf' in them. But is this what you expect of a book with a name like William Shatner on the cover? Don't be so cynical, it isn't Shatner could have drawn on his experience of life, his career, things of substance like that; instead he seems to have used the scripts that he's read, the characters that he's played and rehased them into an odd sort of stew.

And the execution could be better. The writing is clumsy: every time that Dennis Barragray is re-introduced we are told who he is, yet when we meet the terrorist Almita suddenly for only the second time we are expected to remember exactly who she is. All very surprising when a writer like Ron Goulart has a hand in things.

Never mind, when all's said and done it will be the name on the cover which sells this book, not the quality or otherwise of its contents.

Alison Sinclair

Blueheart (Orion, 1996, 348pp, £16.99)

Reviewed by Andy Mills

In Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*, there is a debate on whether or not the planet should be terraformed or left as much as possible in its present state. In *Blueheart* Alison Sinclair attempts a variation on this which is potentially as interesting: should the water-world Blueheart be terraformed, or allowed to remain unchanged? The difference is that Sinclair's planet is habitable and many of its inhabitants have, through genetic engineering, been adapted for life in the sea. If the terraforming goes ahead, their pastoral way of life will come to an end and the adapted humans will be phased out. Rache, an adapted human who lives and works with the unadapted, or primary, humans on a research station – as such, he stands apart from his fellows and straddles the two cultures – has a proposal for leaving the planet unchanged which is to be considered by the powers that be:

Over the years I have come to see it as wrong to regard Blueheart as we have all the other planets. Nowhere else had so evolved an ecosystem. In terraforming we must destroy that ecosystem. Never mind the experience we have in reconstruction and diversification, what we recreate will not be Blueheart as we know it now. And I cannot be persuaded, that for all human experience, we will do it better ... I would rather we be adapted to the seas rather than the seas be adapted to us.

(Curiously, a middle ground – such as the institution of a limited number of islands, which could provide the land-mass needed by primaries without interfering with the lifestyle of the adapted humans – is never discussed in the novel).

Fate intervenes in Rache's life when he finds a body in the sea and is thrown into a maelstrom of plots when it is discovered that the dead woman is an illegal adteepe, one whose adaptations have not been sanctioned or registered. And there are a lot more like her out there ...

There are issues addressed in this novel which are both interesting and important, such as the religious and ethical arguments against changing the nature of humanity (indeed, what constitutes humanity?) and the rights of minority cultures. It is probably likely, as Sinclair posits, that should planets be colonised, indigenous humans would be adapted and allowed to increase in population before the debate on whether or not to start terraforming

takes place. But alas, the treatment is dull; the novel lacks either vitality or colour. Blueheart could be a marvellous planet to explore, along with the societies which inhabit it, yet it is rarely brought to life (a lava eel hunt being a notable exception). Whilst the lifestyles of the pastorals and the primaries are touched upon, they never come alive. Nor is the scale of the planet adequately conveyed: key characters meet with each other in unlikely circumstances. Talking of which, two events stand out in particular: in the first, Rache's lover's bracelet is recovered from the seabed, a feat which is mind-bogglingly improbable given the size of this ocean world and the small number of people who live on it, and in the second the bad guy reveals to a young scientist, for no good reason at all (apart from allowing the information to be used against him in the book's resolution), his dastardly plot to infect the adapted humans with a virus. And it is feasible that the existence of thirty thousand illegally adapted humans – one tenth of the entire population of Blueheart – could be kept secret?

Too quickly, Sinclair reveals to her readers what is going on on Blueheart; the novel then trudges to a somewhat predictable conclusion. It certainly does not help that her characters are almost uniformly intense and/or angry, which wears very quickly. To be perfectly frank, by the end of this overly long novel I cared little about what happened to any of them. *Blueheart* is a disappointing treatment of some interesting questions.

Angus Wells

Exile's Challenge

Orion, 1996, 440pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

In *Vector* 188 I wrote of *Exile's Children* by Angus Wells: 'On the whole, this is a moderately good novel, with little scope for a direct sequel (a rarity these days), although he might reuse the world again.'

To prove me wrong, Mr Wells has come up with the second volume. While the first book appeared to end satisfactorily, it is quite obvious that the two books consist of one story. The first is about two sets of characters who only meet in the last few pages; the follow-up is what happens to them together, and how everything ties in and ties up.

This is not a book to be read on its own: it starts immediately after the first one ends and makes no real effort at a refresh. This is a plus: too many books contain a first chapter which tries to then recapitulate the plot and start the new story off, I much prefer writers who ignore this completely, as Wells does.

Exile's Challenge lives up to the first book very well. The progression of the plot from the denouement of the first into further conflicts and a final resolution is a nice flowing piece. The characters continue to be believable, and the plot flows from them, not the other way around. We see how Fyssa, Arcole and Davyd are taken in by the Matawaye and become

part of their people; Davyd's dreaming talent ensures him a place, but not an easy one. Captain Tomas Var, one of the Autarchy's Officers from the first novel, comes into his own as the focus of the non-matawaye side of the story, though this time, he and the rest meet up before the last chapter.

The parallels with the conquest of the Native American tribes by Europeans is very apparent, although Wells turns it into a more peaceful joining than was the case in history. This is reminiscent of the way Guy Gavriel Kay has taken a tragic part of our history in his recent fiction and re-written it into a more satisfactory mould. The Matawaye are recognisably in the Native American mould, but different enough that they come alive in the world in which they are set, rather than seeming like tropical plants transferred to Siberia.

The Breakers, the extremely nasty horde from the first book, make a repeat showing. These are bad guys who get up in the morning and think 'God, I'm evil! Yeah!' – this sort of fantasy bad guy often seems less than lifelike, but Wells manages to pull it off, here they are believable – mostly. Where they came from, and where they expect to go next was and remains a mystery, but some of their justifications are there – some similarities with the White Witch from Narnia come to mind in their roles as avengers of sins.

In short, this is another solid novel that is worth a look, but seek out *Exile's Children* first.

Philip G. Williamson

Enchantment's Edge

Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 376pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

The latest offering from Philip G. Williamson is the first book in a new trilogy and a departure, not only from his popular *Firstworld* series, but from his creation, the loveable rogue Ronbas Dinbig.

Enchantment's Edge is a principality, literally on the edge of a strange area called Enchantment, a place of magic, a place where many have ventured, but none have ever returned. As such it is an enigma, and is deemed to be where the Gods reside. Magic seeps from Enchantment and plays its part in keeping Enchantment's Edge generally isolated from the rest of the world.

King Leth and his beautiful Queen, Issul, rule Enchantment's Edge at a time of growing internal religious conflict which is heightened by news of a vast army, the Krai – an unstoppable tide of dour and implacable foes – approaching from the west. Leth's refusal to allow open worship of the various Gods of Enchantment fuels political and religious machinations and rebellion. When the city is

attacked by unnatural and deadly creatures, it is seen as proof that an unknown God from Enchantment has allied with the invaders and that Leth has fallen foul of the Gods. Besieged from all quarters, Leth struggles not only to retain sovereignty over Enchantment's Edge, but to find a way to unite his people against a common enemy.

Meanwhile Queen Issul, unable to burden Leth with any more problems, is on the track of the Legendary Child: a being whose return is believed to herald the end of the world according to the outlawed religious faction, the True Sept. Issul tries to arrange a meeting with the leader of the True Sept in order to confirm her fears – that the Legendary Child is already born. Much to the chagrin of the Lord High Investigator, Fectur, who is charged with all security and the safety of the royal line, Issul eventually sets off in secrecy for the village of Lastmeadow escorted by only a handful of royal guards, in search of answers.

Leth, finding his beloved Issul gone into possible danger without his knowledge, determines to build a bridge of mutual convenience with Grey Venger, the leader of the True Sept. Fectur, whilst begrudgingly assisting Leth, begins to suspect that the pressures of kingship in these troubled

times has mentally unhinged Leth – and begins to make plans of his own.

Finally, to add a bit of magic and mystery to an already fascinating plot, there is the matter of the blue box that Leth's mother handed to him when she abdicated, a box that for weeks, Leth is unable to open. When one day the box mysteriously opens in Leth's hands, he is drawn into what seems to be another world, a completely 'blue' world, with apparently only one inhabitant: Orbus. Orbus appears to be a rather dotty old man who speaks, not in riddles, but of things that are beyond mere human comprehension. Orbus is one of the Gods of Enchantment, but Leth struggles, not only to understand Orbus's teachings, but to determine whose side Orbus is on – can he be trusted?

Having read and enjoyed several of Williamson's earlier novels, he has become one of those authors that I look out for – one who seems to get better with every book he writes. *Enchantment's Edge* is no exception. Williamson is a storyteller in the true sense of the word, and here he has created a tale that defies anyone not to want more. A book full of intrigue, love, war and magic, stirred into a plot that asks questions of the reader, *demand*s that the reader thinks beyond the page. This is fantasy at its very best, and if there is any justice, Williamson should be winning awards for this. Don't take my word for it, folks – go out and get a copy now!

James Woodall

The Man in the Mirror of the Book (Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 333pp, £20.00)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

In 1927 a story called 'Leyenda Policial' ('Police Tale') appeared in the Argentine journal *Martín Fierro*, it was republished a year later as 'Hombres Pelearon' ('Men Fought') and later still as 'Hombres de las Orillas' ('Men from the Edge of Town') as by 'Francisco Bustos'. Only in 1933 did the story reappear – now retitled again 'Hombre de la Esquina Rosada' ('Man of the Rose-Coloured Corner', later translated as 'Streetcorner Man') – under the real name of its author, Jorge Luis Borges. Borges was already in his mid-30s, a poet with a penchant for the various literary movements of post-First World War Europe (especially the Spanish *Ultraists*) and a reasonable critical reputation in his native Argentina, where he was involved with a variety of short-lived magazines. 'Streetcorner Man' was his first story, within 15 years he would have written most of the stories upon which his reputation rests. By the time his *ficciones* were being translated – first into French, later into English – and generating the excitement that would make him one of the most highly acclaimed writers of the century, he had virtually fallen silent. Only a few collections – *El Informe de Brodie* (*Doctor Brodie's Report*, 1970) and *El Libro de Arena* (*The Book of Sand*, 1975) – appeared after the early 1950s, and there are few who would argue that these contain anything like his best work.

It is a meagre output for such a great reputation. There are no novels (the longest of his short stories probably doesn't amount to as much as a novelle), and though his poetry is acclaimed in the Spanish-speaking world for its rich language it has made little real impression in translation. But when you realise that his stories include 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', 'The Aleph', 'The Circular Ruins', 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', 'Death and the Compass', 'The Library of Babel', 'The Garden of the Forking Paths', 'The Immortal', 'Funes the Memorious' and a host of others, it is clear why Borges is one of the most important writers in the history of twentieth century fantastic literature. His encyclopedic essay-stories, bristling with (often misleading or invented) cultural references, present a bleak and uncompromising picture of eternity and otherness. It raised the images that have shaped contemporary fantastic literature, provided a haunting reference that can still be detected today, and set a standard acknowledged by practically every writer who has ventured beyond the known.

Though he was never a magic realist, despite what some people have claimed, he was fundamental in paving the way for the magic realists; creating a climate in which Latin American literature could take the world stage, and establishing a pattern in which the real world and the other world were inextricably intertwined. Yet all of this came from most unpromising soil: a big fish in the small world of Argentine poetry, Borges was nervous of prose, nervous of life. He lived with his mother until she died, in her 90s; he did not marry, and probably had no sexual experience (after a brief and unsettling adolescent visit to a brothel) until he was in his 60s; he went blind in middle life, and practically all his greatest work was projected onto this blank, unseeing screen.

James Woodall's biography of Borges is not the first (Emir Rodríguez Monegal's *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* came out in 1978), nor the last (Woodall reports at least 13 other biographers working on Borges), nor the best. His prose is often clumsy; his analysis of the stories, where he attempts it, tends to be slight and superficial; his structure, though generally chronological, refers back and forth through time in a way that can be confusing. Nor, it must be said, does Borges's life make an exciting read: after a brief visit to Europe in his early teens, Borges lived all his life in Buenos Aires until the years of his international fame when he toured extensively to deliver lectures and receive awards. He lived quietly in a series of small flats, he worked as a librarian, he went blind, he had no affairs or great romances, he was an outspoken critic of Peron but later became (probably wrongly) identified as a supporter of the *junta* but was never really active in politics in any way. Having said all that, the man somehow transcends the dullness of his life, he lived in books and it was books that provided the wellspring for his fiction. And Woodall has been scrupulous in his research, presenting a readable and interesting portrait of this incredibly important writer.

PULP FICTION

Paperback Reviews
edited by
Tanya Brown

Gregory Benford

Timescape

Vista, 1996, 412pp, £5.99

Reviewed by John D. Owen

First published in 1980, Greg Benford's *Timescape* won the both the Nebula and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, so it is interesting to go back and see how well it has worn. The immediate answer is not well, as it has suffered the fate of many very-near-future stories, in that time has overtaken it.

The story is split between the 'future' of 1998, largely in Cambridge, and the early sixties in California, and broadly tells of a project in 1998 to transmit a message via tachyon beams into the past to avert the environmental catastrophe that is threatens the millennial world. The group of scientists in Cambridge plan to influence the results of experiments carried out by American scientists in 1962, using a tachyon beam to introduce a coded signal into the 1962 results. The best part of the book is the detailing of how scientists work, both the 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration that goes into it, plus the struggle to obtain funding to buy necessary equipment and keep the experiments going for long enough to achieve a publishable result.

As a working physicist (and one who experienced the physics scene in California in the early 60s), Benford is on firm ground when he is telling the early part of the story. He's on more uncertain territory writing about England and Cambridge, portraying a rather dated (even for 1980) view of England, and its class structures, a dating that looks even more embarrassing in the late nineties.

Unfortunately, Benford's story now seems to lack pace, dwelling overlong on the personal difficulties of the characters, while skimming on the details of the future environment problems. The plot drags, until the reader is almost screaming 'Get on with it!' at the characters. The obvious errors of faulty prediction stick out, in that the Soviet Union still exists, huge environmental disasters abound worldwide, and the computers in use in 1998 seem rather quaint. A classic text, some say: but I don't think it has worn all that well at all.

Simon Clarke

Darker

NEL, 1996, 410pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

In 1990 BBR Books published Simon Clarke's first short story anthology, *Blood & Grit*. One of the stories is called 'Bite Back' and it follows a young man as he attempts to escape the deadly clutches of an unnamed force, a shadowy creature that can flatten cars and snap telegraph poles as easily as a match.

With *Darker* Clarke has expanded this idea, given the force a motivation for its behaviour and replaced the sex obsessed youth of 'Bite Back' with Richard Young, a video scriptwriter (yeah, right) and his family. One day Richard's young daughter discovers the remains of a white BMW crashed in the field opposite his house. A few days later a stranger called Michael appears at their door covered in blood, claiming he's been in an accident. In fact he's been living in their house since the car crash. Michael intimates that he is being chased and requires police assistance, so Richard and his family escort Michael to a police station. But they soon discover that what he is being chased by is not of this earth ... This is a wild and bloody chase story, crossing from one side of the country to the other as Richard pursues Michael and the force, the monster, pursues them both, until at the climax, with much gnashing of teeth and wailing and blood-letting, the thing is sent back to the demonic place from whence it came and all is still upon the face of the earth.

This is a novel about power and its misuse, wherein Clarke has visualised power as a definable but barely controllable force – a sort of veiled warning to us all. Yet the similes are barely articulated and what we are left with is an entertaining British horror novel. Good fun and all that, but a disappointment after *Blood Crazy* and *Nailed by The Heart*.

Arthur C Clarke & Mike McQuay

Richter 10

Vista, 1996, 446pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Andy Mills

Despite the relative difference in type size of their names on the front cover, this is – as Clarke himself makes clear in the foreword – very much the late Mike McQuay's novel. And possibly the most fascinating aspect of reading it is comparing the final version with Clarke's original 850 word movie outline, his contribution to the project.

The starting point for both outline and novel is 1994, when young Lewis Crane loses his parents to the LA earthquake. Henceforth he dedicates his life to defeating nature and trying to ensure that the menace to man represented by the destructive forces of the earthquake is removed forever. As one might expect, Clarke's outline appears a more cerebral venture than McQuay's product. Instead of scientific discourse there is much action, and McQuay's future world is more of a dystopia than I suspect Clarke would ever have made it. Some of McQuay's invention is, it has to be said, plain silly, such as a semi-sentient replica of the Earth upon which Crane bases his earthquake predictions, and a key figure – who rises to become President of the United States – who is a woman masquerading as a man. But I do suspect the novel would translate into a fun action movie since McQuay handles the earthquake set pieces well; his description of the growth of a violent, fundamentalist Islamic movement is also chillingly plausible.

Obviously Clarke's name has been used to sell the book to a mass public, but if a publisher out there wants to try a refreshingly different angle, I'm happy to supply any number

of outlines: Andy Mills and Iain M Banks looks good to me for starters ...

Michael Crichton

The Lost World

Arrow, 1996, 433pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Tony Cullen

He's a bit of an odd fish, Michael Crichton. He is generally considered a writer of pot-boilers, 'airport novels', and worst of all – *bestsellers*. With some exceptions – like *Disclosure* – he writes what would, in an only slightly different setting, be considered as some kind of low-grade hard sf. His books have all the right qualifications: lots of scientific info-dumps, off-the-shelf characters who take second place in the plot to the ideas, and a story-line which follows all the basic precepts of a thriller.

In this case we have *The Lost World*, billed not merely as a sequel, but as 'The Successor to *Jurassic Park*'. And indeed this book does absolve you from any need to read the original. The plot, such as it is, is almost identical. A bunch of scientists explore the *other* island where the *Jurassic Park* dinosaurs were actually raised (so you thought they could keep an adolescent Tyrannosaurus in that iddy biddy lab?). In order for there to be a plot, things go wrong, the party become separated, they reunite and escape, with the help (particularly when computer expertise is required) of two bright pre-teen children who just happen to have come along for the ride. Velociraptors and Tyrannosaurs do their stuff, along with lots of other saurians most of whom probably won't make it into the inevitable movie. There is even a subplot involving a biotechnology company trying to steal dinosaur eggs. It all sounds horribly familiar.

Overall this is a deeply dull and disappointing book with a highly unconvincing plot. In the market his books are pitched at, Crichton's works have the virtue of usually being original, whatever his other faults as a writer. But this is nothing more than a tired re-run, and an exercise in exploiting a ready market, particularly since the sequel movie isn't going to be based on this book.

**Michael Crichton &
Anne Marie Martin**

Twister: The Screenplay

Arrow, 1996, 182pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Susan Badham

I haven't been to see *Twister*, but I'm told that it is essentially a B movie with spectacular special effects. This book is the original screenplay, rather than the final version, and as such it's really only for film buffs and completists.

The plot is pretty standard – personal relationship traumas played out against the backdrop of, in this case (but insert random event), large columns of superfast air trashing homes and communities. The major difference is that the tornadoes are not just the background scenery – they are the point of the movie.

Don't get me wrong. I'm really excited about these new special effects. I look forward to seeing the science fiction films that will be made now that the film makers can execute the novelists' visions on screen. But a good film happens when you integrate great special effects or scene settings with a strong story (All together now: "He say you Blade Runner...")

Twister appears to be a case of 'nice pictures, shame about the plot'. Even if you really liked the film, don't buy this book: get the video instead and invest in a big TV.

Jack Deighton

A Son of the Rock

Orbit, 1997, 384pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Alan is an engineer on a tour of the planets prior to settling into a job with a mining corporation. On the planet Copper, being torn apart to provide metals for the expanding commonwealth of Orth, he encounters an old man who calls himself a Son of the Rock: the sole remnant of the settlers who arrived in the diaspora centuries before. Unlike them, he has refused to take Euthuol, a drug which maintains a youthful appearance while not stopping the ageing process: therefore he has grown visibly old. Alan has similarly refused to take the drug, due to an inherited genetic disorder which means it could kill him.

The old man eventually dies, and his mountain is torn apart to provide the iridium for the matter transmitters which are replacing hyperspace ships. Alan, whom the old man named as a fellow Son of the Rock, discovers that the mountains of his own planet are to be similarly dismembered, and begins a campaign against it – which, because he too is no visibly growing old, becomes a campaign against Orth's oppressive social conformity, particularly its demand that everyone take Euthuol. The novel is written as though it were Alan's memoirs.

There are innumerable parallels with the real world. On the planet Copper, the mining station is called Roodland; here, Redland Aggregates plans to level a Hebridean mountain to provide gravel for new motorways. Corporations such as the Rio Tinto Zinc strip the Third World of resources, dispossessing indigenous cultures to do so. Orth's constant quest for novelty replicates our own rapid shifts of fashion, and its peoples' desire to look forever young is our own. Orth's cheap matter transmission is akin to modern packaged jet travel, which makes everywhere foreign indistinguishable from everywhere else. One inevitably wonders why these important questions of cultural and environmental colonialism are addressed through a science fiction novel rather than dealt with directly.

Perhaps it's symptomatic of our depoliticised age that we find it easier to cope with such issues via fiction – which in this case means that the tone is too cool and the message unfortunately muffled. But this is his first novel: Deighton should get better.

John Douglas

Hard Shoulder

NEL, 1996, 275pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Sebastian Philips

John Douglas's latest novel, *Hard Shoulder*, is an enjoyable piece of juvenile horror. The plot is simple enough – a man pursues a phantom truck which killed his daughter, finally tracking it down with the assistance of a young psychic whose hatred manifests itself as a phantom train. There are a few evil doctors, and rape with black rubber dildoes, but nothing too challenging or offensive. Equally, there are lots of descriptions of mangled bodyparts, trucks running over people, peeling flesh etc. Fairly basic stuff which adolescents will enjoy, but it's not very cerebral.

Hard Shoulder is a very predictable book, overlong and yes, there is a smattering of lesbian sex to keep things bouncing through – it's difficult not to skim the last hundred pages as the end is as obvious as – well, a big truck. Overall, there is nothing shocking or frightening here, but any horror fan will have read much worse than this.

Gardner Dozois (Ed.)

*The Best New SF:
9th Annual Collection*
Raven, 1996, 687pp, £7.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Titles can be confusing. What is the "9th Annual Collection" in Britain is actually the "Thirteenth Annual Collection" if you get the American incarnation, *The Year's Best Science Fiction*. Either way, this purports to bring together the best short sf published during 1995.

Now, there are a number of qualifications we need to make in considering such a book. The first, curiously enough, concerns the word "short". This collection makes a big thing about containing "more than 250,000 words of fantastic fiction", a more than hefty amount, yet it contains only 24 stories. Ask any writer of science fiction these days and you will be told that there isn't much of a market for novelettes, or especially novellas; editors will tell you there is no call for them; people who count the nominations for our awards will say there are far fewer works that qualify in the longer categories. Yet the great majority of the stories selected as the "best" are novelettes or novellas - Poul Anderson's "Genesis" is not far short of being a novel. There is a moral here, somewhere, but it would probably take more space than I have available in this review to tease it out.

An even trickier word, of course, is "best". The first thing to be said, of course, is that this is "best" according to the tastes of editor Gardner Dozois. He clearly has his favourites. Of the 22 writers featured here (both Greg Egan and Ursula K. Le Guin get two shots), all but one have featured in one or more of the previous 12 collections, some many times over. The newcomer, David Marusek (whose story, "We Were Out of Our Minds with Joy", is one of the freshest and most entertaining of the stories here), is acclaimed by Dozois as one of the most promising new writers around - and the story originally appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, incidentally edited by Dozois. Perhaps it is no surprise that Dozois's taste as editor of one of the leading SF magazines around should be reflected in his taste as editor of the best of the year collection; so it is worth noting that only eight of these stories appeared first in that magazine, though it is better represented than any other single source.

The point is that these may not be your best stories. My own selection would be very different - but I suppose that is part of the fun of these things. I am convinced, for example, that only Le Guin's name could have got "Coming of Age in Karhide" into print in the first place: it is exquisitely written, but the characters are surprisingly perfunctory and the story is non-existent, I have never felt so strong a sense of "so what?" at the end of a story by so reputable a writer. To see it turn up here, therefore, is the sort of shock that makes one question the whole enterprise. Not that Le Guin's other story, "A Woman's Liberation", is really that much better: there is plot and character, but one can't help noting that it is first and foremost a didactic message, and the propaganda is neither particularly original or particularly challenging.

Others that don't make the grade? Robert Reed and Michael F. Flynn have both done far better than the lacklustre offerings here, they are mechanical exercises in writing that go through the paces without any special verve or freshness. Anderson's *magnum opus* would have been twice as good at half the length, sprawled over so many pages it is merely self-indulgent and flabby. John Kessel ("Some Like it Cold"), Michael Swanwick ("Radio Waves"), James Patrick Kelly ("Think Like a Dinosaur") all pursue ideas that don't feel original in ways that don't feel like they're really trying. You can see what I mean when I suggest that people are chosen for inclusion on the strength of how familiar their

names are.

But if these are not the best stories of 1995, others among the company clearly are. Greg Egan's "Luminous" is good enough, but it is outshone by his other selection, "Wang's Carpets" which is a stunningly vivacious picture of the far future. Allen Steele's "The Death of Captain Future" may not actually be great sf, and it certainly doesn't take us anywhere particularly new, but it is a joyously iconoclastic retake on an old pulp sf hero. "Feigenbaum Number" by Nancy Kress is a delightful idea that is perhaps not developed as well as it might have been, but it works as a good story none the less, and "Looking for Kelly Dahl" by Dan Simmons is a superbly twisted adventure. But the two best stories here are Brian Stableford's wonderfully mordant future history of a future history, "Mortimer Gray's *History of Death*" which manages the difficult trick of convincing us that this future scholarship is real; and Paul J. McAuley's "Recording Angel", a story I raved about when I first encountered it in *New Legends* but which is even better when revisited.

This may not fully justify the "best" in the title, and the growing length of the contributions suggests that short sf is going the same otiose way as the novel where one volume is now no longer enough; nevertheless, there are stories here that more than repay the cost of entry, and all-in-all this is as good a survey of the horizon as you are likely to find.

Mary Gentle

Ancient Light

Vista, 1996, 782pp, £6.99

Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

After two excursions to Orthe (the now-republished *Golden Witchbreed*, together with *Ancient Light*), Mary Gentle abandoned the planet in favour of her White Crow novels. She left behind a world which had slid to interecine warfare consequent upon the Trade and Aid practices of Earth's PanOceania Company. The Eldorado sought by trade with Ortheans is the source of artefacts and 'ancient light' which may have survived the virtual extinction of the Golden Witchbreed. This race had preceded, and had in fact created, the Ortheans. It was, however, the military use of 'ancient light' that had devastated much of the planet, so incurring an Orthean resistance to technology. Unfortunately, such resistance was overcome when Earth military technology was traded to claimants to the Golden Empire's hegemony. While interaction between 'outworld' (human) individuals, and between them and individual Ortheans, carries along the story's drama, there is also powerful mega-drama in the planet's ongoing history. Its first settlers, the 'Eldest Empire', were replaced by the 'Golden' humanoids they imported, whose line in turn became extinct save for some interbreeding with the native Ortheans, in turn their successors. It is an exemplary patterning of cultures' rise-fall-and-succession, left intriguingly unfinished.

The 'I' in both novels in Lynne Christie, who in this second novel becomes Representative of the Company. Her ambivalence grows as duty to the Company contends with Orthean identifications and affections. The reader is skilfully led to feel these tensions. Opening pages convey wonderfully the spell the planet exercises on the returning Christie. Then, as you go with her across the Inner Sea or to the cities of the Desert Coast, you become so familiar with Orthean words and phrases that resort to the glossary is unnecessary. It's rather like travelling abroad and having just enough of a language to get by. At one point Christie says of a newly-arrived colleague: "I saw that she had that look we all have after a few weeks on-world ... In the Service we call it

'grounding in.' Readers are quickly 'grounded in' and sense little of the artifice of the genre-writer's technique. More than in most such creations, both alien scene and aliens are so contrived as to seem natural while being at the same time uniquely exotic.

Rob Grant

Backwards

Penguin, 1996, 342pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Liam Proven

It's hard to know what to say about *Backwards*. The prologue's easy: it's a *Red Dwarf* novel, by half of the team behind the TV series - Rob Grant and Doug Naylor, who between them also wrote the first two *Red Dwarf* novels, *Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers* and *Better than Life*. Naylor wrote the third book, *Last Human*, alone, and now it's Grant's turn. It's funny, in places hilarious - at least, if you like *Red Dwarf*'s, ahem, "robust" humour. It should be; Grant and Naylor are experienced humourists, having worked on *Spitting Image* amongst other things.

Neither of the team reveals why the partnership broke up, but it seems likely that Grant wanted to go his own way. The dedications suggest that *Backwards* was started before *Last Human*, but took longer to complete: reading *Last Human*, this is very believable, as that book embodied much of the worst of *Red Dwarf*: schoolboy humour, hallucinatorily-convoluted non-sensical storylines, and silly anti-scientific fantasy. Despite this, *SFX* and others gave it good reviews, and it would have suited one type of *Dwarf*-fan: those who loved the series for its silly funniness, not as SF. *Backwards* is a far more mature and well-written novel, and shows a possible reason for the split of the gestalt entity "Grant Naylor" - Rob Grant has far greater potential than scripting *Dwarf*, whilst Doug Naylor has stuck with the BBC for the latest series, *Red Dwarf VIII*, which (judging by the first episode) has lost all its redeeming intelligence and style.

The title is deceptive: it's not just a novelisation of the famous 'Backwards' episode, where Lister finally finds his way back to (an) Earth, but unfortunately one where the flow of time is reversed, cause following effect. It starts there, and adds some interesting new twists to this established idea. Grant's intelligent writing shines here: when Naylor invents irrational scenarios such as a planet with a habitable ocean underneath a layer of molten lava, created by an engineered virus, Grant displays detailed knowledge of feline penile anatomy. Grant explores the (quite genuine) theory that time need not flow in one particular dimension, and what it would be like for 'forwards' beings to live in a 'backwards' world. Later - or is that earlier? - he goes on to other *Dwarf* episodes, including Ace Rimmer in 'Smoke Me a Kipper, I'll Be Back for Breakfast' and the classic Wild West pastiche, together with a lot of new material. I'm a fairly keen watcher of the series, but there's plenty here that I didn't recognise.

This book is a joy. The prose clearly and elegantly chronicles the ridiculous adventures of Lister, Rimmer, Kryten and the Cat, along with a welcome return for Norman Lovett's Holly. Unlike *Last Human*, the team's exploits hang together in a vaguely believable way, and the novel is a real page-turner - unlike its prequel, which I waded through for the sake of research. Don't think that BSFA reviewers never suffer for their art. Even if you were put off by *Last Human*, you should give *Backwards* a try: it's a better book by far.

Phil Janes

I, Arnold

Millenium, 1995, 364pp, £4

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

There is a kind of mantra for reviewing humorous sf or fantasy novels: "If you like this sort of thing, you'll like this one, and if you don't, you won't". (Quite how to fill the remaining four-hundred-and-sixty-one words of this review is then problematic, of course, and here's another twenty). But what sort of thing? What if you come to volume three, not knowing what sort of thing it is? What if you are given a book to review when you can't defend yourself - or, more likely, come across volume two or three in a library.

For a start the book's cover is graced by a quotation from Chris Tarrant: "[His] sense of humour is as silly as mine". This presumably is meant to be some kind of recommendation. On the other hand, *The Times* figures it is "wonderfully unexpected", whatever that means. And a scan of the blurb braces us for the fact that it is wacky, or rather "Janes'[s] fastest, wackiest novel yet". So if you like this sort of thing...

But let us persist with it: a prologue fills in the story so far. As does the first chapter for those of short memories. Two supreme beings are locked into a game to decide which is the most supreme, and are using lesser species to fight it out. In the third round, the motley group of humans are required to track down a renegade robot.

In order to negotiate this prologue, you must first overcome the hurdle of the main character being named "Richard Curtis". Curtis is of course a talent behind *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *The Vicar of Dibley*, rather than a bumbling, sub-Arthur Dent hero. This Curtis, on the other hand, often only seems to exist so that others can call him Dick. Oh, yes. Because this is a comedy, all the characters obviously have to bicker.

And because this is a post-Pratchett comedy, the bickering comes complete with footnotes. Hence, after Curtis is called "Dick", we get the note: "Not as in 'Going to the fancy dress party as a petrol pump'." Quote. And why not? Or, rather, why?

So the bickering heroes have to run around aimlessly, trying to find this robot, whilst one of them stands for president and Curtis avoids being identified as the messiah who shares his name. And an assassin, rather like the Carrie Fisher character from *The Blue Brothers* - only slightly less amusingly - is trying unsuccessfully to kill them every few chapters.

The funniest comedy relies on understatement, embarrassment and stylish plotting. It does say "Hey, I'm funny", make you cringe and throw in endless irrelevancies. If you like Robert Rankin, then you may well like this. I laughed once - as I did with the last Rankin I read - which suggests the mantra holds.

**Stephen Jones &
David Sutton (eds)**

Dark Terrors

Vista, 1996, 379pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Sebastian Phillips

Dark Terrors is the latest collation of short stories assembled by two of the UK's most knowledgeable editors. The stories assembled herein are a very mixed lot, as they will be in any collection which reflects the editors' choice. The stories range from the very good indeed ('More Tomorrow' by Michael Smith, 'Fee' by Peter Straub and 'Dinner at Grief's table' by Roberta Lannes) through the fairly ho hum ('The Puppets' by Ramsey Campbell) right down to the truly dreadful

(‘Where the Bodies are Buried 3: Black and White and Red all over’ by Kim Newman). In general, the standard of writing is very high and leans towards dark fantasy rather than the classic ghost story or splatter. Some, such as Lisa Morton’s ‘Love Eats’ and Jeff VanderMeer’s ‘At the Crossroads Burying the Dog’ have a disturbing lyricism to them.

This collection contains work from some of the biggest names in horror and is particularly representative of the more literate end of the British fiction scene. Overall, it is very strong and anyone who enjoys a more cerebral line of horror will find something here to please them.

My only complaint with this collection is that a number of the well-known authors have contributed some pretty weak stories. I can’t help feeling the collection would have been much stronger without the presence of some of these ‘usual suspects’. Brian Lumley with ‘Uzzi’ and Christopher Fowler with ‘The Laundry Imp’ are particularly slack. Obviously, readers buy a collection because they know the authors whose work is contained – on the other hand, they also like to see work by less well known writers and that is where this collection falls short.

St. Jude, R. U. Sirius & Bart Nagel *Cyberpunk Handbook [The Real Cyberpunk Fakebook]*
Arrow, 1996, 192pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Liam Proven

Or - if you aren't yet familiar with haqrese^[1] - ‘Cool, dude!’ After reading this book, if you can't at least pretend to be a hacker, you're a rancid lamey.^[2]

The Net is growing in significance every day, but as it spreads its tendrils throughout the lives of much of the developed world, its original denizens are being left high and dry. When the Net was young and text-based, the haqrs who owned it were rebellious kids, reveling in their superior knowledge of UNIX arcania and developing their own subculture. This is, guessably, much involved with the youth culture of rich young North Americans, often rebellious teenagers whose mastery of the systems was matched with a certain degree of scholastic and social inadequacy. Thus, a new dialect of English, based around intentional misspellings, abbreviations, cryptic computer references and so on. This evolved, as rapidly as anything involved with computers, in a context of purely text-based, nonlinear, non-real-time communication, where everything can potentially be overheard, so impenetrable obscurity is a positive boon. Off the Net, the haquer community developed other peculiarities, of dress (from nerdy ‘I-don't-care-how-I-look’ to Gothic ‘all-that-matters-is-how-I-look’), ‘challenging’ hairstyles, attitude and behaviour, recognition signals, recreational activities, and even diet (ramen, twinkies and Jolt cola).

And now, it's all fading away in the bright harsh light of the World Wide Web: the Internet for all, made so easy to operate that the newbies are taking over. The time is nigh to document this disappearing culture along with the aboriginal indians, and R. U. Sirius and ‘Saint’ Jude Milhon are just the people to do it. Part of the original teams behind *Wired*, *Mondo2000* and *boING boING* (seminal Infobahn zines all), these guys are definitely members of the elite. No-one seems to be quite sure what Bart Nagel's doing in there, but it's probably something dull but important like checking that most of the words are spelled correctly and in roughly the

conventional order.

The Cyberpunk Handbook is a vital tool for all sorts of people. If you suspect that someone you know^[3] may be a hacker, this will let you identify the signs. It won't help you do anything about it, but at least you will have some idea what they're on about. It will give you a brief, glancing introduction to deep geek psychology. It will even help a newbie take their first proper steps into the Big Room, and warn them away from the really dangerous bits. More importantly, of course, if you already are a something of a hacker, then it has several functions. First, it will tell you what level you are. For instance:

- Do you have a Net account, Web access and an address? [Newbie]
- Do you have at least three addresses, one ISP account and several online service ones, know what the current version of Netscape Navigator is, and have a non-lame homepage? [Cyber-yup]
- Do you roll your own Linux kernels and run an ISP? [Dude]
- Do you have lunch with Tim Berners-Lee^[4] and definitive answers to RFCs? [Leet^[5]]

Secondly, it's a step-by-step DIY guide to upgrading y. knowledge, and therefore cyberhood. (For instance, it list number of the seminal SF books and films that you should know.) Thirdly, you should laugh your nose-ring off.

Recommended. 4/4 shuriken^[6]. OK, it's not actually science fiction, but it *talks* about SF. READ THIS BOOK!

Paul Kearney *Hawkwood's Voyage: Book 1 of The Monarchies of God*
Vista, 1996, 382pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

When so much fantasy takes place in a comfy, soft-edged world of wishful thinking, Paul Kearney's new trilogy is an exciting contrast: it is tough, harshly imagined and, in consequence, wonderfully believable.

The West, a loose conglomeration of separate nations dominated by the Ramusian Church (who have a high Pontiff and worship The Saint), is under ferocious attack from the invading Merduks (who have Sultans, fight with scimitars and worship Ahrimuz). The West's holy city, Aekir, is sacked and destroyed, its womenfolk raped, its menfolk put to the sword or crucified; and the response of the Inceptines (a party-within-a-party inside the Ramusian hierarchy) is simply to burn more and more heretics and tighten their grip on power.

Sea-captain Richard Hawkwood is sent by King Abeleyn to voyage across the western ocean to seek out an unknown land, described in an ancient ship's logbook. He is to take with him (in addition to his own crew) a miscellaneous group of dweomers and mages, fleeing from Inceptine persecution, and a band of soldiers, live animals and other necessities of settlement in a strange land. Hawkwood is also accompanied by Murad, a cousin of the king, who is to rule the new colony on Abeleyn's behalf.

But Hawkwood is not told of the other message of the old logbook: that previous explorations of the west have been ravaged by werewolves and other shapeshifters – and we know that there is at least one on Hawkwood's vessel.

[1] Challenging spelling is part of the cool, OK?

[2] Don't understand? You may be one already. Do something!

[3] That's ‘Elite’ to you

[4] – A kinda cyber-star”

[1] Challenging spelling is part of the cool, OK?

[2] Don't understand? You may be one already. Do something! QUICK!

The differences between the two competing religions seem to be purely cultural; we are spared analysis of their doctrines but not their intrigues. The battles, the sea journey – and indeed everything else – is told with meticulous hard detail, and Kearney manages a huge spread of characters and incidents. The result is a thrilling and marvellously-told story that compels attention. I look forward with eagerness to the two succeeding volumes.

David Marshall-Wright *Savannah*
Lief Publishing, 1996, 225pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

David Marshall-Wright *owns* Lief Publishing, and hopes to publish other north-eastern writers. He 'declined offers of publication through mainstream international publishers' as he 'wished to keep control of his work'. After reading this book, I have to say that he was ill-advised.

Savannah is the first of a trilogy. Jennifer, an idealistic young local reporter, and Louis, a reclusive 'light-theorist and programmer', are randomly plucked out by a mysterious alien force and placed in full control of an amazing spaceship in order to find a solution to 'the human problem'. Under their command is a seemingly endless supply of beautiful female technicians and limitless technological power. They can inspect or record any area or event in detail: appear in partial simulation anywhere they wish: whisk before them any world politician: impose any punishment or line of action they choose.

As a concept it's quite promising. In execution it's a sprawl. Male humanity is very understandably indicted for violence, corruption, environmental destruction and much else, but when the author wants to describe actual politics, say, or the workings of the social services, his use of language shows he hasn't done his homework and doesn't know what he's talking about. The plot has an improvised feel, moving in sudden lurches after lengthy doldrums. Drunken binges and remarkable sexual explosions receive detailed description, for no apparent reason (they must be the 'Gnostic experiences' that the blurb describes!); but the book's climax, when all the world's politicians are whisked before a badly hung-over Louis for his instructions, is hurried through as if pages were running out. The nations of the world are controlled behind the scenes by a secret conspiracy of eleven people: an interesting notion, but their motivation, how the conspiracy works, and its relevance to the story's theme, are quite unclear.

My review copy needed more careful proof-reading, and for some reason page 55 is in double-spacing, as if a paragraph or so had been removed and the rest spread out to fill the page.

Sadly, I was disappointed. The next two volumes will have to be very good indeed to make up for this.

Leonard Nimoy *I Am Spock*
Arrow, 1996, 347pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

In the mid-70's, Leonard Nimoy wrote an autobiography called *I Am Not Spock*. At the time it must have seemed apt. *Star Trek* had been cancelled and the public were finding it difficult to see Nimoy as anything other than Spock. He was a talented actor whose career had seemingly been blighted by a character that he played for three series, a character that had proved to have so strong an attraction to the viewing public that they could not see Nimoy as anyone other than Spock. (Ask yourself this. Did the sight of Leonard grinning

away as he figured that he'd outsmarted Columbo on the repeat last week sit well, or was it disturbing?). Since the great *Star Trek* revival, with the movies and the series, Spock has paid the bills, successfully integrated his Human and Vulcan sides and, if this book be believed, become reconciled with his creator, Leonard Nimoy. Well, maybe.

I haven't actually read *I Am Not Spock* so I can't really compare this book with the other, but in *I Am Spock*, Nimoy writes of Spock with an affection which tempers the negative tone of the earlier title. And in the end autobiography is autobiography. The first half of this one covers Nimoy's early career and *Star Trek*, the second, his life since; the Movies and his other acting and directing jobs. Along the way we are regaled with the usual Bill Shatner/Gene Roddenberry practical jokes anecdotes carefully spiced with the interesting production facts that these *Star Trek* autobiographies are usually made of. (Interestingly, Leonard seems kinder to Bill's little foibles than some of his ST colleagues...)

If you're a *Star Trek* fan, a Leonard Nimoy fan, or just one of those people who like to read autobiographies, then you'll probably read this.

David Pringle (ed) *The Best of Interzone*
Voyager, 1997, 518pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Pat McMurray

Interzone has been a reliable source of good short SF stories throughout its 14 years of publication. This anthology collects 29 of these stories from the 1990s. (Earlier anthologies have been published which cover earlier years.) This anthology is a very good mixture and measure of the work contained within *Interzone*. There are stories of alien contact, grim future dystopias, true romance, humour, alternate history. One or two of the stories would probably fail for a non-UK reader – "Slow News Day" by Kim Newman is a clever and poignant story of Britain after 50 years of Nazi occupation that relies heavily on a close knowledge of John Major's government for its humour – but most of the stories are just good SF, rather than British SF. There's quite a lot of humour buried in this book; for example, "Norbert & the System" by Timons Esais, and "Cyril the Cyberpig" by Eugene Byrne.

If you like short stories, you'll find a lot to enjoy in this book. If, like myself, you regularly read *Interzone*, you'll probably be pleased to read these stories again. My only quibble is that none of the non-fiction is included – the interviews, bibliographies, book & film reviews – but this is only a minor flaw.

Steven Spruill *Rulers of Darkness*
Coronet, 1996, 364pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

The best thing about this book is the title, or the title's derivation ("For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world" – Ephesians). That undeniably reads better than anything in the book itself. If I hadn't been meant to be reviewing it, I wouldn't have made it past the first few chapters. The rest of it is an improvement, but the first impression hangs around like a bad taste, threatening to get inept again at any moment.

The basic ideas aren't bad: a (to me) new take on vampirism as a particularly unpleasant side effect of, and only "cure" for, a strain of childhood leukaemia and the accompanying denomination of vampires as haemophages sets

this up on the scientific side of horror. As for the plot, it's certainly action-packed even if, somehow, nothing much happens for at least the first two-thirds of the book – there's a lot of suspense at any rate. Scenes familiar from US cop shows and medical dramas abound, and the focus of the plot on eight or nine family members, at least half of whom have no idea in what relation they really stand to one another, brings in more than a shade of soap opera as well. At the centre of all of this, and in addition to the Good Cop/Bad Cop sub-plot, we have the Good Vampire/Bad Vampire riff. But you have to do more than put a noble vampire into these scenarios to get anything new out – particularly if hardly anyone else knows he's a vampire (in itself, hardly an unfamiliar plot device). And maybe it's the frequent hospital scenes, but this book seems to have a lot of dead and dying characters even for a vampire novel. Is this a metaphor? Just another cliché? A neat twist on something or other? Ultimately, I couldn't care enough to want to analyse it, even if I did finally become sufficiently engaged to decide I should finish the book.

Sprull must be doing something right; most of his characters awaken some sort of sympathy in the reader, enhancing the plot dilemma which dictates that *someone* has got to get it, as it were, in the neck in order to provide any sort of happy outcome for the majority of the protagonists. And he does at least avoid the cliché of making everyone come good at the end. But there is still something in the plotting, in the characters' roles and interrelationships, and most especially in the first few chapters when all of this is spoon-fed to the increasingly reluctant reader – cliché is, in an appropriately but inevitably clichéd manner, the only description I can use. And there is to be a sequel. Of course there is. *All* medical drama-cop show-soap opera-vampire novels have sequels.

David Weber

Honor Among Enemies

Bantam, 1997, 543pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Pat McMurray

This is the sixth volume in an ongoing series about a female Hornblower type in space, and the first to be published in the UK. It's also the first of the series I've read, so I was picking this up very much in the middle. Basically Honor Harrington is a disgraced Captain in the Royal Manticoran Navy, who's now serving as an Admiral with the Navy of one of their allies, the Graysons. Somehow she's also become a great noble amongst the Graysons as well. Very little background is given, and occasionally leaves you wondering what the hell is going on. There's also a great deal of political manoeuvring amongst the Manticorans over whether or not to reinstate Honor in the Navy.

Anyway, fairly predictably, Captain Honor Harrington is re-instated, given a small fleet and sent off to fight pirates at overwhelming odds. She is magnificently successful, managing to defeat not only the pirates, but also some Peeps as well. (If Manticora is late 18th Century England, the Peeps – the People's Republic – are post-Revolutionary France). She does lose her ship, but goes down fighting against magnificent odds in a good cause, drawing the enemy Peeps off from a very important civilian vessel.

In many ways, this book is absolute tosh. A Napoleonic era military structure is in no way compatible with a Navy of eleven million with ships that need several thousand sailors, any more than a Napoleonic era political system and nobility could be writ large to form a planetary government. It is however brilliant and engaging tosh, and I do want to read some more about the adventures of Honor Harrington.

Michael J. Weldon

The Psychotronic Video Guide

Titan, 1996, 646pp, £19.99

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

At the front of this book, Michael J. Weldon is pictured behind the neon lit glass of a 42nd Street cinema box office. With a straight face and an unflinching gaze he is offering us a cinema ticket, a symbol of what this book has to declare, an invitation to come inside. And what do we find if we enter? – a guide to 'Psychotronic' films. Weldon describes the Psychotronic film thus: 'horror, science fiction, fantasy and exploitation movies... releases that used to be called 'B' features... barely released obscurities, acknowledged cult items, or over-hyped and over merchandised household names.' Weldon also encourages us by adding that 'unlike other video guides, nothing is omitted because it's in bad taste'.

The Psychotronic Video Guide is not just an alternative to *Halliwel's Film Guide*, it is an alternative *Halliwel's* – with all the weird stuff left in. How do they compare? *Halliwel's* uses a star rating system which runs from no stars (poor or worthless) to 4 stars (a work of art). 4 star films are stuff like *Citizen Kane* and *The Graduate*, and *Halliwel's* helpfully lists them all out, year by year, at the back. They're a pretty predictable bunch. The entry for each film consists of a one sentence summary, a sentence of criticism and then a list of the credits; director, writer, stars and so on.

Weldon does not bother with any kind of rating system to measure the quality of the films and his entries are not nearly so formal. He does list director, producer and writer, but other credits, including the stars, are included (I assume) at his whim. He also makes an attempt to describe the films and sometimes passes an opinion – if he feels the film is worthy of comment, then he comments. Information of a more esoteric nature is also included, for example on different versions, if it was cut (censored) for distribution, or if the special effects are of interest. It's less of a list book and because there's no rating system the reader is not inclined to make a value judgement on a particular film simply because it has or has not made the perceived grade. It's a more personal guide and when, for example, Weldon suggests Robert Wise's *The Haunting* is the best ghost story film ever made, the reader is more impressed to respect his opinion.

But the biggest difference is the type of films that each guide covers. You won't find any mention of *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers* ('Hookers kill the customers and duel with chainsaws in this unrated detective / horror spoof') or *The Ribald Tales of Robin Hood* ('All the usual Sherwood Forest characters appear, but the women have heavy eye makeup and take their clothes off') in *Halliwel's*, just as many of the 4 star films in *Halliwel's* are not mentioned in *The Psychotronic Guide*. In fact, where films are mentioned in both guides, views differ. According to *Halliwel's*, *The Player* (4 stars), directed by Robert Altman, is a 'deft and dazzling satire on the film industry – witty, surprising and intelligent', while Weldon says the film is 'a Hollywood satire/murder mystery that was created to irritate.'

The Psychotronic Video Guide is the sequel to *The Psychotronic Movie Guide* which was published in 1989 and films covered in that book are not covered in this one. I think this is a shame because the two guides are really two halves of a whole and the earlier volume covers many of the more obvious examples of the genre (but not so much Kung Fu and Hong Kong action movies). For me, the ideal film guide would be the two 'Psychotronic' books merged

together. Now that would be indispensable.

A. Susan Williams &
Richard Glyn Jones (eds) *The Penguin Book of
Modern Fantasy by
Women*
Penguin, 1996, 562pp, £8.99

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

The joy of a collection like this (thirty-eight short stories by women, all originally written in English, "from the Second World War to the present day") is that there is almost certain to be something in it that you like. Unfortunately, there is almost certainly something you'll dislike in it as well. The editors have taken "a broad view of what constitutes fantasy", and though the editorial supporting material is literary-academic in tone, the stories are a fine mix of 'highbrow' and popular, SF, fantasy and horror, and surreal, magical realist, non-realist, and just plain weird.

The editors "make no claim that the selection is exhaustive or 'representative'", which is good because it's obviously skewed both chronologically (3 stories from the 1940s, 5 from the 1950s, 7 from the 1960s, 9 from the 1970s, 9 from the 1980s, and 5 from the first half of the 90s) and geographically (16 stories from the UK, 14 from the USA, 2 from Canada, 1 from Ireland, 1 from New Zealand, and four stories with multiple attributions - UK/Mexico, UK/USA, New Zealand/Australia, and India/Canada/UK). I think the geographical attributions are where the story was written, not necessarily where the author now (or usually) lives.

Inevitably everyone who's widely read in the field will have their own Obviously Overlooked Key Fantasy Writer, but I suspect that omissions (and inclusions) in this collection probably have more to do with copyright, and with personal taste, than with any Grand Plan. Even so, it is odd to find Angela Carter, P. D. James, Anne McCaffrey and Muriel Spark as literary bedfellows, along with a number of writers I'd never heard of before. Three of the most recently written stories (by L. A. Hall, Ann Oakley and Lynda Rajan) have their first publications in this collection: the rest are reprints and many have been anthologised before. Well-known authors (Joan Aiken, Tanith Lee, Ursula K. LeGuin, Joanna Russ) are represented by well-known stories, representative of their work ("Marmalade Wine", "Red as Blood", "Sur", "The Second Inquisition") and in this respect the book could usefully serve as an introductory sampler for people to browse through and work out what they'd like to read more of - or as a handy collection of old favourites for people who don't have them elsewhere.

What's missing? Well, stories of this kind written before 1940, which will presumably be represented in the companion volume, *The Penguin Book of Classic Fantasy by Women*. There isn't much horror, or romantic fiction, or historical fiction. And (possibly for reasons to do with copyright or obscenity law) there is no trace of the vast quantity of 'fan' (i.e. written about characters of existing series, predominantly but not exclusively television SF series) and 'slash' (erotic same-sex 'fan') fiction currently being written by and for women. Does this indicate that sexual fantasies are less valued than fantasies of violence, escapism or power?

Michael Williams *Arcady*
NEL, 1996, 486pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Pat McMurray

I found this book very offputting, and came very close to

giving up halfway through. Examined casually it almost looks like a standard fantasy, with the maps and genealogy in the front, the phoenix and the sphinxes, the combat in the forest between rebels and guards. This is the story of five cousins who were brought up in Arcady, a mansion on the Borders founded by their grandfather. There are the three brothers; Solomon the priest and apparently failed magician, Diego a Captain of the Guards, and Endymion who's inherited the house and seems to be going insane. There's also the two sisters; Artemis, leader of the rebels and Mina, a sculptress.

The 'Borders' are the Borders of the Absences, voids where reality seems to become unravelled. One of these Absences is encroaching upon the house, and the story is mainly the attempt of the family to protect Arcady, while following their own agendas. The story has a very rich and ornate texture, with constant quotes from the Texts, especially where they're used to perform magic.

I found this book too rich, too involved, too opaque, with too many odd occurrences and unexplained coincidences. In an odd sort of way, everything was wrapped up too neatly at the end. I didn't like it, but you may have a greater tolerance for this than I do.

N Lee Wood

Looking for the Mahdi

Vista, 1996, 383pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Ian Sales

Of the ingredients that are mixed together to make a science fiction novel, the world or universe of the story is pretty much the *roux*. The world of *Looking for the Mahdi*, as suggested by the title, is the tiny Gulf Arab state of Khuruchabja. However, since this is a SF novel, Khuruchabja is a *poor* Gulf Arab state... Kahilli bint Munadi Suleiman, Arab-American, is a veteran war correspondent of the Khuruchabjan War, when Allied forces 'rescued' the country from its oppressive regime. Masquerading as a man, 'Kay Bee Suleiman' reported on the atrocities from the thick of the fighting, earning herself several journalistic awards and a comfortable desk-bound position. Ten years later, the US government approaches Suleiman and asks her to secretly deliver a fabricant (i.e. replicant) to Khuruchabja's current ruler to act as his bodyguard. Which is where it all starts to go horribly wrong.

This is a novel set in the Arab world, so of course there will be plots within plots, internecine rivalries and thinly-disguised terrorism. *Looking for the Mahdi* is a near-future thriller, its plot a staple of that genre, as Suleiman delves deeper into the Khuruchabjan situation, newshound's instincts to the fore. And, like in much Arab politics, there are no good guys - including the Americans, who are lambasted with the sort of righteous indignation only an expatriate US author can imagine (Wood lives in France).

But, given the book's setting, *Looking for the Mahdi*, stands or falls on its depiction of the invented country of Khuruchabja. Perhaps it's just me, but I initially found it hard to accept the country for what Wood would have us believe. Admittedly, I'm a pickier reader than most in this regard since I've spent more years in the Middle East than I have in the country of my birth. However, it was only little things. Khuruchabja (which, as a name sounds more Urdu than Arabic to me; Arabic does not have a 'ch' phoneme) came across more as a Northern Area Arab country, rather than a Gulf state - here, men wear *dishdashas*, *aqul* and *guthras*; not a *kaffiyeh*; the *abeysa* is black, not henna'd. I often stumbled over the latinised Arabic Wood used. Many Arabic words have entered Gulf expatriate English, with already

accepted spellings – *wadi* and *jebel*, for instance. Wood's latinisation struck me as an attempt to remain more faithful to Arabic, but actually made it seem less like Arabic.

But these are only minor criticisms in what is actually an excellent book. Suleiman and the fabricant, Halton, are well-rounded characters – perhaps Suleiman is a little too much the clichéd wise-cracking newshound, but a genuine personality shines through from beneath. Halton is clearly not human, but close enough to sympathise with. And the Arabs are handled well. The plot romps along – a little sadistic in places, true – and the resolution is as much a product of the book's world and technology as it is of the story itself.

However, any author setting a book in the Middle East – in a real or invented country – can't resist the temptation to lecture on the politics of the region. That Wood's view is more balanced than those of Americans I've met is admirable. But there is still a whiff of admiration for the Israelis, a view

certainly not shared in this part of the world. Wood's take on the Gulf War is definitely not the CNN's and bears a closer resemblance to the truth – although from here it was more Monty Python than Monty's Desert Rats. All this is woven into the extant global situation of the time of the book.

It's only in the closing stages of *Looking for the Mahdi* that Wood begins to become unglued. The final chapters are the most overtly fantastical of what is near-future hard SF – but it's political fantasy: a lasting peaceful solution for the Middle East. It's a happy ending... and after the Khuruchabian history lessons Wood slots into the narrative, it's only fair the country gets one.

This is a well-crafted near-future novel, set in a part of the world not often used in SF, well-written, and recommended. Incidentally, the strapline (on the US edition): "Science created him. Government controls him. One woman can set him free..." does the book no favours.

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