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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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May/June 1998

A Nebraska Yankee in King Arthur's Court



Stephen Lawhead interviewed

Books and Films of the Year • John Wyndham • Storm Constantine

Book Reviews – page 21

Letters – page 3

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9
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Contents

- Editorial** 3
by Andrew M. Butler
- $\Psi\Phi$ 3
Letters to Vector
- Red Shift** 5
Corrections and clarifications
- A Nebraska Yankee in King Arthur's Court** 6
Madeleine Grantham interviews Stephen Lawhead
- 1997: The Year of the SF Film** 8
The genre movies of the year by Colin Odell and Mitch le Blanc
- Books of the Year – 1997** 12
Compiled by Paul Kincaid
- Wyndham's Cosy Warnings** 10
*Ian J. Simpson on the works of John Wyndham
Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris*
- Storyteller for the Millennium** 19
Helen Knibb on Storm Constantine's Grigori books
- First Impressions** 21
Book reviews edited by Paul Kincaid

Cover: Steven Lawhead by Jerry Bauer

VECTOR

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FIFTY YEARS OF BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION: A POLL

We are looking for nominations for the best novel published by a British-born writer between 1948 and 1998. Please send a ranked listing of your own top five (by whichever criteria you choose) to Andrew M. Butler, 33 Brook View Drive, Keyworth, Nottingham, NG12 5JN or email vector-bsfa@rocketmail.com. Please feel free to annotate your listing. Deadline: June 30 1998.

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The View from the 757

To slightly misquote Sir Arthur C. Clarke: Any sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from magic. Applying Occam's Razor presumably suggests that if you come across sufficiently advanced science, then it's science, not magic. That word processor that swallowed the article on sf and tantric sex, that was science not magic. That payroll program that can only be run every two weeks and not before is (management) science not (black) magic.

On the other hand, when you're venturing through a bureaucracy that would have even Kafka diving for cover, simply to get a few lousy quid for services rendered six months ago, you do get the odd paranoid thoughts about hexes and curses. But I digress.

Although it's not unknown for *Vector* to stray into areas of science (the novelist Steve Palmer used to produce a column for earlier editors), our primary focus here is science fiction. And fantasy. And then horror. The same law applies: Any sufficiently advanced science fiction is indistinguishable from fantasy. Or, arguably, any insufficiently advanced science fiction is indistinguishable from fantasy.

Certainly some fantasy aspires to the condition of science fiction. If memory serves, Stephen Lawhead's *Pendragon Chronicles* were relocating Arthur's court to the aftermath of the falls of Rome and Atlantis. (Frankly memory doesn't serve, so you'll have to trust me on this). I certainly recall reading precisely which inter-glacial period the Third Age of the Sun fell into, thus dating the historical events of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The reverse is more likely to be true. *The Lord of the Rings* sets the format for most fantasy trilogies. The champions are gathered together, but dispersed by treachery from one of their own number. End of volume one. Survivors regather their separate forces and pull themselves back together, with much pointless wandering around. End of volume two. A final crisis is reached and resolved, and the surviving heroes depart one by one. This is clearly the structure of the *Mars Trilogy* by Kim Stanley Robinson, with the First Hundred standing in for the Company of the Ring. (Come to think of it, a thought too late for Easter, it's also the events from the Last Supper to the end of the Apostles.)

On the other hand, take Sharon Shinn's *Jovah's Angel*. Please. Actually, I quite enjoyed this in a no-brain way, even though from the first fifty pages it was clear who she was to marry by page four hundred. It's set in a world with medieval level technology, although some developments are being made. But a host of angels are in existence, and praying with them to Jovah can control the weather across the continent. Ahah, cries the perceptive reader, Jovah is clearly a weather-controlling satellite and the angels genetically modified hybrids. Those oracles spouting nonsense clearly have Pentium processors.

Take Michael Swanwick's *Jack Faust*. Please do: you'll enjoy

it, and may have won the BSFA Award by now. It's a retreat of the Faust legend, with Mephistopheles as some alien creature. A rule of thumb is that any novel containing a steam engine is clearly not fantasy. So what if Faust develops atomic energy or television? Can that be fantasy? (There's a Doctor Who story where the Meddling Monk offers atomic bazookas to Harold's army to defeat the Norman invasion).

Dave Duncan's Great Game trilogy, where the hero is transported to what looks like a fantasy world from First World War England, could well be sf if the gods using him for their games were extraterrestrial superintelligences. Or bored tenth generation supercomputers. You couldn't tell the difference.

Paul McAuley – with whom we hope to run an interview soon – is perhaps the worst offender with his use of the Next Big Thing™, nanotechnology. I have to say the whole of *Child of the River* read to me like a fantasy novel, although the big science of nanotech hovered over it. I know the characters are all sitting around on a Big Dumb Object, but it's still a river with a big city downstream. It has always been thus. *Fairyland* could stand for a whole series of novels on themes more associated with fantasy, but given a hi-tech gloss. Vampirism? A rare blood disease. Werewolves? Something adrift in the genotype, at a quantum level.

The boundary between fantasy (by which I mean both little creatures with hairy feet fighting dragons and a wider sense of the genre) and sf (by which I mean what Chris Terran has been discussing: Agenda SF) is one which is heavily policed. If anything is possible, the challenge is gone. It's like playing tennis with the net down. So we who read sf rather than fantasy console ourselves with the idea of the scientific method, deduction, cause and effect, sneer at those who have angels flying with a single glance at: 1) wing span versus lift, 2) muscle strength, 3) ability to dance on a needle and count rivets. No doubt those who read and enjoy fantasy sneer at us, say 'loosen up, man', and roll a twenty sided dice for a wandering monster.

OK, maybe not that last bit.

I guess what I'm saying is that it's all part of the fantastic now, and we're losing some of the inner walls. As Colin and Mitch's survey of 1997 shows, film is having a love affair with sf – as indeed is tv – and like it or not that's shaping sf. I don't think this is Agenda or Post-agenda sf, and I don't think the scientific method comes close. Someone else appears to be In Charge. But Agenda-sf is still being produced, and Arthurian fantasy, and a host of other stuff. Some of it will be to your taste, some of it will not be. And some of us are groping for the ever more obscure (read: foreign) to get our fixes. It'll all be a lot clearer after things have settled down, and the next agenda has been found.

As we approach issue two hundred, and life for the BSFA begins at forty, we hope that *Vector* will help us all to find it.

by Andrew M. Butler (in transit, approaching Doncaster) Nottingham/Hull, Spring 1998.



LETTERS TO VECTOR

Despite being a lost mailing for many people, a letter in *Vector* 197 from David Lewis of Stow Upland, Stowmarket, Suffolk has generated much comment. We've decided to reprint a chunk of

Mr Lewis's letter and Gary Dalkin's response to bring people up to speed. Mr Lewis complained that *Vector* wasn't sufficiently critical, saying that 'I do not rate articles on obscure French Films as a necessary or legit interpretation of S.F. criticism nor do I rate Paul Kincaid's recycled schoolboy's guide to themes in S.F. as serious criticism or analysis. Neither are the squibs by L.J. Hurst or A. Blundell much better.'

In response, Gary Dalkin asserted that: '[W]e consider that L.J. Hurst and Anthony Blundell (on Mark Adlard and Howard Baker respectively) have written valuable pieces which may help revive interest in two unjustly neglected authors. Obscure isn't a synonym for bad – indeed, much of the sf covered in *Vector* might be considered the epitome of *recherché* by the wider world'. So I am surprised you object to coverage of "obscure French Films"; or is it because they are French? Should we stick to covering only famous American films that you could read about in any of a

dozen magazines easily available in any good newsagent? *Le Dernier Combat* (Luc Besson's first film in 1983) was not only *sf*, but one of the most striking first films of the 1980s. The films which followed, although not *sf*, were certainly fantastical, having that certain indefinable something which makes them appeal to fandom. His latest, *The Fifth Element*, is neither obscure nor French, but it is certainly *sf*, and it is certainly notable.

Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc, who wrote the article on Besson, respond:

From Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc, Coventry

We were very interested and amused to read David Lewis's letter in *Vector* 197, particularly his criticism that the article on Luc Besson's career was about obscure French films. Besson is, financially, the most successful French director of all time, *The Fifth Element* cost \$90,000,000, bought in over \$250,000,000 at the Box Office and played the multiplexes for months last summer. If this is obscure, we dread to think what defines a popular film. Anyone starting in cinema starts small, and their films do not have the budget for spectacular effects or well-known actors. Therefore film makers have to use their imagination, and this often produces exceptionally creative and interesting work. Examining the formative output and subsequent progression of any artist is essential to producing an informed critique of current works.

If the objection is targeted towards the French, it should also be pointed out that the French not only invented popular science-fiction literature (it could be argued), but also *sf* cinema through the works of George Méliès, and indeed cinema itself courtesy of the Lumière brothers. World cinema has an extremely important part to play in providing alternate visions. There have been some splendid *sf* films created by Russians, Spanish, Czechoslovakian, Japanese, Australian, German and, yes, French directors, to name but a few nationalities, and these should have equal standing with the popular American movies. That they are not given the coverage they deserve means that we may be missing out on a kaleidoscopic myriad of science-fiction gems. Getting access to these films is a very difficult, time consuming and expensive process, but more often than not, unbelievably worthwhile and rewarding. ☐

Anthony Blundell, who wrote on Howard Baker, adds his *happ'orth*:

From Anthony Blundell, Hull

Hey, you guys know that a squib is also a firework, consisting of a paper tube filled with explosive powder? Howard himself would probably be sporting a badge declaring, 'I'm a squib!' if he did such things. And we find in the *Leeds Mercury*: (26 Mar 1898): 'Ah'll knock thee dahn, yo' little squib, if tha doesn't shut thi gob.' Off by about forty miles, but never mind.

The point of the piece was that he hasn't been anywhere, alas – he's been thoroughly erased from the record. Some people even wonder if he even exists (squib, *n.* a short composition of a satirical character; a lampoon) and that the piece was a sly joke played by me on the readership. (First the fictional Gary Dalkin, and now this). Howard exists, folks. Where is he now? Probably at work, but you can catch him most Tuesday evenings in The Blue Bell or The Avenues.

Incidentally, I agree with David Lewis that you shouldn't have dealt with French *sf* films, obscure or otherwise. Leave that to the glossies, and stick with what *Vector* does well: the printed word. ☐

Dave M. Roberts writes to put his point of view:

From Dave M. Roberts, Hull.

David Lewis seems to have read a different version of *Vector* 195 to the one that I received. In my copy, there was an article about a

French film director and his films. A significant proportion of which is *SF* and one of these being one of the more important *SF* films of the decade. I failed to locate the about obscure French films. I'm sure I would have very much enjoyed reading it. I was pleased not to be able to find any 'where are they now squibs' as these would have been very dull. What I did find was two pieces of interest. One of these was about the work of a writer whose work deserves to be much better known than it is. The other concerned a popular trilogy of the early seventies, and pointed up some of the ways in which the world and themes posited parallel the post-Thatcherite Britain of today. I presume that fact that I enjoy Paul Kincaid's 'Cognitive Mapping' just classes me as a schoolboy.

This is a rather flippant dismissal of David Lewis's letter, but I feel his flippant dismissal of *Vector* 195 deserves a response.

He dismisses the article about Luc Besson as being about 'obscure French films'. The piece reviewed the work of an important director, much of whose output is *SF*. A proportion is also not *SF*, and since he is French, his earlier films are in French. When considering the *SF* work of such a director, it is interesting to see how his vision developed. This does mean looking at some of the non-*SF* work as well as the less well known and the sometimes not very good. The fact the films are in a foreign language is of course irrelevant. The accusation of obscurity is the worst part of this. The implication is that anything obscure is not of any interest. This is also the implication of David Lewis's dismissal of the pieces on Mark Adlard and Howard Baker as 'where are they now squibs'. Both pieces were much more concerned with the work of these two writers than any kind of 'whatever happened to...'. For *Vector* to ignore anything about anyone who is not or (as in Howard Baker's case) never has been in the limelight would be to do a great disservice to the writers and their work, and also to the readers of the magazine.

One of things I like about *Vector* is the way it can and does introduce me to the work of writers that I have not previously read. This may be because I haven't got around to it and an article can prompt me to try reading them, or it may be that I was even unaware of their existence. As Gary Dalkin said in his reply, obscure does not mean bad. It means (in this case) not well known. It could also be taken to mean not currently fashionable. If *Vector* can introduce me to some of the better obscure writers then I am a very happy reader. ☐

But we've not heard the last from David Lewis as we offered him the chance to reply:

From: David Lewis, Stow Upland, Stowmarket, Suffolk

Thanks for the opportunity to see the response to my letter. I am not impressed and stand by my original remarks. Nor was I impressed by Mark Adlard's trilogy first time round when I was asked to review it by Geoff Rippington for *Vector* in the early 1970s. I found it totally unreadable then and still do now.

I have written to *Vector* and contributed to *Matrix* many times in the 1970s, having been in the BSFA for thirty or more years, so I leave it to others now to get it on. I refer you to Dave Langford's article in the *Matrix* [issue 129 -Eds.] as I identify with the 'kill the fuckers' dictum of Greg Pickersgill and Leroy Kettle et al and find *Vector* very bland and boring with its 'cosy up' attitude to many mediocre writers out there.

We need blood on the floor. We need red meat not this nambly pambly stuff. To use an old 1960's phrase 'Kick out the jams'. I accept that you are carrying on where others left off and *Vector* is very finely produced now, compared with the past, but it is characterless. Like many things today it is all image and very little real content.

I do not intend to write ad infinitum defending or justifying my views to anyone. Luckily for you this is the 1990s and not the 1970s otherwise you would find the attitude from fandom at large very different and very critical.

My views and the changing of Vector's editors does not however affect my continued reading of this journal. After all, criticisms are the building blocks of improvement.

Yours, unrepentantly
David Lewis ☐

Gary Dalkin responds: I don't know about 'namby pamby', but as a child of the 1960s I used to cry every time Andy Pandy said goodbye. Kicking out fruit preserves seems simply stupid, but then people said a lot of stupid things in the good old days. Things like "Hope I die before I get old". Then they grew up. Perhaps it's time you did too, or if you are really serious about some of the things you say in your letter, be locked up. You adopt the royal 'We', claiming to speak for everyone, as if only your opinion counted and, by implication, that Vector has no business publishing articles at variance with your opinions. Then you proclaim a need for blood sacrifice in the name of your people and preach a doctrine of genocide against anyone who has ever had sex. I think you sum up your problem with your very last word.

Andrew M Butler: Gary, have you misunderstood KTF criticism, or are you attempting to practise it? Fandom goes in phases and KTF was what, twenty years ago? I'm disturbed by the suggestion that we suck up to mediocre writers. Suggesting to Robert Holdstock that he is afraid of being castrated and pointing out to the prolific Garry Kilworth quite how many books he has written is hardly sucking up. But then they aren't mediocre. (slurp).

I think when you say someone is unreadable (as you claim Adlard is), you close down debate. What can you then say? But I know enough people whose tastes I trust who like his stuff that I'm willing to give it a go, twenty-five years on.

In the real world, the biggest exponent of KTF-style writing is Tom Hibbert, who used to write "Who the Hell...?" pieces for Q and Empire, and who I last saw in the hallowed pages (irony mode on) of the Mail on Sunday. It was amusing at first, but even his undoubted wit sank under relentless negativity.

By and large our contributors write because they have a genuine passion for a writer or director – why else would they take so much time and trouble? But, as ever, if anyone wishes to attempt to demolish the reputation of A E van Vogt (as Damon Knight tried) or Alfred Bester (as George Turner tried) or anyone else, we'll consider it like anything else. Reviews are positive, negative and indifferent. Perhaps Paul Kincaid is too good at his job, in matching book to reviewer?

For better or worse, we are in the soft and fluffy nineties. We hope we're old before we die. Not so much Kill the Fuckers as Fuck the Killers. ✍

Finally, a letter from Steve Jeffery:

From Steve Jeffery, Kidlington, via Email

"...as a closer inspection of the genre reveals that the encounter with the realm of the dead is central to cyberpunk." (Vector 198: p. 10-11)

This is one of those perceptive comments where a lot of things suddenly click into place: Gibson's 3Jane, AI's manifesting as voodoo loas, the seemingly odd mix of the cyber realm and mythology in Gibson and Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, and the Orpheus myth that underpins *Vurt* (like you I think this latter, along with *Automated Alice* and *Nymphomation*, as post-cyberpunk [or second-generation child of c/p]).

That Turing Test interrogation (was it planned for this article to tie that theme with Paul Kincaid's Cognitive Mapping in this issue?) of the original and the copy that is a central theme to Egan's *Permutation City* is also there in *Diaspora*, where the software polis citizens/explorers can (and some choose not to) replicate themselves to send other child copies along different

paths. Some even re-merge with these spawned copies at some prearranged point, which raised the further question(s): Which now is the 'original'? Does the 'original' have any privileged state over the divergent experiences of the child copies? What happen if one or more of those copies make an autonomous decision not to surrender their individuality in this way?

The bit that struck me, and is still a philosophical grey area, in *Permutation City* is the idea of life as a series of snapshot frames, the 'persistence of vision' between individual recomputations of the copy state (and by extension, in the original human brain?). That raises another whole area of 're-starting' people as fully functional conscious and self-aware human beings after cryogenic suspension. That you can just pick up in mid-thought after a period of non-conscious suspension (true, Tobes seems to act like this at conventions, but it's not sure that he could actually pass a Turing Test in such a state.)

Intriguing. If Bruce Gillespie didn't already have the title, we would have to start thinking of Vector as the *Metaphysical Review*... ☐

Andrew M. Butler replies: Steve, everything is planned, we just don't necessarily know it at the time. The Egan piece has been gestating for a while, and it made a nice link with the Cognitive Mapping, which nodded to N. Lee Wood. As for starting people in a full state of consciousness, I think our experience of waking up in the morning would dismiss this as a possibility. Mind you, never one to resist a cheap gag: What were the reincarnated buddhist's first words? 'As I was saying...' ✍

Letters to Vector should be sent by post to Gary Dalkin, 5 Lydford Road, Bournemouth, BN11 8SN or emailed to vector-bsfa@rocketmail.com. Please mark your communication 'for publication' where appropriate. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.

Red Shift

Corrections and Clarifications

As is traditional in Vector, we appear to have mis-spelt Nicola Griffith's name wrong at least once in the article by Ian J Simpson in Vector 198. We should have caught this, but at least have been consistently wrong. Similarly, Daniel O'Mahony's name has acquired an additional 'e' in his reviews of late, an error he seems quite used to. In part we share this error with *Locus* (<http://www.sff.net/locus/b382.htm#A4868>). Fortunately his mention on the cover of Vector used his preferred spelling and not an inadvertent but deeply impenetrable pseudonym

A note from Steve Jeffery: Came across another reference of interest regarding Shelley and Aldiss, which appears (and is reprinted as an Appendix) in Aldiss's *Bury My Heart at W.H. Smith's*. This is 'The Brood of Mary: Brian Aldiss, Frankenstein, and Science Fiction', by Nicholas Ruddick (presented at Ninth Conference of the Fantastic in the Arts, Fort Lauderdale, FL, March 1988)

A Nebraska Yankee in King Arthur's Court

An Interview with Stephen Lawhead by Madeleine Grantham

Stephen Lawhead is an American writer who has lived in England for the last ten years. Best known for *The Pendragon Cycle*, an imaginative reworking of the Arthurian legends, he has also written SF, children's books and much else besides. Worldwide over 5 million copies of his books have been sold. His most recent works are the epic historical adventure *Byzantium* [1996], and *Grail* [1997], the fifth Pendragon novel. The following interview took place at last year's Greenbelt festival. **MG**: Madeleine Grantham. **Q**: Additional questions from the audience.

MG: Did you always want to be a writer?

SL: Oh, yeah. I came to that pretty early. By the time I was in high-school I was writing pretty much all the time. I didn't actually think of it in terms of a profession until I was well into, or maybe even out of college. In fact, if my mother was here she would tell you - she tells everybody else - I was always the one telling ghost stories on family trips, or whatever. I was always the one who had some sort of elaborate story going. Whether it was getting the neighborhood kids to do plays or whatever. So Mom is not surprised that I ended up writing, because it seemed to be natural for me. It's certainly something that suits me.

MG: How did you start writing?

SL: Professionally, I started writing for a magazine with a small staff. We all had to have several pen names in order to make it look like there was a whole lot of us; but really we were writing everything ourselves, and it might end up that by the time the art department got through with the layout you had three articles in a row. Unless you had a few pseudonyms, it looked like a one-man show.

MG: What kind of magazine was it?

SL: It was basically for Christian high-school and college-age people in the States, so youth-orientated and lively - articles and stories on all kinds of subjects. We might go out on an assignment to the Frisbee championships, or interview a kid who lost his parents in a horrible crash and was learning to cope. Anything, really. It was great, great training discipline-wise because you learned to work in utter chaos and produce readable manuscripts to a strict deadline.

MG: You wrote a book about rock 'n' roll?

SL: I did. That came out years ago when I was still working for the magazine. I did a column on music at the time which drew so much flak from other Christians who couldn't understand why anyone would have anything to do with rock music that magazine subscriptions were cancelled left and right. It was extremely contentious. It's hard to imagine now - especially as we're here at Greenbelt - that this would

be a problem. I'd played in rock bands all through high-school and college. That's how I paid my way, playing guitar in rock bands. It was news to me that people had a problem with this. When I started the magazine column, we started getting all these crazy, nasty letters from people saying 'you're going to hell', and I thought 'Well Gee, what if they're right? Or, if they're not right, why aren't they right?' So the book grew out of a series of columns in the magazine on that subject.

MG: How do you work?

SL: I'm pretty much a nine-five writer. I'm always at my desk by nine-ish, and working through to five, writing a certain number of words per day. It used to be pages, but computers don't count pages, they count words. The nifty thing about that is you avoid all the fear and panic of publishing because you always know exactly where you are in the book and exactly how much time there is left. So there is never any dread about it. 'Oh, no! I've got only a month to go and I've got half a book to write' That never happens. Living a more-or-less normal life is actually an escape from what, if you allowed it to become undisciplined, 'ill-disciplined, could actually hamper the main enterprise, which is to write.

Q: Writing as a Christian do you consider yourself an artist, or...?

SL: I think there are two views people take on this question. Sometimes people think of artists as the mediating priest between the proles on the ground and God, or enlightenment, or something. It's sort of the Catholic view of art, which is where I think it comes from, because the Catholic church does respect artists; they put art on a pedestal. But there is another view, and that is: it's a job. Writing is a craft - much like tuning pianos. Most of what a person needs to know can be learned in an afternoon or two, if you're sufficiently motivated. I don't buy into the 'artist as priest' view. I don't believe that as an artist you should put yourself above the ordinary concerns of daily life. In fact, I think it's probably dangerous to hold yourself aloof from normal life, to say, in effect, 'Just because I'm an artist, I can't possibly be seen carrying out the rubbish, or washing the car, or what-have-you because that's not who I am.' Or, 'Because of my special gifts as an artist, the normal aspects of morality and social conduct to not apply to me.' I think some of those artistic conceits are probably dead ends.

Q: How has your spiritual development affected the way that you've written? The development of your writing?

SL: Well I think it tends to get reflected in the books where I'm at spiritually at any particular time. It just happens; I don't set out to write a book deciding 'where am I at now and what do I want to say about this'. What I want to do,

and the only thing I've ever really wanted to do is the same from the beginning, is just to tell an entertaining story, to make sense of this hash I've gotten myself into with these characters and situations in the book I'm writing – to make the story live, to make it actually live for the reader so that they feel like they are in touch with something that either could exist, or should have existed in some way, and that it's an enjoyable thing. In a word, entertainment.

I hasten to add, I think entertainment can do more than it is often called upon to do: Friday night sit-coms, game shows, etc. Entertainment can challenge and inspire and ennoble. It can nourish. It can do many, many things. I would like to see it do more of those good things; that's why I write the way I do. But that's not why I write; why I write is to tell the story I want to tell, and to make the experience as real for the reader as it was for me.

Q: You've had some CDs based on your books?

SL: The Songs of Albion music project is based on the Song of Albion trilogy. The idea was suggested by my publishers as a sort of soundtrack. The music was by a keyboard player named Jeff Johnson, and a flute player, Brian Dunning. I liked the results, and we've since collaborated on other music projects as well. I enjoy it, and still listen to the music while I write.

MG: My personal favorites, the ones I go back to time and again, are the science-fiction novels. Have you moved away from those completely, or do you think you'll go back?

SL: No, in fact I have a really good idea for a science-fiction/fantasy series that I probably will get to. Maybe the one after the one I'm working on now.

MG: What are your favorite SF books? Pizzle in *Empyrian* quotes so many SF titles.

SL: Yeah, that was my tribute to the books that I read when I was growing up. The early Heinlein I thought was splendid stuff when I was a kid, and I read all I could get. I sort of lost interest in Heinlein after *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Robert Holdstock's not science-fiction, but he's one I find real interesting. Also the odd Philip K. Dick. Off the wall things – I'm just a really eclectic reader so I tend to have favorite books rather than favorite authors.

MG: What are you reading nowadays?

SL: All sorts of things. Church history, Celtic history – that's for work, but it's also interesting to me. It seems like I'm filling up a well that didn't get filled up in school. It might be ancient history, but it's all news to me, so it's still entertaining. I also keep in touch with most of what's going on. As it happens, I don't read a lot in the genre – I read enough to know what sorts of things are going on, and what people are doing, but I don't want to be influenced by it. I don't want to react to it, and I think that if you read too much you begin reacting to what you read. But it's good to know what's out there. My wife is a great reader. She reads all the time. She's always chucking books at me 'Oh this one, don't waste your time on that, but this one you should read.'

MG: Coming back to your books, how do you choose what you'll write about next?

SL: What tends to happen is I get interested in subject, or a time period, or something evokes a feeling and I respond to that. Then I do a little research and I'll find out various bits, make notes, and begin building-up a heap of stuff I can use. Then I usually let it sit and stew a while. The ideas seem really great when they first come, and I've learned that they all *seem* like that but only some of them *are*. So what I like to

do is let them sit, because the really good ideas will stick around and get better, and the flash-in-the-pan ones will just fade away.

MG: How did you get interested in the Arthur stories?

SL: As an American I grew up with 'Cowboys and Indians' so this was the attraction of the different. I'd always been interested in Arthur, but my interest was spurred one day when I came across a quote in a book by an Oxford philologist named John Rhys, who suggested that Llyonesse was a Celtic version of the word 'Atlantis.' Rhys lived around the turn of the century, and he traveled around Ireland, Scotland, the Isle-of-Man and Cornwall collecting Celtic tales. He suggested the Atlantean-Arthur connection, which so intrigued me, I had to look into it further. I quickly discovered there was a mountain of material to master. That was why we moved to Britain – to gain access to materials and to see the sites where the stories happened. I would probably not have started it if we hadn't been able to come here.

MG: With the Arthurian books, was there pressure because you're automatically going to be compared with all the other Arthurian books? I know in another interview you were saying you felt you'd done something fresh, but was there a sense of tension?

SL: The most severe tension came from the publisher when I first told them that I thought I might like to do something with the Arthurian legend. They said, 'What makes you think you can write where so many have written so well before?' So, first of all, I had to sell them the idea, and in fact they weren't hot. They were completely skeptical until *Talesin* was finished. They saw it was working then. Yet, I've never really written to please anybody else. I want to entertain, yes, and the person I'm entertaining, the person I'm trying to make interested, is myself. I find that it's actually when you try to guess what you think somebody else will like that you go wrong. Ultimately, it's best, I think, to just be true to yourself and write something that, when all's said and done, you're happy with it. For example, *Byzantium* took two years to write, and it took a year and a half before it was published. So, what I was engaged with was years away from the people who would actually read it. When you're working like that there is no way you can guess what people are going to want to read in two or three years' time.

MG: *Byzantium* and the Pendragon Cycle and the Song of Albion series all seem to be very heavily researched. There's a lot of historical or mythological detail, whereas some of the earlier books seem less researched.

SL: In the early days I actually couldn't afford to do any research. What I could do was pretty much limited to libraries. Moving here I've become so more and more impressed with history – which is pretty thin on the ground in America. Not only the age of the country and culture, but the accessibility as well – to be able to go down to the bookshop and buy a copy of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles for £1.50 is pretty amazing. You can search high and low in Lincoln, Nebraska, a university town, and not find anything useful at all. And, because the research is possible now, I don't feel comfortable writing something unless I see it, and know it.

MG: I remember you saying once about sitting on the bay at Tintagel looking out across the water, and you saw it all.

SL: Yeah, going to physical locations whenever possible helps because it's a lot quicker in the end. Now, you could read tide tables, and go look up what the weather was like in March in Cornwall... Or, you can go and sit on a rock in the bay, and come away with a far better sense of it. That's what I discovered moving here. Now I don't research exhaustively. What I do is I research enough to allow me to begin, and then I do what I need to do as it comes to me. For example, I didn't need to know *everything* about the whole Byzantine Empire to write about it, because *everything* isn't going to come into play – just what happens to the characters. So until I know exactly what's going to happen, most of what I need to know is very general.

By the time I begin, I will have a mass of material that can be at my fingertips when and if I need it, because I will have the shape of what I'm going to be looking for and a sense of what is going to be necessary. Woody Allen once said that whenever he was writing a movie, he felt like he ought to be playing jazz clarinet; and whenever he was playing clarinet, he felt he should actually be doing comedy; and when he was doing comedy, he always felt it was a waste of time, that he should be directing a movie. I know how he feels: when I'm researching I feel like I should be writing, and when I'm writing I feel like, 'Oh, this is going nowhere, I should be researching and get this really nailed down.' But you can't live like that.

I have learned to find the significant detail, and make it work very hard. I don't include everything I know about a subject or scene, because whatever doesn't earn its keep has to go, and that includes all these wonderful details that I discover but don't put in because it's just showing off. You read reviews of books that say, 'the author sure did a lot of research, shame about the story'. I want to make sure that never happens to me.

Q: You inject themes of redemption into the Arthurian material, bringing it back from the pagan?

SL: For much of what I write, the Christian elements are there in the source material. It's just that they have tended to be taken for granted or dismissed as not 20th Century, or some people have been hostile towards them and deliberately

made the story non-Christian. People have always used the Arthurian myths to say things about their own times, and an assumption made in these times is that the material is pagan. What I'm interested in is 'what did it mean to be living then, and to be a Christian then?' Really, I think we must try not to impose 20th Century ideas on a different reality.

MG: There was a big gap between the third Arthur book and *Pendragon* and then there was another big gap and now there's *Grail*.

SL: Well, at the time I was just getting into the Celtic thing and the Song of Albion was really hot, and so I thought if Arthur is something that never grows beyond three books, that's fine. I actually had four lined-out, but I wanted to complete *Albion* first; I didn't want to switch back. Then *Byzantium* was the other gap. That's just because it was a ferociously huge book and it took two years. It took twice as long as anything I'd done previously; I was still working as hard as I work on all the others, it's just longer. Nevertheless, I wanted to do it as one volume, because although it could easily be three books, it's still about a single journey. It's a pilgrimage, and to put that out in three installments seemed to me inelegant. I thought once publishers get a hold of it they'll want one book each year and it'll take forever, and so I wanted to be able to finish it, however long it took.

MG: It's had a lot more across the board praise as well?

SL: Yes. The reviewers have been kind. I don't know why, maybe because it's just the moment when people are thinking about things Celtic and it's got kind of wild Irish monks in it. Also people are interested in Islamic things, and it's got that too. Much of what takes place in the book seems to parallel the world we live in now – the things that occupy us now. Even though the world of *Byzantium* is as true to the time as I could make it, these universal things come out. Maybe some we're not as different from those wild Irish monks as we like to think.

MG: Stephen Lawhead, thank you very much.

The Iron Lance, the first volume of a new trilogy charting the involvement of a family from Orkney during the Crusades will be published later this year.

1997 – Year of the SF Film

by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

The year got off to a flying start with *Mars Attacks!* (1996). Tim Burton's films tend to fall into either of two categories – weird, but solid commercial cinema,



or truly bizarre labours of love – both of which bear the markings of his inimitable style. But the personal films, although generally better, never seem to succeed at the Box Office. *Mars Attacks!* was intended to fall into the former category, but inadvertently leapt into the latter with a gleeful thud. Based on a series of Bubblegum Cards from the 1950s, this is a sick and audacious stormer of a film. The Martians

decide to conquer the Earth – 'Nice Planet – We'll Take It' which is just what they do. They have no sense of morality, there is no justification for the attack and certainly no chance of an apology. This sets the agenda for a relentless assault of sick visual skits as pious humans, particularly those in power, attempt to 'embrace' and 'welcome' a new culture, and the Martians simply torture or destroy everything in their path.

Although there is no real need for a storyline, attention to the human element is focused on a small number of characters, typical Burtonesque misfits, scattered across America, who eventually pull through and stop the invasion by the most bizarre means yet devised in such a film. Burton

always challenges what is socially acceptable, and characters portrayed as 'normal' are invariably the bad guys of the piece; indeed, in this film their respective demises provide some of the most satisfying comedy sequences. It is the unusual, the unacceptable, the awkward that triumphs; all the heroes are lacking in some way. Many of the top actors were simply dying (Jack Nicholson, twice) to get involved with the project, often appearing in little more than cameo roles.

The most important element of this film, however, lies in its manic pace, sheer nerve and downright silliness. This is reflected in the Martians themselves. They have enormous heads, pathetically puny bodies (with rather fetching red underpants), manic eyes, inane grins and, although computer generated, move as though they have been animated in a stop motion style (a tribute to Ray Harryhausen) which somehow makes them appear less virtual and their interaction with the human characters more convincing and sinister. They stole the show and, in an age where society is becoming increasingly moral, it was absolutely great to see a film which displayed total disregard for nineties sensibilities in favour of the bizarre, the irreverent and the manic.

STAR WARS

Star Wars: A New Hope (1977) was possibly one of the most influential science-fiction films ever made. Years in the planning with dozens of rewrites of the script, *Star Wars* was always destined to be great because it had a powerful story, sympathetic but not necessarily virtuous heroes, terrifyingly evil villains, revolutionary special effects and a certain, undefinable sense of wonder. Which is why it didn't need to be tarted up with CGI. Sure, the restoration was a joy; the print gleamed and the sound was spectacular, but the addition of extra scenes and a formerly prohibitively expensive Jabba the Hut, created in no time by the miracles of modern technology, detracted from the work's force (if you will), which was that it was a Ripping Yarn of the very best sort.

The Empire Strikes Back (1980), however, did benefit from its restoration. It was the transitional film, where the 'action' climax occurred at the beginning and the ending contained one of the most exciting revelations in cinema history, yet left everything so painfully and unsatisfactorily unresolved. It is rare to see this in any film, particularly one that was guaranteed commercial success, but it is because of this that it remains the most powerful of the trilogy. [Director Kevin Smith presumably agrees: 'Empire had the better ending. Luke loses his hand and finds out Vader is his father. Han is frozen and captured by Boba Fett. It ends on such a down note. Just like in real life. All *Jedi* had was a bunch of Muppets.' *Clerks* (1994) - Eds].

Return of the Jedi (1981) never had the impact of its predecessors. It was the film where everything was resolved for good and, although well made, it never captured the dark hopelessness of the former two at any time. This was not helped by the Ewoks who were just too damned cute for the film's good. Adding extra minutes of 'family entertainment' into the restoration was the final insult.

Still, it was wonderful to have the opportunity to see the films on the big screen once more, and they were introduced to a new generation, which can't be a bad thing. It also

conveniently sets the publicity machine moving for the three long-awaited prequels which are currently in production...

Stuart Gordon's *Space Truckers* (1997) slipped in and out of the multiplexes so quickly last Summer that you could be



forgiven for missing its presence, which is great pity as it was one of the highlights of the year. Ditching any attempt to be treated as serious, *Space Truckers* hurls you from one ludicrous set piece to the next without pausing for tea. Dennis Hopper plays the good guy for a

change and for once does not overshadow all in his wake; as John Canyon his job is about as unglamorous as it gets - transporting genetically enhanced pork products for InterPork around the galaxy stopping only to lurch out in greasy intergalactic highway service stations. Life, as we suspect, does not rest in this cosy existence, oh no. Mr Canyon has to leave behind the high gloss world of piggy snacks and get on with saving the galaxy aided only by hitch hikers Mike (Stephen Dorff) and Cindy (Debi Mazar). With his space truck at the ready, our illustrious heroes do battle with high finance, nasty BMWs (Bio-Mechanical Warriors) and the Regalia, a massive jet black (light just falls off it...) pirate ship.

What sets *Space Truckers* apart from the normal sf spoof is that it treats its subject seriously, but not the action. Zero gravity is just that (achieved here with subtle wire work courtesy of Koichi Sakamoto of *A Chinese Ghost Story* fame), vacuum quite literally sucks and things look, well, grimy. All of this makes for a believable and coherent setting, which makes the appearance of arch villain Captain Macanudo (Charles Dance in a Ming the Merciless beating performance) all the more amusing. Captain Macanudo's outrageous double entendres and pneumatic penis make for one of the screens most bizarre baddies, a sort of RoboCodpiece. It is this gung ho pace that creates a real Saturday Morning Serial appeal. This is not to say that the effects have in any way been compromised, far from it. Attention to detail is high throughout, the screen crammed with lurid advertising, groups of vicious 'keep left' signs and intergalactic highway beacons.

Highly recommended for good, solid fun. Rent a copy today or, better still, hope it comes around at a rep cinema near you.

Words cannot accurately reflect the travesty that was *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*. The film had only its special effects to recommend it, and this is a very poor substitute for quality film making. Spielberg has shown in the past how adept he is at controlling composition, suspense and sympathetic characterisation, but all these skills have been sharply curtailed to give us a rambling, overblown, incoherent mess of a film. There is little sense of the wonder that enthused in *ET - the Extraterrestrial* (1982) or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), none of the adrenaline of the Indiana Jones films and none of the suspense of *Duel* (1971) or *Jaws* (1975). The script is atrocious, its laughable

attempts at political correctness are cringeworthy and the foreshadowing juvenile, the characterisation is defined by stereotypes and the action, for want of a better term, is formulaic and unconvincing. And then there is the acting. Dear old Dicky Attenborough should stick to directing crowd scenes. Jeff Goldblum alternates between Brandoesque mumbblings and 'gee whiz' hyper scientist. The only redeeming performance comes from Vanessa Lee Chester as the child interest; a wonderful career ahead of her, she is shot by the starting pistol. The camerawork too, is lacklustre and ineffectual; it is currently trendy to use handheld camerawork to emphasise dynamism and audience point of view participation, but even this is sloppy and confusing and appears to have been sprinkled randomly throughout the proceedings without due attention to necessity.

Individual lowlights included the sadistic and extended pursuit/torture of an unsympathetic character ending in an off-screen 'money shot' with what looks suspiciously like CGI blood in the water; a ludicrous van over the cliff with tyrannosaurus sketch that obliterates credibility; a pointless King Kong rampage scene, much touted but ultimately very dull; and finally a totally inadequate 'bad guy comeuppance' scene.

To be fair, the effects were spectacular and Stan Winston's latex dinosaurs superb, far more organic than their (admittedly impressive) CGI counterparts. Even the music lacked the *avant garde* primal dominance of its predecessor. In conclusion *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* is like censored pornography: it satisfies no-one.

Men In Black (1997) was the surprise hit of the year, mainly

due to the fact that all the "Summer Blockbusters" were either too chicken to compete with other releases or too crap even for the studio's generated

hype to drum up business (*Batman and Robin*, for example, a classic example of a budget blown on actors [Schwarzenegger, Clooney and even O'Donnell, Silverstone and Thurman] and effects, and nobody thought to buy a plot). A short, snappy little number, *Men In Black* pairs up (Will) Smith and (Tommy Lee) Jones as the secret government agents that oversee the activities of real illegal aliens, that is, tourists from other worlds.

Its attempt at plausibility works well, most aliens can cunningly disguise themselves in human form, and any unsuspecting soul who inadvertently comes across such a being in its 'natural state' can receive a memory wipe, thus dealing with any associated trauma. Earth seems to be a popular place to visit and in general the aliens are well behaved. However, there are always some irritating tourists that give the rest a bad name and one has decided to run riot in someone else's body. Add the mystery of a missing galaxy and things start to get strange...

So, the day has to be saved and there are only two men qualified to do it. Cue the visual gags (particularly where

aliens are concerned), hi-tech gadgets and military hardware, with time for some (but not a vast amount) of love interest. Narrative is not an issue here, there's no need for any deep meaningful philosophy; it's simply a licence for the filmmakers to go mad with their imagination and humour. Which is basically what they did.

The concept was good and the film was enjoyable to watch, but bearing in mind the material available, could have been quite a bit more manic. It suffered from a very fast paced trailer, which gave away all the best jokes and indeed the ending.

David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) falls into familiar love or

loathe territory. On board for a second outing is writer Barry Gifford, who scripted Lynch's *Wild At Heart* (1990), and it is clear that the two of

them work exceptionally well together. Gifford's books explore the minutia of every character's existence, they are all given equal weight and suitably bizarre idiosyncrasies, nothing is extraneous. Similarly Lynch's films enjoy exploring the surreal details of everyday life and extending them to absurdity. They also share a similar love of macabre humour and the satisfaction of coincidence.

In *Lost Highway* the main protagonist, Fred Madison, is accused of the brutal murder of his wife following the appearance of voyeuristic videotapes that have brought him to the brink of paranoia. But this is no Hitchcockian 'innocent man on the run' film. Fred is confused, persecuted and watched, he is placed in prison, and there he becomes his younger self, or someone else, or mad. Lynch brings on his supporting cast like a ringmaster - Mr Eddy the rich

pornographer with a novel way of reinforcing the Highway Code, the Mystery Man with his schizophrenic mobile phone and Mr Eddy's

girlfriend, complete with slow-mo diffusion and hug-me-tight fetishistic sweater. All the characters have a comfortably familiar air; Lynch relaxes with them and eases their situations out deliberately and thoughtfully. Where this differs from his previous works is the total denial of structural realism and its replacement with mental realism - in this case the mental realism of a man beyond the edge. Changing a main character half way through a film is an audacious step; not even to be aware how much this new character is even new, stretches audience acceptance. As usual, Lynch does not compromise to win over new friends.

We are only allowed to see one world and it is incredibly strange - the (relatively few) deaths become more surreal and, perversely, more believable. The final truths are hard to cope with, obtuse and repellent.

In terms of cinematography the film excels - hyperfast blurry roads, effortless cranes, gorgeous close-up focusing and macabre lighting, the very essence of a cinematic experience. The contrast at times is very low with dark reds dripping against blacks on a wide screen.

LOST HIGHWAY



Also of note is the astonishing soundtrack, Badalamenti (Lynch's regular composer) delivers some of his sleaziest, laid back jazz/easy yet, which perfectly counterpoints the more driving industrial/metal on offer, here mixed by Trent Raznor of Nine Inch Nails fame.

Certainly not to everyone's taste and in many respects an enormously difficult film to watch, but a fascinating, surreal and disturbing experience.

After a couple of false starts, John Woo finally has a Hollywood film



under his belt that can stand alongside his astonishing Hong Kong films without shame and that film is *Face/Off*. Nicholas Cage is Castor Troy, evil, charismatic and treacherous. John Travolta is clean living Sean Archer, a police officer dedicated to hunting down Troy, who killed his son. The stage is set, and it's operatic.

As is usual for a Woo film everything is larger: coats billow in loving slow motion, bodies fly through the air with choreographed grace, there's beautiful imagery (*The Killer's* doves and church resurface [1989]) and most importantly the deep, deep emotion dominates. *Face/Off* (1997) takes the *Prince and the Pauper* principle, perverts it and mixes in Franju's *Yeux Sans Les Visage* (1959) (which being obscure and French clearly has no place on these hallowed pages [see *David Lewis's letter in Vector 197 and responses in this issue - Eds*) to see Travolta's good guy physically becoming Cage's bad guy, and *visa versa*. All of this would seem a little far fetched were it not for the skill of both the actors and director, Travolta as Cage playing Travolta is remarkable and chilling, he wins his way into his new 'family' by charm and subversion, Cage does not have it so easy, stuck in prison as a man he is not, he is subjected to magnetic boots, unruly prisoners/guards and threats of lobotomy.

The world created is clearly defined, futuristic in every sense and yet contemporary enough to be recognisable, as is pure science fiction combined with Woo's masterful action packed direction.

This is a very provisional list of sf, fantasy, and generally *Vectorish* movies released last year in Britain. Some titles - the odd Bolivian black and white zombie musical perhaps - may have slipped the net. I haven't included re-releases (*It's A Wonderful Life*, the *Star Wars* trilogy), but have listed thrillers like *Darklands*, *The Game* and *Tomorrow Never Dies* as associational. I've included musicals because they are obviously parallel world fantasies. And *Evita* appears to be set in a dimension in which Eva Peron wasn't an evil Nazi scumbag - GD

AMB - Andrew M Butler, CO - Colin Odell, GD - Gary Dalkin, JA - John Asbrook, MLB - Mitch Le Blanc. M# - Matrix issue number. V# - Vector issue number. Unsigned comments by AMB

The Addiction - Abel Farrara does vampires

Alien: Resurrection - 'Far better than it should have been, but not as good as it could have been' CO/MLB; 'a total failure...most disappointing film I have ever seen' GD M130

Honourable Mentions

Science Fiction is an incredibly popular genre at the moment. So many films were produced last year that it was virtually impossible to select which to write about and there just has to be an 'Honourable Mentions Section':

Peter Jackson's *The Frighteners* (1996) was strange and satisfying, a combination of fun and gore. It was certainly the most commercial of Jackson's films to date, but hugely enjoyable.

The biggest spectacle produced was Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997). Visually stunning, it created a bizarre world, beautifully designed but the film was ultimately flawed by casting.

Abel Ferrara created a small, but thoughtful black and white vampire film called *The Addiction* (1995).

Cronenberg's and Ballard's respective talents finally come together with *Crash* (1996), a simultaneously beautiful and repellent study of sex and the automobile.

Event Horizon (1997) was a nasty horror film set in space. Slick, sick and nauseous.

Alien: Resurrection (1997) suffered from having to carry the baggage of the previous films despite a worthy directing attempt from Jean Pierre Jeunet. Close, but no cigar.

So, a good year for sf films? Certainly from a Hollywood perspective - science fiction is definitely in fashion, the genre being a perfect medium for big budgets, fast action and special effects. It was interesting to see some of the well-respected directors, such as David Lynch, John Woo and Abel Ferrara making sf films and they have proved that it is possible to produce genre films that are intelligent and challenging, not simply packed with effects. Science-fiction comedy/spoof was also a big feature of 1997 and produced some truly enjoyable films.

© Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc 1998

Colin and Mitch should be well known to Vector and Matrix readers by now; if we could persuade them to submit some poetry to Focus, they will have collected the set. They continue to enjoy obscure movies, unusual food and disliking The Lost World: Jurassic Park-Eds.

An American Werewolf in Paris - too little too late sequel to cult

Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery - Mike Myers tries to parody Bond

♠♠♠ *Batman and Robin* - 'too many damn' villains and too many sidekicks' AMB letter M129

♠♠ *The Borrowers* - 'within sight of being a wonderful yarn'

The Boy from Mercury - little seen child's fantasy

♠ *Chasing Amy* - associational (if only for *Star Wars* and black power riff) third part of Kevin Smith's 'New Jersey' Trilogy

Conspiracy Theory - Mel Gibson as paranoid

Conspirators of Pleasure - Jan Svankmajer comedy

Contact - 'almost enough to make one lose one's faith... in the movies' GD; 'a long deliberate movie' JA M128

♠ *Crash* - if this film is released civilisation will fall claims the Daily Mail. It was; it hasn't... Article by John Costello M123

Crying Freeman - live animé

Dante's Peak - Pierce Brosnan and volcano

- Darklands* – Wicker Man style thriller
- † *Event Horizon* – ‘little more than a collection of found footage’ – JA M128
- Everyone Says I Love You* – Woody Allen sings
- Evita* – Madonna sings; Jonathan Pryce is rediscovered
- †† *Extreme Measures* – Hugh Grant hospital thriller
- †† *Face/Off* – face swap hokum
- †† *The Fifth Element* – ‘it is, for want of a better word, perfect’ JA M128; ‘Besson vs. Hollywood’ CO / MLB V195
- †† *The Frighteners* – Peter Jackson’s follow-up to the brilliant *Heavenly Creatures*
- †† *The Game* – Michael Douglas in *Wall Street* mode falls into Phil Dickian corporate hospitality
- Gamera* – Shiusuke Kaneko monster movie
- George of the Jungle* – live action cartoon
- Hercules* – Gerald Scarle messes with the Mouse
- I Know What You Did Last Summer* – slasher hokum from some of the *Scream* team
- † *Liar Liar* – Jim Carrey tells the truth
- † *A Life Less Ordinary* – angels ensure true love doesn’t run true
- † *Lawn Dogs* – ‘a gem to search for’ AMB letter M129
- † *Lost Highway* – weirdest thing since Lynch’s last work
- †/† *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* – dinosaurs are back, if you like that sort of thing
- Macbeth* – Jason Connery and Helen Baxendale play the Shakespearean couple whose hospitality is best refused
- †† *Mars Attacks!* – ‘has at the very least a distaff, through the looking glass kind of greatness’ M124; Dave M Roberts. ‘Living In His Own World: A Tim Burton Retrospective’ V191, Daniel O’Mahony, ‘Still Searching for Rosebud: Towards a Critique of Tim Burton’ V196
- Ma Vie en Rose* – touching French tale of child’s fantasy and tranvestism
- † *Men in Black* – ‘a light-hearted “what-if” piece’ JA M128
- Michael* – John Travolta as an angel
- A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – ‘constantly inventive, beautiful on the eye, funny, strange and thoroughly entertaining’ GD M127
- Mother Night* – Vonnegut adaptation which vanished
- The Peacemaker* – George Clooney in stolen missile hokum
- The Phantom* – live action comic
- Photographing Fairies* – variant on Cottingley Fairies
- Powder* – parable about difference, lost in sexual controversy
- The Preacher’s Wife* – Denzel Washington as an angel
- Roald Dahl’s Matilda* – adaptation of the century’s best children’s book
- The Relic* – something nasty in the sewers
- Scream* – intelligent slasher, if that’s possible.
- A Simple Wish* – fairy godfather comedy
- Smilla’s Feeling for Snow* – disappointing and compromised version of Peter Hoeg’s cult novel
- Snow White: A Tale of Terror* – Sigourney Weaver in adult fairy tale
- Space Jam* – Bugs Bunny and baseball
- † *Space Truckers* – Dennis Hopper does comedy? The horror, the horror...
- Spawn* – ‘enjoyable hokum’ JA M128
- Spiceworld* – not what we really want
- The Swan Princess: The Secret of the Castle* – sequel to *The Swan Princess*, featuring Prince, er, Derek.
- Thinner* – Stephen King as Richard Bachman hokum
- Tomorrow Never Dies* – Bond franchise; rediscovered Jonathan Pryce plays the villain
- Unforgettable* – er, um, get back to me, no, hang on: hokum about injecting memories, wastes Linda Fiorentino as much as *MIB* did but director John Dahl (*Last Seduction*) should know better
- Volcano* – Tommy Lee Jones and a volcano
- Warriors of Virtue* – fantasy action adventure
- ††† *White Man’s Burden* – alternate world with white ghettoes
- ††† *William Shakespeare’s Hamlet* – ‘Quite simply the best British film ever made (and the best film anyone’s made since 2001: *A Space Odyssey*)’ GD; M127
- ††† *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* – ‘the concentrated intensity of Cameron and the hyperkinetic anarchy of Ken Russell’ GD M127

Books of the Year – 1997

compiled and edited by Paul Kincaid

‘Sometimes you make the list. Sometimes the list makes you.’
 Andy Sawyer’s remark accompanying his list of books of the year seems particularly apposite this year.

Every year, for well over a decade, the BSFA has conducted an annual survey of reviewers (and, latterly, committee members). Each is invited to name the five books of the year. These might be fiction or non-fiction, new books or old, but taken together it provides a snapshot of the books that have stood out in people’s reading. Because the scope is deliberately wide, the number of books named is wide, and there have been years when any book that amassed five votes would have stood out clearly as *the* Book of the Year.

This year two books got five votes apiece, but even so they ended up a distant second to Mary Doria Russell’s *The Sparrow*. I can’t remember a year when one book has so totally dominated the list, gathering votes from over a third of respondents, which is unprecedented. It slipped out late last year from a publisher, Black Swan, not normally noted for its science fiction. It had garnered the James Tiptree Award in America, though that isn’t actually one of the

THE LIST

13 VOTES

The Sparrow (Black Swan) — Mary Doria Russell

5 VOTES

The Encyclopedia of Fantasy (Orbit) — John Clute & John Grant

Diaspora (Millennium) — Greg Egan

3 VOTES

Excursion (Orbit) — Iain M. Banks

Titan (Voyager) — Stephen Baxter

Voyage (Voyager) — Stephen Baxter

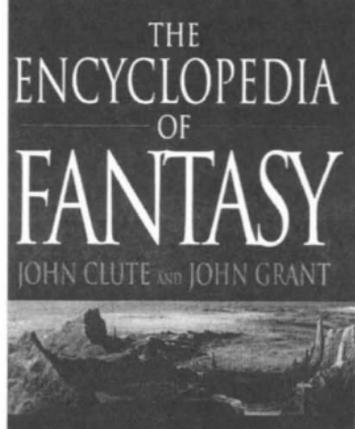
Earthquake Weather (Legend) — Tim Powers

Jack Faust (Orion) — Michael Swanwick

The Family Tree (Avon/Voyager) — Sheri S. Tepper

biggest awards in the sf world. Yet it rapidly began to gather the sort of word-of-mouth unheard since Jeff Noon's debut, *Vurt*. It is by no means a perfect book, but, as K.V. Bailey says, 'Everybody has picked justifiable holes here and there, but I doubt anyone can quite get it out of his/her mind, or deny it a reasonable claim to be the sf book (whatever its professed genre) of the decade.' Certainly, it is that ability of the book to lodge in the reader's mind that was commented upon time and time again. Tanya Brown said, 'Among other things, it made me think about belief and faith (a rare attribute in an sf novel)' and Andrew Seaman said it 'raises disturbing questions about faith, morality and suffering that linger long after the last page is turned'.

Whether or not K.V. Bailey is right to call it the book of the decade, it is clearly, as Steve Jeffery pointed out, 'the book everyone seems to be talking about this year.' Given such dominance, it would be easy to overlook how well two other books did in the poll.



Both *Diaspora* by Greg Egan and *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* edited by John Clute and John Grant won enough votes to have topped the poll in some other years.

It is perhaps not surprising that Greg Egan has done so well, his previous books have been consistently placed high in the poll and this one has generated impressive praise. Brian Stableford, for instance, considered it 'magnificently mind-stretching hard sf; a real work of art', while Gary Dalkin said, 'this is real sf at

close to its very best. A staggeringly inventive and imaginative work, and one with a real sense-of-wonder'.

It is a little more unexpected see the *Encyclopedia* up there, getting a better response even than its companion volume, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* did. In fact, this is a significantly better result than any work of non-fiction has ever achieved before now. Not that there aren't criticisms, Chris Terran remarks that 'it suffers from a bit too much geography - the "landscape" metaphor for fantasy is perhaps a little limiting for certain types of fantastic literature' and Steve Jeffery admits that 'you might quibble over the overall balance, the sometimes arcane terminology, or Clute's central argument, but it is a welcome attempt to provide a critical overview of fantasy that does not rest on a handful of



THE LIST (CONT.)

2 VOTES

- Moths to a Flame* — Sarah Ash
Slant — Greg Bear
Freedom and Necessity (Tor) — Steven Brust & Emma Bull
The Calcutta Chromosome (Picador) — Amitav Ghosh
An Instance of the Fingerpost — Iain Pears
Jingo (Gollancz) — Terry Pratchett
Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner (Orion) — Paul M. Sammon
Holy Fire — Bruce Sterling

1 VOTE

- Chatterton* — Peter Ackroyd
The House of Doctor Dee — Peter Ackroyd
The Chronicles of the Round Table — Mike Ashley
Centuries — A.A. Attanasio
The Regulators — Richard Bachman
The Crow Road — Iain Banks
A Song of Stone — Iain Banks
The Sweet Hereafter — Russell Banks
Sacrament — Clive Barker
The Transmigration of Souls — William Barton
Made in America — Bill Bryson
Memory — Lois McMaster Bujold
Alvin Journeyman — Orson Scott Card
Pastwatch — Orson Scott Card
The Troika — Stepan Chapman
Inheritor — C.J. Cherryh
Dark Love — Nancy Collins, Edward Kramer & Martin Harry Greenberg
Stealing Sacred Fire — Storm Constantine
Darkfell — Mary Corran
The Lost World — Michael Crichton
The Measure of Reality — W. Crosby
Earthling — Tony Daniel
Captain Corelli's Mandolin — Louis De Bernieres
Guns, Germs and Steels — Jared Diamond
The Mistress of Spices — Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
The Book of Night with Moon — Diane Duane
My Cousin Rachel — Daphne Du Maurier
Polgara the Sorceress — David & Leigh Eddings
The Big Nowhere — James Ellroy
Fisherman's Hope — David Feintuch
Bridget Jones's Diary — Helen Fielding
The Great Wave: Price Revelations and the Rhythm of History — David Hackett Fischer
The Sandman: The Wake — Neil Gaiman et al
The Sandman: Book of Dreams — Neil Gaiman & Ed Kramer
Hitler's Willing Executioners — Daniel Jonah Goldhagen
Firelord — Parke Godwin
The Plenty Principle — Colin Greenland
(more...)

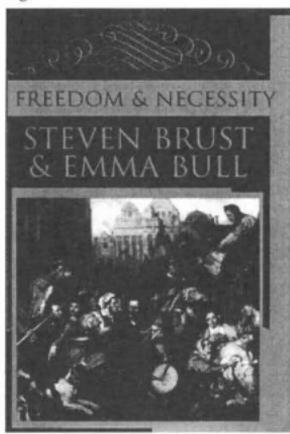


still a near text book example of how a "making of" book should be done'. This would be a heartening showing for critical books about science fiction and fantasy, were it not for the fact that the numerous other non-fiction titles that make the list cover all sorts of topics (science in Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steels* and Hofstadter's *Le Ton Beau de Marot*; history in Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* and Fischer's *The Great Wave*; even literature in *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* edited by Tom McArthur and Noel Malcolm's *The Origins of English Nonsense*) but other works on sf are notable for their absence

What else can we tell from the current list? The old favourites are still very much in evidence. Last year's chart topper, *Excession* by Iain M. Banks, is still doing well at joint fourth, though his most recent

academically approved "classic" writers." Even with such quibbles, therefore, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* fills a perceived need on our reference shelves, there has been no such wide ranging survey of the genre in its entire long history, and people clearly find themselves turning to it regularly. That said, even such a valuable non-fiction book might, in the past, have been expected to earn two, maybe three votes and achieve a decent place among the also-rans; to come joint second is impressive indeed.

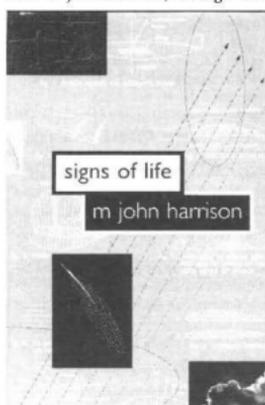
Even more impressive, it was not the only critical work to make a decent show in our poll. *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* by Paul M. Sammon is described by Gary Dalkin as: 'riddled with small mistakes and lacking any decent stills from the film, this is



book, *A Song of Stone*, only managed to attract a single vote. Stephen Baxter's *Voyage*, which also did well last year, is another in joint fourth position, having attracted as many votes as his latest novel, *Titan*. It must be said that a certain similarity in the response to *Titan* - 'what a lousy ending,' Andrew M. Butler; 'what a shame about the misjudged and incongruous coda,' Colin Bird; 'despite the extremely flawed ending (the last 50 pages are best ignored)...' Chris Terran - suggests that a book that was '50 pages away from being a near-masterpiece' (Chris Terran) could have done better with a little judicious editing. And Sheri Tepper, after staking her claim last year with *Gibbon's Decline and Fall*, is back again with *The Family Tree*. 'This book stands

THE LIST (CONT.)

- Allan Quatermain** — H. Rider Haggard
The Reality Dysfunction — Peter F. Hamilton
The Neutronium Alchemist — Peter F. Hamilton
Glimmering — Elizabeth Hand
Winterlong — Elizabeth Hand
Signs of Life — M. John Harrison
The School Bag — Seamus Heaney & Ted Hughes
Assassin's Quest — Robin Hobb
Le Ton Beau de Marot — Douglas Hofstadter
Tales from Ovid — Ted Hughes
Phoenix Café — Gwyneth Jones
The Barbed Coil — J.V. Jones
Master and Fool — J.V. Jones
The Waterborn — Greg Keyes
The Wild Road — Gabriel King
The Celtic Druid's Year — John King
The Silence of the Langford — David Langford
The Dealings of Daniel Kesserich — Fritz Leiber
The Oxford Companion to the English Language — Tom McArthur
Acorna — Anne McCaffrey & Margaret Ball
Engines of God — Jack McDevitt
Sacrifice of Fools — Ian McDonald
Dead Man's Walk — Larry McMurtry
The Origins of English Nonsense — Noel Malcolm
Robin Hood, Lord of the Greenwood — John Matthews
Magnificent — Julian May
The Good Fairies of New York — Martin Miller
Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned — Walter Mosley
Nymphomation — Jeff Noon
Collected Short Stories — Patrick O'Brian
Hogfather — Terry Pratchett
The Prestige — Christopher Priest
The Shipping News — E. Annie Proulx
The Subtle Knife — Philip Pullman
Marx for Beginners — Rius
Icehenge — Kim Stanley Robinson
Blue Mars — Kim Stanley Robinson
Mars Trilogy — Kim Stanley Robinson
Starplex — Robert J. Sawyer
The Grail of Hearts — Susan Shwartz
Endymion — Dan Simmons
Lost in Music — Giles Smith
Spare — Michael Marshall Smith
Darker Angels — S.P. Somtow
Fair Peril — Nancy Springer
Chimera's Cradle — Brian Stableford
Snow Crash — Neal Stephenson
She's Fantastical — Lucy Sussex & Judith Raphael Buckrich
Purple Homicide — John Sweeney
The End of Time — Damien Thompson (more...)



as a shining example of the very best of storytelling and imagination combined. For once, Tepper's eco-agenda is mere background to a wonderful yarn' as Vikki Lee described it.



IAIN BANKS
The most important British novelist of the generation
A SONG OF STONE

These three authors are joined in joint fourth position by two other writers whose work seems to crop up in this annual listing with predictable regularity. Tim Powers is there for *Earthquake Weather*, which Brian Stableford calls a 'dense, brooding and intoxicating fantasy'. Michael Swanwick makes the list with *Jack Faust*, a powerful fable which Brian Stableford (again) considers: 'the book which is to Campbellian sf what the Marquis de Sade is to moral philosophy: the challenge which has to be overcome if the game is to be taken into extra time.'

Apart from Mary Doria Russell's debut, one thing that marks all the novels on the list so far is that they are by established authors, writers

whose names regularly feature on lists such as this. (Though it is curious that another author who has been a fixture this high on the list for the last several years has slipped down the ratings this year. Kim Stanley Robinson gained one vote for his Mars Trilogy as a whole, one for the final volume in that trilogy, *Blue Mars*, and one for the re-issue of his earlier novel *Icehege*, but no votes at all for his new book, *Antarctica*. While other generally popular writers achieve only one vote (Gwyneth Jones) or none (Paul J. McAuley) for their latest novels.) It is only as we move further down the list that less familiar names start to appear. Sarah Ash, for instance, for her fantasy novel *Moths to a Flame*, and Amitav Ghosh for *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

It is interesting, and rather heartening, that both last year's BSFA Award winner (*Excession*) and the Arthur C. Clarke Award winner (*The Calcutta Chromosome*) feature strongly on the list. Curiously, although the short listed titles for this year's awards tend to have done rather well in the poll (most notably, of course, *The Sparrow* which features on both short lists), each has one missing title: *Son of the Rock* by Jack Deighton from the BSFA Award shortlist and *Days* by James Lovegrove from the Clarke Award shortlist.

At this level, with two votes apiece, there are more familiar names. There is Greg Bear with *Slant* which, 'although inevitably lacking the impact that made *Queen of Angels* arguably Bear's best novel to date,' as Andrew Seaman says, 'is still a worthy sequel.'

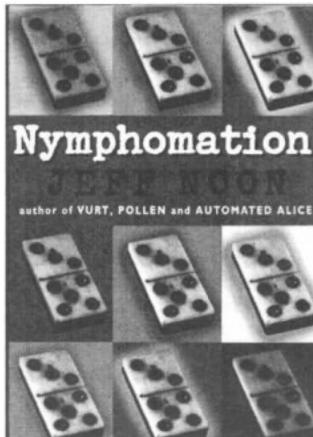
Bruce Sterling is there with *Holy Fire*, 'the kind of intelligent genre novel to give to people who think they don't like sf,' as Colin Bird describes it. And there is Terry Pratchett's *Jingo* - 'I'm a Pratchett fan. I can't say more than that,' as John R. Oram put it - which has done rather better than Pratchett's novels have tended to do of late, maybe we've once more stopped taking him for granted.

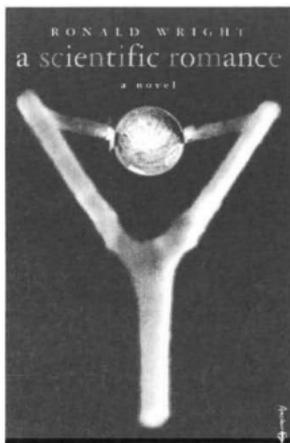
However, alongside these titles which (even the Ash and the Ghosh) could be expected to appear high on the list, are two which have to be completely unexpected. *Freedom and Necessity* is at least written by two familiar fantasy authors, Steven Brust and Emma Bull, but it is a historical mystery which hasn't even been published in this country. As Tanya Brown describes it, it consists of 'four appealing characters writing to one another (and the speed of the postal service makes it fantastic, even if one decides that there isn't any actual magic!) against a backdrop of Victorian politics, parlour mysticism and swashbuckling intrigue.' In this novel there is a pseudo-pagan cult mixed up in Chartist politics, but *An Instance of the Fingerpost* doesn't even have that degree of magic, though it does share with *Freedom and Necessity* the way that a very carefully detailed historical background is essential in the development and resolution of the mystery. In this instance the setting is Oxford in the immediate aftermath of the

THE LIST (CONCLUDED)

- A Fire Upon the Deep** — Vernor Vinge
A Dance in Blood Velvet — Freda Warrington
There's Treasure Everywhere — Bill Watterson
Polymorph — Scott Westerfield
Islands in the Sky — Gary Westfahl
Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica — Sara Wheeler
Arcady — Michael Williams
Otherland — Tad Williams
The Woodwife — Terri Windling
The Book of the Long Sun — Gene Wolfe
Let's Put the Future Behind Us — Jack Womack
A Scientific Romance — Ronald Wright

TOTAL: 114 TITLES





Restoration of Charles II. Paul Kincaid says of it: 'four unreliable narrators describe the same events and manage to conjure four totally different explanations. This is historical fiction of the first order, genuinely creating a sense of wonder from the minute realism with which the world is described.' Not since Iain Banks topped the list with *Complicity* has crime fiction, however loosely defined, done so well in the poll, but these two books clearly speak to something in the science fiction fan. And judging from the appearance elsewhere on the list of historical fiction (such as the two novels by Peter Ackroyd) and crime fiction (books by James Ellroy and Walter Mosley), these related genres continue to fascinate sf fans as much as ever.

So, what emerges from the exercise this year? For a start, of the 17 books which received two or more votes, eight are clearly science fiction, two are fantasy, and three (by Powers, Swanwick and Tepper) somewhere in that indefinable hinterland between the two. When we consider the rest of the books nominated, the distinction is not so clear cut (31 to 26 at a rough count, with a fair number hovering in between). There is still a strong preference for out and out science fiction, though this can vary from the subtle, almost mainstream fiction of M. John Harrison's *Signs of Life* to the straightforward space adventure of David Feintuch's *Fisherman's Hope*. But the taste for fantasy does seem to be growing, though again this can vary

from the magic realism of *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni to the monumental heroic fantasy of Robin Hobb's *Assassin's Quest*. However, this may reflect the way that fantasy tends to dominate publishers' lists these days. (Curiously, there seems to be less dark fantasy or horror this year, and the few titles that do make the list, by Bachman, Barker, Collins et al. and Somtow, tend more towards fantasy than horror.)

Once again short stories do not do well, though seven anthologies or collections do make the list, which has to be quite good going. Especially when you consider that, though individual stories may stand out, most books are liable to contain one or two tales on average that don't make the grade, and that could easily be enough for the book to miss the list.

Neil Gaiman's final comic in *The Sandman* series, *The Wake*, makes the list, as does Bill Watterson's latest collection of Calvin and Hobbes cartoons, *There's Treasure Everywhere*, both of which are noteworthy additions to the list. Though what really is a first, I think, is the inclusion of two books of poetry on the list, *The School Bag* edited by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes and Hughes's own award-winning *Tales from Ovid*.

There aren't so many older titles this year, though votes for Vernor Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep* and Rider Haggard's *Allan Quatermain* demonstrate how a good story can keep its audience. However, after the Haggard, the oldest book on the list is also one of the newest, Fritz Leiber's *The Dealings of Daniel Kesserich* which has only just seen the light of day and, as Brian Stableford says, 'it beggars the imagination that no one was willing to publish this in the late 30s.'

Wyndham's Cosy Warnings

By Ian J. Simpson

'Science is an edged tool, with which men play like children, and cut their own fingers'

Sir Arthur Eddington.

There appears to be little evidence of John Wyndham's education in scientific theory, but after World War Two, a new found cynicism turned the author from an unsuccessful teen detective writer to one of the most revered Science Fiction authors of the century. In the spirit of H.G.Wells and using original scenarios to impart warnings of invasion and catastrophe – often man-made in the case of the latter. Wyndham has produced classics such as *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Midwich Cuckoos* and perhaps his best and most chilling

work, *The Chrysalids*. Evolution, genetics and religion – man playing God? – are recurring themes in Wyndham's work. He also hinted strongly at a belief in old fashioned Middle England values, where the educated man knows all and the woman is little more than the wife. There are a few exceptions to this rule, but whatever strength or intelligence he gave his heroines, he also endowed them with the ability to be there to be looked at, or even, in the case of Josella in *The Day of the Triffids*, to be held to ridicule for an attempt at sexual independence. Perhaps by the time he wrote *The Trouble with Lichen*, his values were changing. The heroine, Diana, is unlike any female character in his earlier works.

In his early days John Wyndham was published as John Beynon Harris, John Beynon, Wyndham Parkes, Lucas Parkes and Johnson Harris. It was perhaps fortunate that he was born John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris in 1903. When searching for a *nom de plume* he had plenty of choice.

Despite only producing six major novels, John Wyndham has many titles published, resulting from a profusion of overlapping anthologies, reprints and revisions of his early fiction. Much of his work has been published under more than one title. For him writing was a fifth attempt at a career, following law, farming, commercial art and advertising. At first he wrote mainly for American pulp magazines, trying his hand at detective stories. During the 1930s he turned his attention to SF, contributing adventure and juvenile SF to various UK periodicals. Some of this early work can be read in the collections *'Sleepers of Mars'* (1973), *'Wanderers of Time'* (1973) and *Exiles on Asperus* (1979). This last published as by John Benyon. A revised, restored edition of *The Secret People*, Wyndham's first novel, was published in 1972.

A period of relative silence followed the war. John Harris became John Wyndham, signing a deal with a new publisher, Michael Joseph. World War Two must be seen as a critical point in Wyndham's life, as it was for most who lived through it. After the war he sought to exemplify Middle England's insecurities and highlight the dangers of man's actions and ego. He also developed a highly poetic and much more readable style than previously.

In 1951 Wyndham published *The Day of the Triffids*. This is an outstanding, genuinely scary tale of a type one might call 'proto post-apocalyptic'. John Clute has written (in *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, 2nd edition) that Wyndham defined a pattern: "the city (usually London), depopulated by the catastrophe; the exodus, with its scenes of panic and bravery; and the ensuing focus on a small but growing nucleus of survivors who reach some kind of sanctuary in the country and prepare to re-establish Man's shaken dominion." In *The Day of the Triffids*, after most of the world's population has been blinded by mysterious lights, the Triffids, engineered plants designed for oil production (unlike in the simplified 1963 filmed version, where they are aliens, associated with the lights) break out of their prisons and hound the remains of humanity. Brian Aldiss has called the book a 'Cosy Catastrophe' (*Billion Year Spree*, 1973) due to the 'analgesic style', but in reality it is, like most of Wyndham's novels, highly satirical. Take away that which we take for granted, and follow the consequences. In many ways, certainly thematically, and in overall post-war style, Wyndham is reminiscent

of H.G. Wells. The most astonishing aspect of *The Day of the Triffids* is that there is no conclusion. The Triffids still roam, man continues to fight for survival.

The London working class is portrayed as somewhat down-trodden and criminal, not at all fitting in with the narrator's Middle England values, although he does credit Coker for his capture. The heroine, Josella, is given intelligence and independence of mind, though is shunned by other women due to the nature of her novel, 'Sex is My Adventure'. She is a symbol of a view that suggests that when women seek independence, they are ostracised by their own. *The Day of the Triffids* is both a warning and an accurate depiction of, then, future developments. Wyndham foresaw genetic engineering, bio-chemical warfare and advanced satellite weaponry. In the wake of World War Two the author suggests that while humans may learn from their mistakes, they will also continually make new ones.

The Kraken Wakes (1953 – also published as *Out of the Depths*) follows this 'comforting' format, although as a novel, it is less effective and less successful. This time the invaders are extraterrestrial. Only able to survive underwater, nevertheless these powerful entities are rising up. A radio journalist and his wife witness the aliens coming from the sea in their initially indestructible vehicles. The E.T.s have planted giant heating machines under the polar icecaps and the world grows smaller as the waters and the aliens rise. This is a disappointing follow-up, perhaps a return to pre-war form. The male hero with the woman at his side continues from *The Day of the Triffids*. Indeed, this is a format that proliferates through Wyndham's earlier forays. The male is often portrayed as more intelligent, and as a protector. This is despite her showing equal intelligence and diplomacy skills. It may be said that she uses her looks as a weapon to further her career, but in this, Wyndham demeans the intelligence he gives her. It may be that Wyndham is being satirical, ironic might be a better word, in reality suggesting that he believed women to be his equal. Certainly some of his later female characters become much more central to their respective novels, and not simply a pleasing sidekick.

There is little 'cosiness' in *The Chrysalids* (1955, originally titled *Re-Birth*) or *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957, also published as *Village of the Damned*). These great works are very disturbing. *The Chrysalids* is set in a post-apocalyptic world. (It is noteworthy that all of Wyndham's post-apocalyptic settings are far from those often depicted in modern SF, where the planet has suffered irreparable destruction and is all but an uninhabitable wasteland.) Wyndham manages to warn against the horrors of war without direct reference: the consequences themselves are terrible. The book is also a



satire on religious doctrine. The community in which the narrator grows up in follows the Holy Bible and the evangelical 'Nicholson's Repentance's' to the letter. Genetic mutations resulting from the war are seen as God's tribulation, and the community disposes all the newly born who do not conform to the perfect image of God. Animals and crops suffer the same fate. However, David – a young boy – and some of his friends have developed a form of unseen mutation, telepathy. As the youngsters grow, their secret becomes more difficult to hide, and eventually David must run from his pious and respected father. There is another community in touch with David, his sister and their like, a community where telepathy is the norm. Again, males dominate. However, for the first time, the focus of the novel is a small girl, and the saviour from the second community is also female. This novel is marvellous; in its use of language, its pace, the chills it creates, and the message that what is right for us is not necessarily right for others. Perhaps this is a message against racism informed by the horrors of Nazism, as well as a great tale.

The Midwich Cuckoos is darker still. Another 'cosy' invasion falls, this time upon the small village of Midwich. One quiet night when the narrator and his wife are celebrating his birthday in London, the village is sealed-off by a mysterious force. A short while later, all the women of child-bearing age are found to be, well, bearing children. Once born, the children appear to have a collective intelligence, which initially seems child-like but is actually brutal. As the vessels for invasion, the women are depicted as remarkably placid and accepting. It is the dominant males, including the secretive Colonel and the quiet Priest who pit their wits against the children. As with Wyndham's previous novels, the style is poetic and the setting very evocative of Middle England. Yet there appear to be paradoxes within the text, one such being a near disgust at the idea of adultery yet, in effect, all the women bearing bastards and behaving as surrogates for the 'cuckoos' being accepted as just strange eccentricities of village life. However, these situations can be seen as simply plot devices for Wyndham's exploration of ideas concerning human evolution. In *The Chrysalids* human evolution was seen to move on by mutation into telepaths. In *The Midwich Cuckoos* Wyndham suggests humanity needs competition to evolve, or face extinction.

Or perhaps genetic alteration. Combining ideas found in *The Day of the Triffids* with these last two texts, Wyndham explores the idea of humans shaping their own destiny in *The Trouble with Lichen* (1960). In this novel, the main character is female, as Wyndham explores the beauty industry and academe with equal irony and cutting satire. Diana Brackley shows the wit and guile of the male protagonists of his previous works. The downside of the character is that Wyndham

places her at a weakness with respect to Dr. Saxover. The world is still one where women are to be married and looked at. Diana accidentally discovers a lichen which can slow the metabolic rate, and goes on to open a beauty parlour charging extortionate prices to the most influential women in England. The purpose is long term public acceptance of the life-lengthening formula. Diana's aim is to empower women, although she has a more personal motive closer to heart. The world wants Antigerone, her anti-ageing agent, but there is dissent, especially amongst working men who don't want their women to have the kind of freedom the treatment promises. Again, Wyndham looks at how man copes when the goalposts of evolution are moved. At a time when genetic science and the discovery of DNA were just beginning to grip the World's imagination, Wyndham showed that just because you can, it doesn't mean you should.

With the exception of invasion, all of Wyndham's themes are addressed in this book. The warnings of humanity meddling with science, the examination of the evolution of mankind, the exploration of traditional Middle England values and the follies of religious ideology.

In John Wyndham's last novel *Chocky* (1968) the old themes were seemingly disregarded. In the eight years that passed between this and his previous publication, it would seem that he decided to try something new. Judging by the relative lack of success of this novel, it was a direction not widely appreciated. Less interested in the behaviours of the human animal, Wyndham moves on to the mind. The story concerns Matthew. The youngster talks to himself, but so do most children, so it's no big deal. Matthew soon starts having intense and sophisticated conversations with the eponymous imaginary friend. At this point, one may be forgiven for thinking that this is another tale of evolution and advancement, especially when it appears that Matthew spontaneously begins to count in binary code. However, when his parents ask how he can do this, he tells them about Chocky, the little boy that lives in his head. Despite a consistency in prose style the book lacks the content of earlier work. Wyndham needs his satirical edge. Without it, but with a happy ending, *Chocky* is as cosy as the author ever got. Perhaps it is telling that it is his only work to be adapted for children's television.

John Wyndham died in 1969, before he had finished the follow-up work to *Chocky*, eventually published as *Web* (1979). After the disappointing *Chocky*, Wyndham heads back to themes of the dangerous direction mankind is taking. A millionaire decides to create a Utopia in defiance to the rules of society. However, it's a 'cosy invasion' scenario again as the new settlers to his paradise are confronted with genetically mutated spiders. Affected by nuclear testing, the colonies of millions of spiders have a collective consciousness and

increased intelligence, rather like the children of Midwich. It is unfair to critique a novel published after the death of its author. We cannot know if Wyndham would have been content with finished version. Many of Wyndham's old themes converge in this novel. Man playing god with science to his own Folly, man's 'cosy' values threatened by invasion, and a small band of hopefuls fighting for survival, hoping for something phoenix-like to emerge from the nightmares. In many ways the scenario prefigures the plot and themes, if not the excitement, of Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*.

One published oddity is *The Outward Urge* (1959). This is a collection of linked short stories written in conjunction with Lucas Parkes. Parkes, of course is a pseudonym of Wyndham's. The stories have a harder edge than most of Wyndham's other work, so it may be that he felt a distinction had to be drawn. Parkes apparently 'starred' as technical adviser on the stories concerning the Troons, a family of space pioneers.

Other Wyndham collections in addition to those already mentioned include *Fizzle* (1954), *The Seeds of Time* (1956), *Consider Her Ways and Others* (1961), and *The Infinite Moment* (1961).

The best Wyndham conversion from paper to celluloid is the BBC TV adaptation of *The Day of the Triffids* from 1981 directed by Ken Hannam, and adapted by Douglas Livingstone. This version is far superior to the US film made in 1963 directed by Steve Sekely (unaccredited) and Freddie Francis. In the latter version there are two fundamental and damaging changes made from the novel. There is also an over importance of love interest. Other notable interpretations include *Village of the Damned* (1960) which was remade/sequelised in 1963 as the *Children of the Damned* directed by Anton M. Leader in an urban setting. A further remake was completed in 1995 by

John Carpenter, who relocated the story to an American seaside town.

The ITV TV series based on *Chocky* (1984) was so successful as to warrant two 'original' sequels *Chocky's Children* (1985) and *Chocky's Challenge* (1986). A further adaptation of the novel, this time for BBC Radio 4 was broadcast in March. This followed the transmission in February, also on Radio 4, of a play based upon *The Kraken Wakes*. Both productions have been released by the BBC on sell-through audio-cassettes.

Despite only publishing a handful of novels with true quality, including what I believe are out and out classics: *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Chrysalids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*, John Wyndham remains one of the most important and successful British Science Fiction authors. Character driven and often highly poetic, John Wyndham and his 'cosy catastrophe' are, for the most part, a delight to read. With the exception of *Chocky*, a common thread runs through his work. He is warning us, using satire as an effective tool, showing us that the past is full of lessons. Our future is not going to be cosy. John Wyndham's novels are thought-provoking, a little too close to home, and even today, despite the passing of almost half a century, relevant. These are the hallmarks of great Science Fiction.

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**'Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things-
We murder to dissect.'**

William Wordsworth

Ian Simpson wrote about Nichola Griffith and Tricia Sullivan in *Vector* 198 and reviewed *Lexx* in *Matrix* 130 - Eds.

Storyteller for the Millennium: Storm Constantine's Grigori Trilogy

By Helen Knibb

At this late stage of the Twentieth Century, and whether or not we subscribe to the Christian faith by which our calendar is dated, one of our Western cultural obsessions is the impending Millennium. It cannot be ignored, if only because the date stares us in the face daily. It is everywhere, from the title of Chris Carter's follow-up to *The X-Files* to *The Dome*, and perhaps most spectacularly, the Millennium Bug, which threatens to crash the globally interlocked computer net at midnight 2000. At the same time, the last few years have seen an upsurge of interest in angels; books and images abound, many of them saccharine. Interest in the Dark Angel is also rife; from role playing games

and films to vampire novels, the dark side is arguably more prevalent than the chubby cherub.

Storm Constantine's recently completed trilogy comprising *Stalking Tender Prey* (Signet 1995) *Scenting Hallowed Blood*, (Signet 1996) and *Stealing Sacred Fire* (Penguin 1997) explores the ancient mythology of the Nephilim in the light of the approaching Millennium. Here eternity proves to be measured in millennia, as close to the Year 2000, angels walk the earth again. Briefly: In the earliest days, the Anannage [the author's interpretation of the Biblical Nephilim by another name], known as the Sons of God, used relatively primitive humans as a labour force. The Anannage had superior knowledge and technology, and their own

laws forbade any sharing of knowledge with humans. Led by the rebel prince, Shemyaza, some of the Anannage rebelled, took human wives and shared with them secrets of their race. Shemyaza's human partner was Ishtar. Retribution was dire; some were buried alive, Shemyaza's body was burned and his soul imprisoned in the constellation of Orion for eternity. The angels fell. In this century, all that remains of the Anannage are human/Nephilim hybrids known as The Grigori.

The idea of the fallen angel is one of enduring appeal; Milton made Lucifer his most sympathetic character in *Paradise Lost*. The Grigori are angels from a different branch of mythology, yet nonetheless we recognise them because their characteristics are similar. (It could be argued that they both spring from the same root.) Using The Grigori, Constantine puts her finger on the prevailing twentieth century obsession with psychoanalysis, and the concept of the divided self. Her protagonist, Peverel Othman, is a figure we can understand if not sympathise with; the individual who lacks self-knowledge in the most profound sense, who is unaware of who he is, or what he is capable of. At this level there are similarities with many of the protagonists of Clive Barker's epic metaphysical dark fantasies.

By making the Grigori Trilogy a contemporary series, Constantine is able to explore the idea of angels on earth in both the present and the past, the ancient story being told in flashbacks which inform present-day events. In this way the reader is able to follow both threads, enjoying the dramatic irony which often comes when the reader knows more than the characters. The flashback device also adds resonance to the exploration of another cherished idea of the last several hundred years; that love can transcend death, endure millennia and cross incarnations. Not only romantic love, but familial love. In addition to love from the past, injustice and pain span the generations to affect the present.

The Grigori are strange and terrible, dark and beautiful. They have occult powers and are a controlling force in the human world. They can be mercilessly destructive. Their sexuality is

different; they make no distinction between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. For the humans in the story, to have sex with a Grigori is to be irrevocably changed; to become a dependant, unlikely to ever want a sexual relationship with another human again.

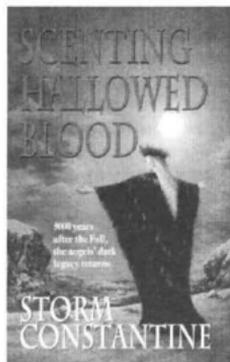
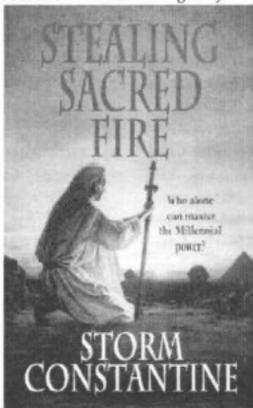
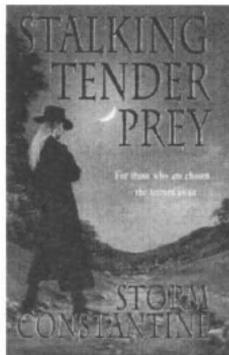
The Grigori are different things to different people; to the fundamentalist Christians in the story, they are demons incarnate; to some humans, hope of longevity and beauty, possibly even the salvation of the planet itself. In the Christian tradition, people have always feared the end of the world; we now have the technology to make it happen, but this makes us no different from a medieval person being certain that God could destroy everything tomorrow. It could be argued that this is one of the main stresses of the approaching Millennium, that associated with Armageddon, it could herald the end of the world, perhaps, through the actions of a individual or group deranged and determined enough, become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Though to the rare optimist, The Millennium may be a new beginning.

Constantine weaves all these late twentieth century concerns into a tapestry of desire, faith and power. While, from middle-eastern despots to Cornish witches, her characters are as well-rounded as they are different, her darkly erotic prose is captivating and the breadth of her vision astonishing.

An interview with Storm Constantine and a bibliography can be found on her homepages at: <http://members.aol.com/MalakTawus/Storm.htm>

For details of Inception, The Storm Constantine Appreciation Society contact Steve Jeffery or Vicki Lee France at 44 White Way, Kiddington, OXON, OX5 2AX

Also of interest is The Watchers Trilogy, by Stuart Gordon published in the late '80's, an imaginative fantasy series which also takes the Nephilim and the Millennium as source material. The books are *Archon* [1997], *The Hidden World* [1988] and *The Mask* [1988].





First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Paul Kincaid

Note: All novels marked: [] are eligible for the 1998 BSFA Award for Best Novel. All collections and anthologies marked: * contain stories that are eligible for the 1998 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction.

LeVar Burton

Aftermath

Vista, 1997, 275pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 575 60371 2

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

LeVar Burton has gone back to his roots, if not *Roots*. Burton *alias* Kunte Kinte *alias* Geordi LaForge (the Afro-Earthman with the hairband over his eyes in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) is a long-time fan of science fiction. From Author's note:

Asimov, Clarke, Bova and others... dared me to contemplate two of the most powerful words in the English language – 'What if?' What if – like the heroes in their books – I could actually create for myself a future of my own choosing, on my own terms, in my own image?... Sadly though, what I always found lacking in those stories were... characters of African descent or other people of colour populating those worlds... I suppose that's a large part of the reason I found myself so attracted to the world of *Star Trek*... The presence of Nichelle Nichols as Lt. Uhura assured me that not only would people who looked like me be a part of the world of the future, we would play a vital role in the continuing evolution of the human experience... This goes to the heart of why I am so grateful for the opportunity to create an experience like *Aftermath*.

Full marks for observation.

'Epic, along the lines of *The Stand*', Whoopi Goldberg's front-cover endorsement is like saying that *The Pelican Brief* is 'Epic along the lines of *Bleak House*'. Burton does provide a *Chronology Of Events Leading Up To The War Of 2015-2018*. Then: '2019... The race war finally grinds to a halt... People of colour have seized control of... power and land...'

Hope comes from Dr. Rene Reynolds, the inventor of a cure-most-all which she calls the Neuro Enhancer. The right

idea at the right time? Not according to Randall Sinclair: 'We (*doctors*) are paid to look for cures; we are not paid to find them... You will have saved mankind, but in doing so you will have cost us our jobs... and virtually destroy medical science'. So Marcus Welby, M.D. lived in vain, after all.

LeVar Burton has done a solid piece of 'prentice fiction-joinery. The shelves fit together and the hinges work. Unfortunately, however, it ends up as one info-dumpling after another; even characterisation and action scenes are reduced to checklist chunks. Harsh words. But then I've judged *Aftermath* in terms of what it is, not in terms of what the author wishes it might have been.

Solecism Alert: 'She shook her head no' (p.213). Does 'head' not imply the existence of a subordinate no? Or perhaps even a foot no? But let's forget the no play. 'She shook her head' would have been clear enough to the village idiot.

Stepan Chapman

The Troika

Ministry of Whimsy/BBR, 1997, 255 pp, £14.99 ISBN 1 892464 02 3

Steven J. Frank

The Uncertainty Principle

Permeable Press/BBR, 1997, 240 pp, £9.95 ISBN 1 882633 26 1

Reviewed by Chris Amies

Steven J. Frank's *The Uncertainty Principle* is a campus novel and novel of ideas set among the hacker generation. His protagonist, MIT student Paul Bustamante, is working on a program for the accurate forecasting of weather systems via the uncertainty principle of the title. Like all leaps of imagination it derives from a chance encounter: being run off the road by a truck while thinking of a particular line from a poem. Paul gets his curiosity from his father, an ebullient (or

just crazy) Italian who interrogates his family on matters scientific at the dinner table. His uncle, unwilling to waste breath on debate with minors, pretends to be a senile old fool; this proves far from the truth. He tells Paul, 'you're a weird kid', which coming from him has to be recognition of a kindred spirit.

Meanwhile Paul is also experimenting with sex, and starts an affair with a very strange woman called Rita, whose dependence on initial conditions is such that she changes character entirely – baffling Paul who was expecting her to be a predictable phenomenon, instead of as changeable as the weather. The result of all this investigation of many types is that chaos is always with us, and just as well.

Stepan Chapman's *The Troika* is a very strange story. It concerns three characters who seem to be in some way related and who are travelling through a Beckettian endless desert in the bodies of three entities: a Mexican woman, a Jeep, and a Brontosaurus. The story is deeply surrealistic and obeys the twisted logic of dreams. Characters have names like

Mazer (the creator of mazes) and Bosch (the artist of the Garden of Earthly Delights). During the story we are introduced to the back-histories of the three principal characters and their lives in what seems to be an early-21st-century America, a cryogenic storage facility in the northern wastes, and a Mexico reverted to New Age worship of the pre-Columbian gods, before their personalities were uploaded into a space probe. The probe sends them insane and the events that happen to them afterwards – the desert, and what follows – is an experiment in psychotherapy. Though obsessed with their treatment, the psychotherapist becomes more and more fixated on them and develops new hoops for them to jump through before he will release their spirits from the music box he keeps on his desk. It is also (thankfully, after all this heavy dislocational stuff) a very funny book, with the strange juxtapositions of nightmare providing the jokes. Even in the bits that appear to be set in 'our world' it is by no means certain that the dreamer has woken up, and if he/she has, into what reality?

Vera Chapman

The Enchantresses □

Gollancz, 1998, 223pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 575 06524 9

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Vera Chapman has so far been known for her linked series of three Arthurian novels, *The Three Damosels*, which first appeared in the 1970s, and was reissued in 1996. *The Enchantresses* might be considered as a 'prequel' to that work as it makes use of the same Arthurian world and the same interpretation of some of the characters. The manuscript was discovered among Vera Chapman's papers when she died in 1996, and appears here for the first time.

The central character is Vivian, here identified as the third of Ygraine's daughters by Gorlois of Cornwall, and therefore Arthur's half-sister. She comes to be the Lady of the Lake, in a different sense from how that character is usually portrayed in Arthurian romance, and also Merlin's wife and the guardian of Arthur in his earliest years. Along with Merlin, she opposes the evil Morgan le Fay in her attempts to destroy Arthur, and this conflict is the core of the book.

Anyone familiar with *The Three Damosels* will expect the same richness in Chapman's portrayal of the Arthurian

world, and the same depth in portraying its characters. To some extent this expectation is satisfied, but in patches. As I read on I became increasingly conscious that the book was not seen through the press by its author, and that it would be wrong to judge it as a completely finished work.

There are three sections. The first, which I found the most detailed and the most satisfying, tells of the childhood of Vivian, Morgan and Morgause. The second covers the conception and birth of Arthur, until Merlin finds the baby and Vivian a refuge against Morgan's evil. The third part covers the entire reign of Arthur, and here Chapman moves fast, selecting key incidents that fit her theme, leaving a great deal unsaid. It's hard to be sure, but I feel that someone coming afresh to Arthurian legend in this book might find the third section difficult to follow.

I wouldn't have missed this for anything, because I admire Vera Chapman's earlier work so much. *The Enchantresses* doesn't measure up, but it's unfair to criticise too strongly when the writer, for whatever reason, was unable to finish her work. It's still a fascinating book, but not the right place to start exploring the Arthurian world.

A.C. Crispin

Alien Resurrection

Warner Books, 1997, 276pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 7515 1419 5

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

'It's Ripley, Jim, but not as we know her.'

So much from so little. Ancient blood samples. Bits of tissue from the marrow, the spleen, the spinal fluid. Scattered, shattered DNA. Infected cells. From all that, this . . . the specimen turned, its shoulder-length wavy brown floating loosely around its face, occasionally obscuring the attractive, recognizably human features. Its hand curled into a fist, then relaxed. The eyes beneath the closed lids moved back and forth (p.14).

The Talented Ms. Ripley would make an ideal alternative title for the *Alien* saga, if Patricia Highsmith hadn't (almost) got there first. *Ripley's Believe It Or Not?* Again, no.

The story so far (for some castaway lately returned to

civilisation and/or the BSFA): (a) Ripley had escaped the destruction of colony LV-426... but had ended up on Fiorina 161 when her ship had malfunctioned. A single warrior Alien had emerged there, waiting for the Queen that Ripley had unknowingly harboured (*sic*). But the warrior had been destroyed, and Ripley had committed suicide to ensure the Queen inside her would never emerge. (b) The secret of the nearly perfect organism had died... on LV-426, until the discovery (*twenty-five years later*) of Ripley's preserved blood and tissue samples from Fiorina 161. (c) The infusion of Alien DNA into Ripley's own had been how they'd managed to incubate her and her embryo.

But it hadn't been easy ('*Get away!*') They'd had to separate out the DNA right down to the RNA, reconstruct it, try to get it functioning... But now she sat here, like any other human being... *And her terrible child, even now* – (p. 49).

Hence *Alien Resurrection*. Or – going by the front-cover photo of Sigourney Weaver – *Alien Erection*. It looks like a screen test for *The Crying Game* and/or *The Naked Gun 33^{1/3}*. For the usual ensuing complications, see the movie/read this novelisation. Why do people publish/write/buy/read such things? I don't have enough space, here, to go into all that. But the present example is well worth its paltry asking price.

As everybody who's in the know knows, the first three *Aliens* were novelised Alan Dean Foster – see *The Complete Alien Omnibus*; which is now, of course, *The Incomplete...* For some reason – too busy that week? – Foster passed on

No. 4, Ann Carol Crispin got the job. And a fine job she's done too, even making this-time-out's Alien seem really hard done by. Although the part where Elgyn loses his marbles should satisfy the most gruesome among us.

Crispin has dedicated her take on *Alien Resurrection* to Sigourney Weaver: 'Thank you for creating a female action/adventure hero we can all look up to'. Fair enough, but I'm of the opinion that Jennifer Saunders made an even more kick-Alien-ass Ripley. She didn't go looking for a lost cat, or leave the airlock open.

Fantastic Times

Scott Ciencin *The Elven Ways 2: Ancient Games*

Avon Books, 1997, 261pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0 380 77981 1

Dave Duncan *Future Indefinite*

Avon Books, 1997, 334pp, \$23.00 ISBN 0 380 97586 6

David & Leigh Eddings *Polgara the Sorceress*

Voyager, 1997, 697pp, £17.99 ISBN 0 246 13844 0

Sharon Green *Competitions*

Avon Books, 1997, 422pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0 380 78415 7

Nancy McKenzie *The Child Queen*

Legend, 1997, 307pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 09 922482 8

Sasha Miller *Ladylord*

Voyager, 1997, 382pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648304 6

J.R.R. Tolkien *The Peoples of Middle-Earth*

HarperCollins, 1997, 482pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 261 10348 2

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

way to enlightening the reader as to just why she is like she is. One to miss I'm afraid.

Ladylord by Sasha Miller is a book that sets out to be something, then doesn't really deliver. From the cover art and the blurb, it appears to be along the lines of the collaboration between Raymond Feist and Janny Wurts, their Empire series, a clear 'in the glorious tradition of' without actually saying it. The book is well enough written, and has many plot lines and strands that do strengthen the resemblance; Lady Javere is left her father's lands in the absence of a male heir; a powerful Lord sets out to take the lands from her; a group of loyal and trusted friends help her to win through all that is thrown at her; the setting is oriental in origin, as are many of the customs. But, even with all these resemblances, the story never quite fulfils the promise hinted at by the cover blurb, and I quote: 'Fantasy for grown-ups. *Ladylord* is original, inventive, and not for the prudish.' Well, it certainly isn't original, it may be inventive in parts, but 'not for the prudish'? Oh come on! Hinting at bizarre sexual practices and one rape scene is hardly going to send anyone today yelling for 'parental guidance only' to be added to the cover, now is it? It's a fun read for the most part, and certainly one to while away a few hours.

The Child Queen by Nancy McKenzie is a fairly stock example of yet another retelling of the legend of King Arthur. Told from the viewpoint of Guinevere; cursed by a wise woman at birth to betray her king and herself be betrayed. Living in North Wales, the young Guinevere is bought up with her cousin Elaine, who has high hopes of marrying the dashing English King, Arthur. When, however, the king chooses the hand of his Queen, there are naturally no surprises that it turns out to be Guinevere, and not the specially groomed Elaine. Having gotten this far without the reader being totally floored with surprises, the book then gets much more interesting as the relationship between the lifelong friends, Elaine and Guinevere, deteriorates, with disastrous consequences. It's a well told story that suffers from few real surprises, but then, it's difficult to do anything really new with a story that is so often and well told already.

The remaining three books are all second books in trilogies or series, and this reader didn't have the advantage of having read any of the first books in each case.

In Dave Duncan's *Future Indefinite*, portals allow access to a parallel world, known rather tritely as 'Nextdoor'. An Englishman, Edward Exeter, is named in 'The Filoby Testament', basically a prophecy, as the one to bring death to Death. Whatever happened in the first book in this series, Exeter has decided he is the one named in the prophecy, and

In a fairly mixed bag of fantasy fiction, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Peoples of Middle Earth* (edited by Christopher Tolkien) stands as the odd one out, being the twelfth and final(?) volume of Christopher's rummaging through the great master's waste-paper baskets. Maybe that's a bit strong, but this is really a book for those who take their Tolkien seriously, possibly even religiously. The detail and minutiae of Tolkien's masterpiece may indeed get you on to Mastermind, but is all rather more than this reader ever wanted to know. Although it is packed with interesting notes on people, family trees, languages, and even calendars, I prefer to remember the story fondly in the way Tolkien himself presented it to his readers. I'm sure it's a must for those who have collected the first eleven volumes, and for those, perhaps, who think 'I've started so I'll finish'.

Of the six novels represented here, the major disappointment has to be David Eddings's latest offering, *Polgara The Sorceress*. Having followed, and enjoyed, Eddings to varying degrees for many years, the nagging feeling that the author left me with after *Belgarath the Sorcerer* last year finally came home to roost with a vengeance. A feeling of having been there before, having heard it all before, even having slept through parts of it before. This book is nothing but a warning to those of us who, in our wildest dreams, have ever thought it would be great to live to forever. The tediousness of Polgara's existence leaves the reader wondering why she never thought of suicide, whilst at least going some

as such, sets out on his preordained path the meet Death in battle, and destroy him/it. Exeter becomes the *messiah*, and gathers his followers along the way to witness this final battle. This book suffered greatly for me in that there was very little information about the world of Nextdoor and its rules for survival. The many characters were, in most cases, already well drawn in the first book, and Duncan takes little time, or makes little effort, to enlighten the reader in this book. One does however get a feel for it, and often for what must have happened before, so all is not completely lost. It's a fascinating book with lots of well drawn, if somewhat 'whacky' characters, and I wish I'd read the first book in the series first. A must, I think, for those who have, a bit of a slog for those who haven't.

Ancient Games by Scott Ciencin suffers to a much larger extent as the second book in The Elven Ways trilogy. I really couldn't make out exactly what this book was all about, except to say that the Earth is ruled by a Heavenly Host, Dark Angels, and the hero, Tom Keeper, is the one who knows their secret and sets out to reveal it to all. In order to do this, he has to cross into the Realm of Shadows to rescue his friends, who are apparently Dark Angels themselves. Now I may well be quite wrong in this appraisal of what exactly was going on in this book, but it really didn't make a

lot of sense to me. One hopes it would have had I read the first in the series.

Competitions by Sharon Green is, however, a totally different kettle of fish altogether. Unlike the previous two books, Green goes to a lot of effort to educate the reader in case they haven't read the first in the series. She begins with a short introduction to all the main characters and their relationship to one another. By the time the story picks up again, one feels one has at least a grounding in what is going on. In a class-conscious society ruled by a blending of five magicians (masters in the primary basics, Air, Fire, Water, Earth and Spirit), training for the future Ruling Blending is well underway. Two main groups are followed in their efforts to qualify for total power and a life of riches and ease: a group of nobles, and a group of the lower class. Needless to say, in true fantasy fashion, much skulduggery abounds as the nobles, of course, are meant to win, and the reader automatically identifies with the lower classes, against whom all the odds are stacked. This is a genuinely fun novel to read, and is a bit of page-turner to boot. O.K, so you know that the underdogs are going to win in the end, but there are lots of surprises along the way, and the well drawn characters are likeable enough for the reader to care about what happens to them. I'd recommend this one, even if you've not read the first.

Peter Gelman *Flying Saucers over Hennepin*

Permeable Press/BBR, 1997, 200 pp, £8.95 ISBN 1 882633 24 5

Michael Hemmingson *Minstrels*

Permeable Press/BBR, 1997, 148 pp, £7.95 ISBN 1 882633 23 7

Reviewed by Daniel O'Mahony

The letter X crops up frequently in *Flying Saucers Over Hennepin* - X-Rays are transforming Minnesotans into Reaganite mannequins. Those other 'X's - Generation and Files - aren't mentioned explicitly but are undoubtedly lurking somewhere in the undetectable dark matter of Fornax. Or perhaps not, as this novel gives the impression of having been written years before either became fashionable. The story follows the build-up to an anarchist demonstration in Minneapolis in 1988. What if there is in these events imposed by the deluded narrator (because the X-Rays are an escape route, a form of madness), who is also a displaced player in the story. Alienation has replaced *X Files* paranoia or Gen-X consumer-angst as the potent final cargo here.

Dark matter obscures this promising storyline. There is an early heart-sinking moment when the narrator informs us that we're reading 'a document of historical facts... not some banal fiction'. It's difficult to tell whether Gelman means this. From the sunny shot of him on the jacket I'd say not, but if this is satire then we're within our rights to demand that it be sharper, or at least funnier, or at least better written. Gelman is in love with the sound of his own voice, spinning out prose both clumsy and (occasionally) joyous. It leaves the impression that he has nothing to say. Gelman's alienated narrator can't bring himself to touch anything and in the process he reduces description to babble. Elegant caricatures bleed into one another indistinguishably and the vivid portrait of Minneapolis loses any real sense of place.

This isn't a problem with *Minstrels*, set in a solid post-Millennial Paris. The prose is spartan, dialogue-heavy and

effective (though it cries out for Gelman's dazzle in places). Like *Flying Saucers Over Hennepin* it feels like a throwback to an earlier decade. *Minstrels* lifts its local colour from *Last Tango in Paris* and its principal sf device from *The Continuous Katherine Mortenboe*. The presence of urban terrorist-philosophers gives the game away - despite the date this is still the seventies, when 'media landscape' was a phrase with bite and Marlon Brando was taken seriously.

Hemmingson's narrator is a self-absorbed American in Paris whom we immediately find in custody for the murder of a known terrorist. The flashback which follows takes up the first third of the text and almost convinces us that we're reading the new Christopher Priest. Later sections spin the plot away into a more conventional media-conspiracy direction than Priest would allow for; even the revelation that the narrator's camera-eye can record his dreams is sacrificed to literalism. Hemmingson's text strives with some success to disguise the over-familiar characters but only the narrator's plot-pivotal French girlfriend has real substance. Hers is a complex response to being in the glare of a literal media eye, which - following Hemmingson's critique - is a modern form of existential security. Both on and off screen she makes this a book worth reading, a discrete Katherine Mortenboe.

David Garnett (Ed) *New Worlds*

White Wolf, 1997, 357pp, £12.99 ISBN 1 56504 190 9

Reviewed by Janet Barron

'There is no theme', says David Garnett of this latest *New Worlds*. 'All the stories are completely different'. That may be so, but *New Worlds* as an anthology has always had a distinctive flavour, and overall the similarities between these fourteen stories are greater than their differences. Strong on evocation of settings, weak on resolution at endings, and

with a tendency for style to dominate, sometimes at the expense of content. Not a showcase of science fiction as the literature of ideas, but it is science fiction at its own boundaries, gazing, Janus-like, both outward and inward.

Two strong stories are by relative newcomers. 'A Night on The Town' by Noel K. Hannan takes its teenage rich kid through a Neuvo Caracas Bonfire of the Vanities with an energy that never flags. In 'For Life' Christine Manby sustains an even tone as brittle *glitterati* vie to acquire that latest rare accessory, a man. Both extremely enjoyable.

The title says it all in 'The Emperor's New Reality', Pat Cadigan at her least tart, and in Garry Kilworth's 'The Attack of the Charlie Chaplins', the closest approach to whimsy here.

'Ferryman' by Eric Brown shows his usual strength of characterisation but this tale of immortality bestowed by alien nanotech has a sadly perfunctory ending. Peter F Hamilton and Graham Joyce satisfactorily portray the downfall of a City high-roller and, incidentally, the end of capitalism as we all know it in 'The White Stuff'. Kim Newman is in fine form with 'Great Western', blending nuances of history, alternate history and twentieth century culture into a west-country western. In 'Death, Shit, Love, Transfiguration' Brian Aldiss offers a tale surpassing strange at its beginning, but adds too many coils and ultimately ends in a bout of self-referential navel-gazing. In Andrew Stephenson's 'The Pact' the mythological, moral and

scientific elements wrestle uneasily with each other, leaching away the impact of the end of this ambitious tale.

'Heart of Whiteness' by Howard Waldrop seems initially uncertain whether it is aiming for historical authenticity or parody as Kit Marlowe spies out the secrets of John Faustus. It settles for a surreal middle ground upon which it succeeds admirably, producing the most moving ending in the book. 'A Day without Dad' by Ian Watson is equally moving; a future where next of kin have become storage facilities for their expired relatives, and the cracks are beginning to show.

Graham Charnock's 'A Night on Bare Mountain' paints his future dystopia with relish, dwelling lovingly on each deliquescing slush-pool, chemical mire and seeping gangrene, all the way to the final virtuoso up-beat flourish. Michael Moorcock is represented here by 'London Bone', all the more enjoyable because of its restrained prose. London to the Bone.

Finally comes William Gibson's 'Thirteen views of a Cardboard City'. No plot. No characters. Just a camera lingering on the surfaces that make up a life. A Pompeii of the future. The poignancy comes from the transitory nature of the setting. The tension comes from the total absence of anything living. The next angle might reveal....

New Worlds is not everyone's cup of tea. More like a shot of absinthe, it comes complete with literary associations and a hefty dose of wormwood.

Sip slowly to enjoy.

Terry Goodkind

Blood of the Fold

Orion, 1997, 698pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 75280 666 1

Temple of the Winds

Orion, 1997, 528pp, £17.99 ISBN 1 85798 506 0

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The third and fourth volumes in the *Sword of Truth* series, these two novels continue the epic fantasy begun in *Wizard's First Rule* and *Stone of Tears*. By the end of the latter, our hero, Richard Rahl, the Seeker and wielder of the Sword of Truth, had dispatched his evil father, Darken Rahl, and prevented the destruction of the world of the living by the Keeper of the world of the dead. In *Blood of the Fold* he finds that he, as the new Master Rahl and the reluctant ruler of the D'Harans, his father's people, is the only person capable of bringing order to the war-torn Midlands. By demanding the surrender of the other lands to D'Hara, he can wield them into a force able to oppose the aggression of the Emperor Jagang who, as is the way of despots, is intent on world domination. Jagang, a dreamwalker who can terrify people into submission to his will through their dreams, plans to use Richard's old adversaries and servants of the Keeper, the Sisters of the Dark, to destroy him. They, although powerless to resist Jagang, have their own agenda. A more immediate threat to Richard and his plans to bring peace to the Midlands comes from Tobias Brogan, General of the Blood of the Fold, who seeks the destruction of all 'banelings', those who, like Richard, have magic.

The story continues seamlessly in *Temple of the Winds*. Jagang threatens Richard by setting in motion an ancient prophecy that seems to suggest that should Richard try to avert the threat, Khalen, his betrothed, will betray him. In the midst of his other problems – Jagang, an outbreak of

plague, uniting the Midlands, riots – Richard discovers that he has a half-brother, Drefan, and he is pursued by Nadine, a woman from his past – much to Kahlen's irritation. Both Drefan and Nadine are healers, and there is no real reason to mistrust them, but the fact that they arrived at Richard's palace at the same time as an assassin sent by Jagang seems to be too much of a coincidence.

By this fourth instalment, it is clear that the *Sword of Truth* series, with its ever-growing cast of characters, plethora of sub-plots and a body-count to rival a Tarantino film, is actually one long multi-volumed novel. Be warned: if you get hooked, you will most likely be turning pages for a very long time, for the conclusion to the story is nowhere yet in sight. However, if you are into epic fantasy you won't object to the length of the tale for it is fast paced with plenty of suspense, treachery and bloody battles – the very stuff of which this genre is made. Richard and Kahlen make amiable main characters who are often forced to make difficult choices on which the fate of thousands depend, and the complexities of plot and sub-plot that have dispersed the numerous minor characters all about the Midlands and the Old World make for compelling reading. Readers who have already sampled volumes one and two will need no encouragement to acquire *Blood of the Fold* and *Temple of the Winds*, other fantasy fans are recommended to acquire all four.

Jon Courtenay

Lucifer's Dragon

Grimwood

New English Library, 1998, 377pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 340 67473 3

Reviewed by Chris Hill

In the early twenty-first century, Passion di Orchi, estranged

daughter of a mafia boss, gets bored with her life of sex and drugs. She launches a private project to build a replica of old Venice in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Through some creative accounting, threats and sheer willpower she succeeds in realising her project and turns it into an independent nation.

A century later newVenice (sic) is run by media corporation CySat. The traditional Doge is a small boy only allowed to be the titular head until he reaches puberty (for reasons not clearly explained). Then he and Razz, his silver-skinned bodyguard, are, apparently, killed. The police investigator brought in finds that the (accidental) killer has himself been murdered and Karo, the daughter of one of CySat's Council of Twelve is one of the prime suspects. He is taken off the case but decides to continue to investigate on his own.

As much as I wanted to, I could not really take to *Lucifer's Dragon*. It is a reasonable competent thriller, with the required cyberpunk ingredients: sex, violence, real-seeming computer games (the *Lucifer's Dragon* of the title), corrupt mega-corporations, genetically-altered humans in street gangs. The violence is graphically described: an early passage in which Karo's father muses on the death and disposal of the body of his wife is one of the most unpleasant things that I have read in many a year. In effect it is an 18-

certificate Doctor Who-style story. Corrupt rulers are exposed and the populace rises up against them. There are a few surprises (particularly in the narrative concerning Razz), but nothing particularly new.

One of the problems is that it is difficult to find anybody particularly likeable. The police investigator, Angeli, is considered a good man who plays by the book, yet that book allows the torture of suspects. In setting up her project Passion di Orchi manages to start a civil war in Russia in which thousand die, yet seems to feel no remorse (or indeed interest). Razz seems to have no particular compunction about killing anybody who annoys her. The rebellious underclass are themselves a rather unpleasant bunch.

The most interesting parts of the book are the flashbacks to the creation of newVenice: Passion's rise to power has a certain fascination. However, she seems to put in an awful lot of effort for something that is basically a whim (and the cost to others is high).

Lucifer's Dragon is publicised as a 'Cybershock' novel (and so is born a new marketing tag) and shocking it certainly is. If you are looking for a fairly good thriller with lots of gratuitous violence and graphic sex (at one point both at the same time) then this book is for you. If you are looking for something thoughtful with a moral or political point then you are probably going to have to look elsewhere.

Jean Hegland

Into the Forest

Arrow, 1998, 239pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 09 925672 X

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

This has been greeted critically as of the 1984 genre, and in that its thematic background is future-dystopian, I suppose it is, though its dystopia – an American way of life collapsing for unexplained economic and/or ecological reasons – is closer to Robinson's *The Gold Coast* than to Orwell's ruthless totalitarianism. It opens with a sylvan idyll of sorts: mother, father and two teenage daughters sharing essentially suburban, ecologically conscious lives in the big tree forests of Northern California, remote, but with phone, powerlines, and San Francisco near enough for socialising and entertainment. Eva, the elder daughter, trains for the San Francisco ballet; Nell, the narrator, studies for Harvard. Then come death (both parents) and destruction – the slow, then rapid, cessation of power, transport and supplies.

From thereon the character, or at least the focus, of the novel changes: it becomes something of a two-girl Robinsonade. The forest loneliness, all immediately adjacent communities dead or fled, parallels a shipwreck in several ways. As the house decays, components are put to improvised uses: the bounds of island (forest) safety are marked out; unrealised natural resources of the island (forest) are explored; rescue is despairingly hoped for. A Crusoe-like phobia is actually reproduced in the appearance of footprints, those of a bear, proving harmless, those of a transient rapist hurtful. There is no Man Friday, but consequent on Eva's rape the homestead's population boasts one male, the baby Burl.

If the book's middle section carries a slight impress of Defoe, there is a distinct trace of Rousseau in its later pages – not the pastoral cottages and picnics of *Emile* but the growing strength of a way of life akin to that of the native

food-gatherer, seed-planter, hunter. Gasoline, electricity and the machine in general have disappeared. Nell's hoard of her father's books, in particular the knowledge-summarising encyclopedia, remains a conduit to 'civilisation', but in the end the encyclopedia's index, the *Native Plants of Northern California* and *Indian Stories and Songs* alone survive. Nell's traumatic hunting, killing and butchering of a feral sow is emblematic of the transition. The girls, fearful of the return of predatory man, have found loving consolation in a sisterly lesbianism, but the birth of Burl brings maternal jealousy and discord, only healed when a common care for the child reinforces their innate mutual affection. To some extent this is a feminist book, with its tacit identification of the feminine with earth/nature, and its exploration of tensions and antinomies activated as the residues of a male-dominated culture disintegrate. Though not without Rousseauesque ambiguities, those explorations are sensitive in their recording of both pain and ecstasy. The iconoclastic conclusion is at once shocking and exhilarating. Eva's wild end-dance encapsulates it: 'She danced a dance that sloughed off ballet like an outgrown skin and left the dancer fresh and joyous and courageous.' From Defoe through Rousseau to Shelley!

Robert A. Heinlein

Starship Troopers

New English Library, 1998, 223pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 450 05373 9

Starship Troopers (15)

Dir: Paul Verhoeven

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Both novelist and film director experienced the Second World War. Having already served in the U.S. Navy between 1929-34, Heinlein returned to the military in 1942. Verhoeven, as a boy in occupied Holland, witnessed Nazi brutalities at first hand. For all their futuristic trappings, both book and film reflect a preoccupation with the horrors

of WWII.

The book opens with a chapter which today reads like a template for any first-person shoot-'em-up video game: platoon lands on alien planet, causes maximum destruction in minimum time and regroups at the pick-up point. If ever *sf* was written to be a game this is it, no wonder Hollywood bought the rights.

Heinlein then flashes back to explain how the situation came about. What follows is a boot-camp narrative which, for a hundred pages, has all the page-turning drive that made Heinlein so popular. Unfortunately, just as the book should be gathering pace, it degenerates into a lengthy political polemic. Some of what Heinlein has to say about how he thought society should be organised is interesting, but it's in the wrong place. What little action there is comes too late, and the *really big battle* comes after the final page. For a war story it's too talky by half, and all a bit disappointing for a 'classic'.

Verhoeven's film is surprisingly faithful to the spirit of the book, keeping and inflating the action to the now traditional state-of-the-art levels, yet also taking time to depict Heinlein's future world. The result is something like *Aliens* on Acid. Various plot details have been rearranged to make things flow better, but all the characters are here, doing what they do in the book. Women can now serve in the infantry, though the famed powersuits have been dropped,

presumably for fears of how silly they might look on screen. The troopers weaponry is pitifully feeble, however it does add to the WWII identification. The pop music of the future sounds just like it was written in America in 1997, Glen Miller would have been more appropriate.

The tone veers from gross comedy to intensely realistic, and intensely exciting, combat. The digital animation of the bugs is startling, both for its quality and quantity, and there are several terrific set-pieces. The destruction of the starship *Roger Young* is particularly stunning. But be warned, despite the 15 certificate this is certainly the bloodiest, most gore-soaked film ever to play the multiplexes.

Heinlein knew service life and at its best his *Starship Troopers* is a compelling account of military training. Verhoeven has crafted, for all the gore, an old-fashioned tale of honour, comradeship and duty, as corny yet entertaining as anything from the glory days of the Hollywood war movie. He even manages to do this while satirically including more of the news inserts he pioneered in *Robocop*: we can see humans bloodily dismembered, but a shot of a cow being butchered has to be plastered with a 'censored' logo. Happily, humour and horror reinforce what message there is.

Thirty eight years on, Heinlein disappoints, but Verhoeven's version, following *Independence Day* and *Mars Attacks!*, is the third great '50s B-picture monster movie in as many years.

Bart Kosko

Nanotime

Avon Books, 1997, 312pp, \$24.00 ISBN 0 380 97466 5

Reviewed by John Newsinger

Bart Kosko is a professor of electrical engineering at the University of Southern California with degrees in philosophy, economics, mathematics and electrical engineering. He is, we are told in the blurb accompanying this book, 'a world leader in cybertech and computer culture... the acknowledged guru of the cutting edge and controversial field of machine intelligence'. His speciality is 'fuzzy logic', something which up to now I associated with Harriet Harman's welfare 'reforms'. He is the author of three major textbooks and a hundred or so articles in technical journals. In his spare time (!), he hunts wild boar, scuba dives, and composes symphonies (his first was completed when he was eighteen). I bet the bastard is a great lover as well! Leaving jealousy aside for a moment, can he write fiction?

I'm afraid the answer is yes, although one's confidence in human frailty is somewhat restored by the fact that he doesn't do it very well. *Nanotime*, I have to report, is a very average thriller involving cardboard characters in an unconvincing international crisis with bits of informed scientific speculation added on. It is resolutely mediocre with the characters having less life than you find in the average video game. The only real interest in the novel is provided by the scientific innovations and developments that Kosko incorporates into the story. There is an eight-page bibliography included to give his speculations credibility.

His protagonist, John Grant, a rather unpleasant, self-centred individual, has an electronic companion, a computerised personal advisor, in the form of John Stuart Mill or 'Jism' as he is now known. All of Mill's works have been fed into an intelligent agent consisting of vast networks

of neural filters and fuzzy rule banks so that they can learn the patterns of the great man's way of thinking. Once this was accomplished, 'Jism' was allowed access to all the contemporary knowledge that Grant had access to. In this way he had an intellectual simulcrum of Mill on hand as an adviser. Why Mill? Obviously Kosko admires the man although judging from the ethos of the novel, Thomas Hobbes and Machiavelli would have seemed more appropriate. Nevertheless, a neat idea.

The other scientific advance of interest is the reproduction of human consciousness on a chip which can replace the brain. This is hardly a new idea, though. Grant has this done to him by Israeli intelligence agents while he is still conscious! Related to this is the notion of 'nanotime': this new brain has the ability to withdraw into nanotime to think things through while in real time barely a second passes. Other than these ideas the novel has little to recommend it, indeed, it could have been better written by any number of hack writers. Which brings us to the question of motivation. Why has such a clever chap spent his valuable time writing this tosh when he could have been out hunting wild boar? Was it money? Is he writing deliberately down-market or is this the sort of fiction he likes himself? Whatever the answer, I can only hope that his symphonies are better than his fiction.

James Lovegrove

Days

Phoenix, 1997, 329pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 75380 228 7

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

'New from Orion Publishing', blares the publicity, '...our new Phoenix Paperback Originals imprint'. This imprint, we are told, offers a platform for high quality writing that does not sit in the usual categories, and yet retains a commercial

edge. Hmmmm... Interesting concept in our world of mega-publishing corporations.

Since *Days* was sent to the BSFA to review, we can perhaps assume that it is not meant to sit in the usual sf categories and, sure enough, it doesn't. Unfortunately this rather damages it since, although it masquerades as a futuristic novel about a giant American shopping store, it is in fact an allegory of modern American shopping life with all the science fictional thrust of a Barbara Cartland novel. It's not a bad novel, just a rather confused one.

In this allegorical world, Frank Hubble has worked for some time at the exclusive Days shopping complex. Our author writes thus:

It takes Frank five and a half minutes to walk from his building to the train station. In his first few years at Days it used to take him four. Age hasn't slowed him. He still has the legs of a twenty year old. But his stride has lost its spring.

Jack McDevitt

Eternity Road 

Voyager, 1998, 338pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648308 9

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

As a check on the bookshop shelves will show, Jack McDevitt has dealt before with our heirs and survivors studying the relics of our civilisation as they try to live in the wreckage. In *Ancient Shores* they found these ruins across the planets. *Eternity Road* has a closer timeframe.

Among other things, *Eternity Road* recognises its forebears, and like George Stewart's *Earth Abides*, it deals with a world devastated by plague. Set some unascertainable time in the future, the plague has yet to come, but it will come soon according to the technology that the Illyrians will find. They call us the Roadmakers, and can think of no way in which our vehicles would have run on the road, they know only how quickly the plague struck from the way we left our cars everywhere blocking the ways which their ponies and traps might otherwise use. Later, though, among the ruins they find a maglev train, a computer of intense sentience (suffering from extreme loneliness), phasers set permanently to stun, and robots forever protecting banks and forever waiting for the police to come and collect the intruders they detain.

They find these last things as they make the epic journey to find Haven, the place where the Roadmakers built a last refuge and left the secrets of their success. Illyria is a frontier community on the Mississippi, and Haven is somewhere else. This the party knows because one man has returned, all his companions dead, with a copy of Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*. So they set out, a small group of protagonists (woodsman, pining lover, priestess who has lost her faith – the usual really), to find that place. I was sometimes unsure and did not recognise the points on the journey, but ultimately they travel up to the Great Lakes, across into Canada and then down the Hudson. The last part of the voyage is by balloon. Luckily their balloonist is an all round master of technology, for, when they finally find the place of books, it is he who saves the expedition from a watery grave.

This is a short book to describe an epic journey, particularly as it is nearly page 100 before the party sets off. But in some ways that is a good thing – Stirling Lanier's

This sort of pointless and frankly rather silly observation (presumably meant to be ironically funny but, hey, we all know Americans can't do irony) is I suppose meant to endear us to both the main character and the author, but it just made me think, 'What's the point?' The guy has aged. Why dress it up in a crude point about springy strides?

Luckily the author's hand becomes steadier as the novel progresses, and there are a few neat points about rampant – and dangerous – American consumerist lifestyles, but in a novel that so clearly wants to be wittily intelligent, it reads as vacuous tosh. The publicity blurb wants us to believe this is a deceptively simple story, but I think that just means it is as empty as the people and society it depicts.

In summary, an ambitious failure that could have worked (and I wish it had) if the author had stopped trying to work so hard at making an effect. The 'deceptively simple story' is not deceptive at all.

classic *Hiero's Journey* is about the same length (though McDevitt has written if not fantasy). I am less sure is where it crosses from pastiche into cliché – *Earth Abides* is now nearly fifty years old and it is nice to see a sideways tribute to it, but *Eternity Road* also uses the now current clichés of wrecked societies: frontier police, renegade pirates, technology treated as magic, and the use of the hot air balloon as a rapid transit. And uses none of them with any great originality. McDevitt is capable of these in places (the robot guard in the bank is one I've not come across before, though the escape from the guard copies a logic puzzle from *Star Trek* and *Dark Star*), I only wish there were more.

I gained something from keeping other books in mind as I read this. Ideally, someone who read *Eternity Road* should then read Stewart or Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*. I only wish it would not make new readers feel they had read either of them before.

Scott Mackay

Outpost

TOR Books, 1998, 349pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0 312 86467 1

Reviewed by Chris Amies

Felicitas lives in a prison on a distant world lit by two suns. Like the rest of the inmates, she is subject to the continuous discipline of robot jailers, left behind by the alien beings who many years before kept humans as prisoners. Although the language of the prisoners is English, the machines, and the suns, and the games the prisoners play are all named in Italian. Nobody can account for this; it is lost in the unknown history of the prison. The prison is slowly running down; the *carcerieri* break down, *topi* (ratlike creatures) swarm in the machinery. Felicitas, though, is different from the others because she has dreams in which a *uomolupo* – a 'wolf-man', an alien called Lungo Muso – guides her through an inexplicable past, making her a witness to times of war and slaughter, including the execution of an Italian scientist called Galileo Galilei. These scenes are obviously relevant to her people's incarceration, as Lungo Muso repeats them often. She is also able to read the glyphs: the language of the *uominilupi*, which enables her to plan an escape for the

prisoners. She alone can use the firelance weapons which the *uominilupi* left behind.

Outpost is a novel which blends time travel and the exploration of an alien world, alternate history and adventure. The prisoners, once escaped, are required to come of age – up to then they have no family names, no real history, and personal relationships are rarely conducted openly. They find the world outside not too hard, although huge and bewildering. Then they are called upon to take part in a further liberation, to turn back the history of Earth so that an interplanetary war and the destruction of all intelligent races – by the New Ones, who made war on Earth and attacked the worlds of the *uominilupi* – are averted.

Julian May

Voyager, 1998, 310pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 00 224623 6

Jack Vance

TOR Books, 1998, 300pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0 312 85801 9

Perseus Spur

Ports of Call

Reviewed by John R. Oram

I've never read any books by either of these authors, so it was with a mixture of pleasure and trepidation that I picked up *Perseus Spur*. I needn't have worried. My only problem was that I had to put it down, due to sleep and work. It's at times like this that I view work as an interruption of a good read. And this is a good read.

Told in the first person, this is the tale of Asahel Frost, the son of a wealthy trading family, who is living out his life under an assumed name on the planet of Kedge-Lockaby. He is a throwaway. Against his father's wishes he had rejected the family business and joined the Interstellar Commerce Secretariat to investigate corporate malpractice and fraud. But he got too close to some of the largest businesses, known as the Hundred Concerns, was framed for corruption, lost his citizenship of the galaxy, and become an exile on this planet.

At the beginning of the story, he is quite content. He has friends, and a small business taking tourists for undersea tours in a submarine. On the way back with some spoiled businessmen, it breaks down. Fortunately for him. He arrives home just in time to see his house being eaten by a Sea Toad – and he should have been inside. Sea Toads don't normally come on to land; it had to be lured there, and the only people who had access to the house were the businessmen he had taken out. At the first opportunity, he gives chase to the chief suspect, only to end up stranded on a comet, but is rescued by a friend who had followed him into space. Coming to in hospital, he sees his father for the first time in years. Somebody wants to take over the company and they don't care how they do it. They think he is dead, and have kidnapped his sister. He is the only person with the necessary skill to get her back.

With the aid of a smuggler, a retired security expert, and a distrustful Chief of Security, he begins his investigations. What he finds is very dirty indeed: some of the concerns are illegally trading with an enemy race and will do anything to stop an investigation. How it is resolved makes a cracking good read. It's well plotted, and the characters are credible. Even the aliens are not just the bad guys. Far from it, they are merely doing what they deem to be right by their own standards.

Outpost is paced and full of good description; its aliens are sufficiently mysterious to allow the suspension of disbelief to continue. They remain almost offstage – with the exception of the dream-glimpsed Lungo Muso – until the very end. Nor do the characters stretch belief – Felicitas's greater powers are explained, and also she does not do everything by herself; characters such as Rosario and Gasparo are fluid, they change according to the world around them. The time travel is not overly 'explained away'; it just happens, as do the 'pools' in which the *uominilupi* are able to stand outside the river of time. It is good science fiction, and a good story.

This is the first of a projected series, and I look forward to the next volume. If there is any justice, this book should win awards.

It's a pity I can't say the same about Jack Vance's book. According to the blurb, this novel is 'filled with intrigue, romance and rollicking fun, and chronicles the adventures of an interplanetary conman as he makes his swashbuckling way from world to world. This is Jack Vance at the top of his form...' Whoever wrote this just couldn't have read the book. It didn't make me even smirk, let alone make me laugh out loud. The characters were unsympathetic, idiots, or both. Worse they were only one dimensional, I didn't care what happened to them. The plot, for want of a better word, was episodic. To be quite frank, this was such utter bilge, that I couldn't bring myself to finish it. This is only for the Vance completist, or for those who collect bad sf. As far as I'm concerned, it's just a waste of trees.

L.E. Modesitt Jr

TOR Books, 1997, 446pp, \$25.95 ISBN 0 312 86389 6

The Chaos Balance

The Spellsong War

TOR Books, 1998, 464pp, \$25.95 ISBN 0 312 86492 2

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Modesitt has established himself with his *Recluce* series as one of the best 90s writers of fantasy, as well as writing sf novels like *Of Tangible Ghosts* and *The Parafaith War*. The fantasies are characterised by a highly developed and consistent system of magic, based on the continual contention between order (black) and chaos (white). The fact the colours are reversed from what we would expect is an important part of the character of Modesitt's books. These two novels are both sequels, *The Chaos Balance* to *Fall of Angels* in the *Recluce* series, and *The Spellsong War* to *The Soprano Sorceress*, a fantasy series set away from *Recluce*.

Although they are apparently set in different universes, there are many similarities between the two books. The first one is of course the systems of magic: in the *Spellson* series this revolves around harmony and discord. Both narratives depict characters from high-technology cultures with (or aspiring to) gender equality stranded in low-technology male-dominated prejudiced societies. Another similarity is the use of common nomenclature and expressions, for example the use of 'ser' for both 'sir' and 'madam' – there are many more examples.

Fall Of Angels has been compared to *Darkover Landfall*, and introduced sf elements to the *Recluse* series. Its events happen maybe several thousand years before *The Magic Of Recluse*, when the main characters have become legends. The crew of the terminally damaged UFF starship *Winterlance* (black-order-good) are forced to abandon ship and land on a planet which turns out to have been planofomed and colonised about five hundred years before by the opposing Rationalists (white-chaos-bad). Most of the crew cannot live at sea level of this world, so they establish a settlement at high altitude on the continent of Candar (off whose Eastern coast is the large island of Recluse). They are called 'angels' by the populace, who try to wipe them out, especially affronted by the equality of their women. The angels survive thanks to their fighting skills, superior technology and the heroic improvisation efforts of Nylan, the starship's engineering officer turned weaponsmith. In this sequel, Nylan falls out with Ryba, leader of the angel colony and former captain of the *Winterlance*. Together with Ayrlyn, the ship's communications officer turned healer, and his infant son, he leaves the mountains for the warring lowland kingdoms. Most powerful amongst these is Cyador, an unreformed Rationalist nation and the only one on the planet retaining the ability to build horseless carriages and sail-less ships, and to perform powerful white (i.e. evil) magic.

The cover of *The Chaos Balance* illustrates the theme of the novel well: a man and a woman in starship uniforms ride on horseback through a mediaeval town, the man carrying a

baby. Nylan of course is the one who cares for his son, feeding and cleaning him, which confuses and infuriates the natives! The two angels form an uneasy alliance with the kingdom of Lornth against the evil empire of Cyador, and the story follows their development of warfare crafts for Lornth as well as self-development in becoming powerful black mages to combat both the white magic of Cyador and the planetary imbalance caused by the Rationalists' planofoming.

In *The Soprano Sorceress* music teacher and former opera singer Anna Marshal was plucked from the mid-West town of Ames, Iowa, to the world of Erde to help the forces of harmony in the kingdom of Defalk fight the evil sorcerer the Evult and the Dark Ones. When *The Spellsong War* starts, Anna has defeated these first enemies and become regent, protecting Defalk's young heir with her newly-found immense powers of sorcery invoked through music. Needless to say, a modern American woman like Anna finds much to disapprove of and to try to change in the way that women are treated on Erde. In this sequel she must defend Defalk against her detractors within and also against the neighbouring states, who see its weakened state as an opportunity for conquest.

Both books are full of Modesitt's skills: strong characters who both suffer and are developed during the narratives, great attention to detail in the depiction of the different worlds, especially their various societies and magic systems, together with plots that carry the reader effortlessly to the last pages. Highly recommended.

Martin Rackham *The Source: Earth Voyage*
Howling at the Moon, 1997, 342pp ISBN 0 95835 689 0

Reviewed by Mat Coward

This is the first volume of an alien invasion trilogy set in the USA, written by an Englishman, and published in New Zealand.

The Anterians are a martial, imperialistic race of erect lizards. Their civilisation depends on a source of energy which they have used up; luckily, plenty of this stuff exists, according to 'the scanner', on 'a small insignificant planet which the inhabitants call Earth'. Thus a small force of warriors is despatched to 'Earth' (as us anglophone inhabitants call it), to commence mining activities.

Yes, just about every single genre cliché which you have ever read, or seen on the screen, is present in this debut novel, from reluctant human heroes to mile-wide spaceships. In some places, the writing is so incredibly bad it almost hurts:

He wondered what they could gain by coming so close, for the destruction of the army bases had been carried out from within space - what had become so necessary for them to avail themselves of the human naked eye?

The proof-reading is abysmal, even by modern standards - sometimes, it has to be said, with delightful results: 'I know, I know, but why must it be my husband? Why must it be me wondering whether he's still alive or lying with his guts sprawled out across some bloody dessert?'

But in the end there's only one meaningful test to apply to the first volume of a trilogy: would you want to read the next volume? The answer here is, yes, I would; for all its

faults, I found this story readable and gripping. I admit to being a sucker for invasion tales, but I also suspect that Rackham is potentially a better writer than this book suggests. Along with the corny stuff at macro level, there are some real flashes of originality in the details of the invasion, and in the characters, human and alien.

Incidentally (very incidentally, to be honest), having been known to froth at the mouth at the current trend for British writers to put the American words 'ass' and 'asshole' into their British characters' mouths, I found myself equally annoyed that Rackham's American characters say 'arse' and 'arsehole'.

Robin Anne Reid *Arthur C. Clarke: A Critical Companion*

Greenwood, 1997, 207pp, £23.95 ISBN 0 313 29529 8

Peter J. Reed *The Short Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut*

Greenwood, 1997, 177pp, £43.95 ISBN 0 313 30235 9

Reviewed by Edward James

Both these volumes, which I shall call *Clarke* and *Vonnegut* (since Reid and Reed are fraught with problems) are aimed at very different audiences and come in different series. *Clarke* is in 'Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers', alongside Clavell, Crichton, Follett, Grisham, King, Koontz, McCaffrey, Rice, Vidal and others; *Vonnegut* is No.1 in 'Contributions to the Study of American Literature', and not, as one might expect, in Greenwood's long-running and

increasingly-expensive series 'Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy'.

Clarke is aimed at the general reader and at students: the books in the series are chosen by an advisory board of high school English teachers and high school and public librarians. After two introductory chapters, there is a chapter discussing each volume from *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973) to *3001* (1997). Presumably there is a feeling that young readers are unlikely to find ancient classics attractive: otherwise there seems no good reason for leaving out detailed discussion of *Childhood's End* or *The City and the Stars*, arguably his two best books, or any of the early books at all. Short stories also get little more than a mention. But the discussions of the post-*Rama* novels are on the whole clear and sensible. Each book is looked at not only in terms of narrative, character development, themes and so on, but also has a section designed to introduce the student to a type of modern criticism: thus *Imperial Earth* is discussed in terms of gender theory, and *The Fountains of Paradise* in terms of post-colonial criticism. But this is more limiting than it sounds: of

the nine novels, two are viewed via post-colonial criticism, two via gender theory, and as many as five via feminist criticism. A wider spread would have been welcome.

Vonnegut is aimed at a much more specialist market: students of American literature. Vonnegut, of course, wrote literature: though sometimes, says Reed (with some regret?), 'his work borders on sci-fi'. Anyone really interested in Vonnegut will find a good deal of interesting information and comment here, though I suspect that one would have to be somewhat obsessive to want to know quite so much about his high-school magazine fiction. Reed knows a great deal about Vonnegut (though very little about science fiction), and seems on the whole to accept Vonnegut's view of the matter: Vonnegut courteously called science fiction writers 'vile'. Does this effect our view of the fact that the sperm sent into space in Vonnegut's story 'The Big Space Fuck' are housed in a spaceship called the *Arthur C. Clarke*. Sadly, we aren't told Sir Arthur's opinion of Vonnegut, but I am sure it is more polite than 'vile', and more accurate.

Robert J. Sawyer

Illegal Alien [L]

Voyager, 1998, 319pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648319 4

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

Remember the O.J. Simpson trial? Even in this country, where O.J. was only a minor celebrity, it received massive publicity. Now imagine what would happen if, instead of an ex-American football player turned bit-part actor being accused of murder, it was one of the first extraterrestrials to visit Earth. A small alien landing craft splashes down in the Atlantic and is met by both the American and Russian Navies. Contact is made, a single alien pilot emerges and quickly learns English. Speaking to a delegation from the two countries, it informs them that it is a member of a race called the Tosok, seven of whom have travelled in a large mother ship from Alpha Centauri. Unfortunately the ship was badly damaged when it collided with a comet as it entered our solar system, leaving the Tosok stranded.

All of the Tosok fly down to the UN in New York, where they agree to share their technology in exchange for manufacture of the parts needed to repair their mother ship. After a world tour they settle in California, along with a human entourage, to supervise the construction and exchange

information. Suddenly one of the humans is found brutally murdered and all the evidence points to one of the Tosok as responsible. Will America's most successful civil rights lawyer be able to prevent the alien being executed?

Although the book slows with some legalistic infodumping, once the trial starts the plot moves at a rapid rate with plenty of twists and turns. Just when you are smugly predicting how you think it is going to end, in the next chapter Sawyer will pull the rug out from underneath you.

The Tosok themselves are complex and well drawn, both as a whole and as individuals, with our sympathy for them waxing and waning throughout the book. At times their motivations seem baffling but it is all eventually explained in the exciting climax.

Although *Illegal Alien* is light at times, with some well placed in-jokes on *Close Encounters*, *Star Trek* and other well known TV television programmes and movies, it provides a fascinating insight into both the American legal system and the nature of justice in general. A reflection of recent events, it also successfully pays homage to the Golden Age and brings in '50s alien invasion paranoia as well. Highly Recommended.

Susan Shwartz

Cross and Crescent

TOR Books, 1997, 382pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0 312 85714 4

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This pleasant historical fantasy is a sequel to *Shards of Empire*, set in Byzantium and the Holy Land at the time of the First Crusade. Anna Comnena, daughter of the Emperor Alexius, was raised to rule but has been disinherited by the birth of her younger brother. As the book opens, she is searching for the means to regain her birthright and her father's favour. Daringly, she leaves the Palace accompanied only by her maid to buy medicinal herbs for him, and meets Leo Ducas, wealthy merchant and black sheep of the Imperial family, his Jewish wife Asherah, and their adopted daughter Binah, who is a Goddess. Asherah and Binah are

both magic-users. (Don't ask me how a Goddess can be raised in, and practice, a monotheistic religion which asserts that she doesn't and can't exist - in fact, don't ask any awkward questions at all. This isn't that sort of book. It's a relaxing read compounded of equal parts exotic luxury, exotic privation, and domestic bliss; okay?)

The book then follows Anna and the Ducas family through the amazing events, landscapes and personalities of the First Crusade. It's a book that manages to make cannibalism feel quite comfy. After all, it all happened a long time ago and a long way away, in a setting that might just as well be Middle-Earth. Leo eventually uses magical means to rescue his daughter Shoshonna and her family from the sack of Jerusalem. That's what the First Crusade was all about, you see, reclaiming Jerusalem from the hands of the infidel

(Muslims are definitely Bad Guys in this book), and slaughtering any of its inhabitants who don't happen to be Western (Catholic) Christians. So that's all right, we have a happy ending. Never mind all the *other* people who get nastily killed in this one single event, the people who (like most of us) don't have a magic-user in the family...

Cross And Crescent tries hard to stand alone as a novel in

its own right, but would clearly benefit from being read after *Shards Of Empire* – it is only comprehensible with a good deal of 'here's what happened in the last book that you need to know to make sense of this one' summarising. With this proviso, it would make an excellent beach book for lovers of bowdlerised de-politicised romanticised fantasy history – very relaxing, and won't make you think too hard...

Robert Silverberg

The Alien Years []

Voyager, 1998, 453pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 246 13722 3

Reviewed by Andy Mills

This is a puzzler and no mistake. At times, whilst reading this, I thought, is this *really* a Silverberg novel? And then a few pages on, ah this *is* a Silverberg book. But by the end I still didn't know what to think of what is a (deceptively?) simple book.

Let me tell you what I found and you can, perhaps, figure it out for yourself.

The cover has a vast alien ship landing in a US city, and this is how the novel begins. The aliens have landed. But there are no demands, no communication. They just are there. The world doesn't know what to do. The aliens wander around the world like unearthly tourists. Then they turn off the power. Chaos follows, society collapses, an abortive strike at the aliens results in savage reprisals. Earth is firmly under the power of the Entities, as the aliens become known. The novel describes snatches of human existence over the next fifty years, an episodic narrative centering on the extended, isolated Carmichael family.

The plot is straightforward, and – as you would expect from such an accomplished story-teller – this is a rollicking read from start to finish. The aliens are especially noteworthy creations, spectacular and unknowable, whose motives for coming to Earth are a total mystery.

But here comes the rub. Despite the publication date, Silverberg didn't dash this out after watching *Independence*

Day or Mars Attacks! It's not mentioned anywhere, but there are at least two (I'd wager there are more) short stories from the Eighties buried in here. 'Against Babylon' kicks off the novel; the more impressive 'The Pardoner's Tale' also appears. There is a degree of sloppiness in the fix-up process. For instance, on page 46 the aliens are communicating with the authorities (as in the original short story), by page 62 they've never attempted to do so. Slack editing.

And, at times, some of the writing is clumsy and hackneyed. The problem revolves around the Carmichaels, a military family with a belief in tradition, the US and so forth, 'wide through the shoulders and deep through the chest', whose head is referred to as 'the Colonel', even by his children. When the Carmichaels retire to the family ranch to lead the human resistance, we have a scenario out of a libertarian wet dream: certainly not a Silverbergian staple. This was and is for me the real conundrum. Most of the real action against the aliens – and the best parts of the novel, such as the killing of an Entity in England, or the fate of the quising Borgmann – are taken forward by those characters who are not Carmichaels, and the family are so clichéd that sometimes one is sure that Silverberg is taking the mickey. But on the other hand, this isn't a comedy and the Carmichaels aren't figures of fun. So what was the author's intention?

I don't know. I do know that, for all its faults, *The Alien Years* is a most entertaining fiction. But it certainly isn't in the same league as novels such as *Dying Inside* or *The Book of Skulls*.

Sophia Snape

Nuclear Man – Naman

Janus, 1997, 298pp, £8.95 ISBN 1 85756 342 5

Reviewed by Colin Bird

The author points out in a preface that this book was originally written under the title, *An Apotheosis, 1984 Revisited* and was intended as a commentary on George Orwell's predictions written in the actual year 1984. Snape consequently emphasises that she has highlighted the 'futuristic aspects' of the actual situation and has therefore renamed the book *Nuclear Man*.

At this point I ought to emphasise that I have no conception of the author's intentions for this book. The situation is not clarified by reading the novel itself; a childlike view of a nuclear apocalypse written in a very non-Orwellian pulp style. So let's put aside Snape's confusing preface and judge the book as a piece of storytelling.

Accepted as a fable, describing a heavily mythologised nuclear rebirth of a superior race of mutants to inhabit a utopian future, *Nuclear Man* is at least consistent. The stiff dialogue (full of phrases like 'So be it!') may be grating to read but at least it emphasises the unreality of the tale. This is

allegory (I hope!) not realistic fiction. However, such a lack of sophistication about the technicalities of the Atomic Age would be, I suspect, very annoying for experienced SF readers. It's difficult to avoid guffaws at scenes of four-armed mutants catching a train at Liverpool Station, for example.

The plot concerns a nuclear power worker who becomes involved with an isolated family of mutants who eke out a living by fishing. They have four arms (because they were caught in a nuclear blast at a power station) and also glow strangely. The mutants spread and experience racism and abuse but ultimately triumph because they can adapt to a brave new world following the Third World War. Did I mention they also have supernatural powers?

The author resorts to heady religious imagery in a confused climax; a paean celebrating the rebirth of Mankind as a race of nuclear-spawned mutants. It's the least convincing portrayal of nuclear apocalypse I can recall reading in a long time. And the book has a morally uncertain quality I find disturbing – the only quality it shares with its apparent inspiration: Orwell's masterpiece.

The awkward prose can be forgiven in a first novel but the poorly focussed allegory fatally weakens this dull effort.

S.P. Somtow***Darker Angels***

Gollancz, 1997, 351pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 575 06122 7

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

This is a strange, complex book. The blurb talks about were-leopards, raising the dead, voodoo, but this is only a very small part of what this novel is. We are also told a well-woven tale, its main thread being carried by the stories told to a respectable English widow in New York by an ex-Union soldier whom she meets (along with Walt Whitman) at Lincoln's tomb.

And that is where the novel begins, with a visit to see Abraham Lincoln's body lying in state in New York in 1865, then progresses back in steps to Santo Domingo in 1804 then forward again to its conclusion. Somtow achieves this with a structure built around a story nested within story format. Each character has a tale to tell, in the course of which one of

the characters has a tale to tell and so on back to Santo Domingo. As each story finishes, we are led back up the chain to 1865 once more.

This technique is very effective. As each story begins, we are left hanging in its parent story. The tension is then built up until it is released when the parent recommences. Each level depends on the rest for cohesion, there are no unnecessary characters here and each one is far more complex than they appear at first meeting. And in the end the top level is still there waiting, and it is not reached until its story is finally played out.

Somtow writes very convincingly, each character tells his tale so matter of factly that the true horrors creep up on the reader rather than grab them by the throat. And ultimately the horrors described are those of the destruction of lives and property caused by the slave trade and the Civil War more than the were-leopards and zombies of the blurb.

Margaret Weis & Don Perrin ***Hung Out*** [L]

Gollancz, 1998, 384pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 575 06170 7

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Hung Out is the third book in the space opera series about former Secret Service agent Xris Cyborg and his Mag Force 7 mercenary team that started with *The Knights Of The Black Earth* and continued with *Robot Blues*. Margaret Weis has been enormously successfully in her collaborations with Tracey Hickman, a writing partnership which I understand was conducted at long-distance from her home in Wisconsin. For this new series she has joined up with former Canadian Defence Department software designer Don Perrin, who I assume from the bio is her life as well as writing partner. However likeable these Xris Cyborg books are, I think they have a clumsier feel than the Weis/Hickman volumes, so I can only conclude that Tracey Hickman brought more to the party in terms of writing skills than Don Perrin does.

The title is a play on words, since the Hung is the evil galaxy-wide crime syndicate that were responsible for Xris's crippling, the death of his partner Ito, and forced the disappearance of his other agent colleague Dalin Rowan, who

has assumed a new female persona as Darlene Mohini. The leaders of the Hung are in prison, but are still directing operations from their cells. In this book, Xris is arrested for the murder of Dalin Rowan and, unable to reveal his/her new identity and betray Dalin/Darlene to the Hung, is convicted. While Mag Force 7 are off on a small backwater planet organising the overthrow of an evil dictator, Xris is sent to the prison planet Jango for twenty years hard labour. This of course, is where the Hung leaders are also held.

The plot unfolds rapidly, flits from planet to planet in rapidly interweaving threads, and has more fun with the antics of Xris's motley crew of mercenaries. It's a light-hearted read, provided you're not offended by the odd bit of blatant stereotyping and crass dialogue. Everything works out well in the end, perhaps even better than you might have expected. All the outstanding issues left over from the first two books are settled here, so maybe Weis and Perrin intend this to be the last Mag Force 7 story.

If you liked the last two books in this series, you'll enjoy this one as much, though it's not one to start the series with. Good undemanding page-turning stuff, but I think Margaret Weis can do better.

Michael White ***The Science of The X-Files***

Legend, 1997, 195pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 09 918572 5

Reviewed by Stephen Deas

Time travel! Life on other planets! Telepathy, telekinesis, precognition and faith-healing! Ghosts, vampires and the Loch Ness monster! Exposed, in one volume, the science behind these and other phenomena!

Well, more investigated than exposed. The purpose of the book appears to be twofold. Firstly to skim the evidence, secondly to explain how these phenomena could (or can't) work within the realms of known science, and when that fails, to suggest extrapolations. The approach is sound-grounded in real science, but open-minded. On several occasions, there are implicit admissions that, although there is no explanation within physics for some things, there is too much good evidence to be dismissed. On the other hand, the author is quite firm that (for example) explaining telepathy through 'psitron' particles doesn't actually explain anything until we can build psitron particle detectors. The

conclusions, in the end, are no surprise - most weird happenings have perfectly good scientific explanations, others are hoaxes or mis-perceptions, but there are loose ends enough to leave some doubt.

So who's it written for? People who watch *The X-Files*. People who find the fringe of science an interesting curiosity. A certain amount of scientific literacy is assumed, but no more than a reasonably bright fourteen year-old would have. And the scope is so wide that even jaded science-fiction physicist veterans can learn something from this book.

Ultimately I found this a stimulating and frustrating book to read. Partly because it raises more questions than it answers (no bad thing, perhaps); partly because to cover so many topics in such a short space means a barrage of ideas with little depth of coverage (but hey, what are the eighty-odd references for?) and there must be hundreds of hypotheses that don't even get a mention. On the other hand, it's well written, well researched, and as an introduction to the subject, it's actually rather good. And an interesting science book - hurrah!

Particles

These are some of the other books we have seen recently. A mention here does not necessarily preclude a review in a later issue of *Vector*.

Malcolm Ashman with Joyce Hargreaves – *Fabulous Beasts*

Paper Tiger, 1997, 112pp, £13.99 ISBN 1 85028 410 5

Rodney Matthews with Nigel Suckling – *Countdown to Millennium*

Paper Tiger, 1997, 112pp, £13.99 ISBN 1 85028 394 X

Art has often employed fabulous or fantastic images without actually being science fictional – as witness the numerous album covers (for bands such as Barclay James Harvest, Asia and Magnum) in the Rodney Matthews collection. These two attractively produced books range from Malcolm Ashman's versions of various creatures from mythology, usually painted in pale tenebrous tones of grey and lilac, to the more vividly coloured and surreal landscapes with which Rodney Matthews has decorated various book and record covers.

Charles De Lint – *Someplace to be Flying*

Macmillan, 1998, 465pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 333 73280 4

The first British edition of a novel already reviewed by Cherith Baldry in V198, it is a story about shapeshifters that she considered 'challenging... It has the suspense of *Mulengro*, except that this time we're not trying to find the truth about a crime but to put together different aspects of the whole and discern a pattern'.

Lewis Gannett – *Gebenna*

HarperCollins, 1997, 249pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648338 0

A novelisation based on a teleplay by Chris Carter for the TV series *Millennium*, this particular story sends Frank Black in search of the leader of a cult awaiting Armageddon.

Robin Hobb – *Assassin's Quest*

Voyager, 1998, 838pp, £7.99 ISBN 0 00 648011 X

The third and concluding volume in Robin Hobb's *Farseer* trilogy consists of 700 pages of nail-biting adventures described by Alan Fraser in V195 as 'excellent ... with well-paced plotting ... and genuinely involving characters'.

Diana Wynne Jones – *Minor Arcana*

Vista, 1998, 287pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 575 60191 4

This collection of seven stories was billed as her 'first adult collection of stories' when it first came out in 1996, but that label has quietly disappeared from this paperback reprint because, as Paul Kincaid pointed out in V194: 'anyone, adult or child, with a taste for serious quirky fantasy has been reading Diana Wynne Jones's novels for years'.

Terry LaBan, Peter Hogan & Alisa Kwitney – *The Dreaming: Beyond the Shores of Night*

Titan, 1998, 208pp, £12.99 ISBN 1 85286 904 6

Neil Gaiman's creation, *The Sandman*, was far too successful to let it lie when Gaiman decided to end the series, so here we are bare months later with the first of a new series set in the same realm as Gaiman's stories but told by a variety of other hands.

Melanie Rawn – *The Mageborn Traitor*

Pan, 1998, 759pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 330 34420 X

Reviewing the second volume in Melanie Rawn's *Exiles* series in V197, Lesley Hatch said it 'has all the ingredients that make an exciting and suspenseful story,' and concluded it was an archetypal example of good epic fantasy.

Mickey Zucker Reichert – *Prince of Demons*

Orion, 1998, 622pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 75280 846 X

The second volume of Reichert's second Renshai sequence was reviewed by Janet Barron in V195: 'The characters attempt to develop in the course of the book, but this process is undermined each time they suffer badly. Initially, this may enlist the sympathies but eventually these spasms of mental and physical anguish... irritate and alienate'.

Aaron Allston – *Wraith Squadron*

Bantam, 1998, 403pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 553 50599 8

Mary Henderson – *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*

Bantam, 1997, 216pp, £12.99 ISBN 0 553 50705 2

Ralph McQuarrie & Kevin J. Anderson – *The Illustrated Star Wars Universe*

Bantam, 1997, 208pp, £12.99 ISBN 0 553 50665 X

Bill Smith – *Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Weapons and Technology*

Boxtree, 1998, 215pp, £14.99 ISBN 0 7522 2338 0

Michael Stackpole – *Star Wars: The Phantom Affair*

Boxtree, 1998, 112pp, £11.99 ISBN 0 7522 0149 2

The three Star Wars films have spawned an incredible range of peripheral books. The most inventive and impressive of this latest crop is Mary Henderson's *The Magic of Myth*, a companion to an exhibition staged at Washington's National Air and Space Museum devoted to the mythological elements of the films which, as this book reveals, stole its look and its underlying story from an astonishing range of cultures. The books by Bill Smith and by Anderson and McQuarrie, on the other hand, follow the uninspired and overly familiar path of taking one aspect from the trilogy – weapons and planets respectively – and describing them with the obsession for irrelevant detail of a trainspotter. Book 5 in the *Star Wars X-Wing* spinoff series by Aaron Allston, *Wraith Squadron*,

sends the rebel pilots on an undercover mission aboard an Imperial warship. Meanwhile Michael Stackpole, who has already contributed several novels to the *X-Wing* series, provides another similar story this time as a comic (the artwork is too coarse and clumsy to call it a graphic novel).

Jack Vance – *Night Lamp*

Voyager, 1998, 380pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648211 2
 Reviewing this novel in V193, Dave Langford remarked: 'Some people dislike Vance's elaborate ironies, his coolly exotic style, and his fondness for describing oddly conceived societies replete with strange customs, disconcerting food, subtly coloured artforms and downright lunatic instruments... Personally I love these excesses.' Certainly this

novel, eccentrically paced and slightly shambolic in construction as it may be, is going to delight his aficionados.

Tad Williams – *Otherland*

Orbit, 1998, 943pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85723 604 1
 The massive first volume in what looks to be a massive quartet in which Williams turns from fantasy to science fiction. Greeting the book in V194 Barbara Davies said: 'I get the impression that Williams feels released from the constraints of traditional fantasy and is having a whale of a time. The possibilities available in *Otherland* are infinite and he clearly intends to use every one – let's hope his energy and enthusiasm can stay the course.'

Vector 199 – Index of Books Reviewed

Aaron Allston – <i>Wraith Squadron</i> [P]	34	Scott Mackay – <i>Outpost</i> [CA]	28
Kevin J. Anderson & Ralph McQuarrie – <i>The Illustrated Star Wars Universe</i> [P]	34	Rodney Matthews with Nigel Suckling – <i>Countdown to Millennium</i> [P]	34
Malcolm Ashman with Joyce Hargreaves – <i>Fabulous Beasts</i> [P]	34	Julian May – <i>Perseus Spur</i> [JRO]	29
LeVar Burton – <i>Aftermath</i> [GA]	21	Jack McDevitt – <i>Eternity Road</i> [LJH]	28
Stepan Chapman – <i>The Troika</i> [CA]	21	Nancy McKenzie – <i>The Child Queen</i> [VL]	23
Vera Chapman – <i>The Enchantresses</i> [CB1]	22	Ralph McQuarrie & Kevin J. Anderson – <i>The Illustrated Star Wars Universe</i> [P]	34
Scott Ciencin – <i>The Elven Ways 2: Ancient Games</i> [VL]	23	Sasha Miller – <i>Ladylord</i> [VL]	23
A.C. Crispin – <i>Alien Resurrection</i> [GA]	22	L.E. Modesitt Jr – <i>The Chaos Balance</i> [AF]	29
Charles De Lint – <i>Someplace to be Flying</i> [P]	34	L.E. Modesitt Jr – <i>The Spellsong War</i> [AF]	29
Dave Duncan – <i>Future Indefinite</i> [VL]	23	Don Perrin & Margaret Weis – <i>Hung Out</i> [AF]	33
David & Leigh Eddings – <i>Polgara the Sorceress</i> [VL]	23	Martin Rackham – <i>The Source: Earth Voyage</i> [MC]	30
Steven J. Frank – <i>The Uncertainty Principle</i> [CA]	21	Melanie Rawn – <i>The Mageborn Traitor</i> [P]	34
Lewis Gannett – <i>Gehenna</i> [P]	34	Peter J. Reed – <i>The Short Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut</i> [EJ]	30
David Garnett (Ed) – <i>New Worlds</i> [JB]	24	Mickey Zucker Reichert – <i>Prince of Demons</i> [P]	34
Peter Gelman – <i>Flying Saucers over Hennepin</i> [DOM]	24	Robin Anne Reid – <i>Arthur C. Clarke: A Critical Companion</i> [EJ]	30
Terry Goodkind – <i>Blood of the Fold</i> [LB]	25	Robert J. Sawyer – <i>Illegal Alien</i> [GW]	31
Terry Goodkind – <i>Temple of the Winds</i> [LB]	25	Susan Schwartz – <i>Cross and Crescent</i> [ST]	31
Sharon Green – <i>Competitions</i> [VL]	23	Robert Silverberg – <i>The Alien Years</i> [AM]	32
Jon Courtenay Grimwood – <i>Lucifer's Dragon</i> [CH]	25	Bill Smith – <i>Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Weapons and Technology</i> [P]	34
Joyce Hargreaves, Malcolm Ashman with – <i>Fabulous Beasts</i> [P]	34	Sophia Snape – <i>Nuclear Man – Naman</i> [CB2]	32
Jean Hegland – <i>Into the Forest</i> [KVB]	26	S.P. Somtow – <i>Darker Angels</i> [JW]	33
Robert A. Heinlein – <i>Starship Troopers</i> [GD]	26	Michael Stackpole – <i>Star Wars: The Phantom Affair</i> [P]	34
Michael Hemmingson – <i>Minstrels</i> [DOM]	24	Nigel Suckling, Rodney Matthews with – <i>Countdown to Millennium</i> [P]	34
Mary Henderson – <i>Star Wars: The Magic of Myth</i> [P]	34	J.R.R. Tolkien – <i>The Peoples of Middle-Earth</i> [VL]	23
Robin Hobb – <i>Assassin's Quest</i> [P]	34	Jack Vance – <i>Ports of Call</i> [JRO]	29
Peter Hogan, Terry LaBan & Alisa Kwitney – <i>The Dreaming: Beyond the Shores of Night</i> [P]	34	Jack Vance – <i>Night Lamp</i> [P]	35
Diana Wynne Jones – <i>Minor Arcana</i> [P]	34	Paul Verhoeven (dir) – <i>Starship Troopers</i> [GD]	26
Bart Kosko – <i>Nanotime</i> [SP]	27	Margaret Weis & Don Perrin – <i>Hung Out</i> [AF]	33
Alisa Kwitney, Terry LaBan & Peter Hogan – <i>The Dreaming: Beyond the Shores of Night</i> [P]	34	Michael White – <i>The Science of The X-Files</i> [SD]	33
Terry LaBan, Peter Hogan & Alisa Kwitney – <i>The Dreaming: Beyond the Shores of Night</i> [P]	34	Tad Williams – <i>Otherland</i> [P]	35
James Lovegrove – <i>Days</i> [SP]	27		

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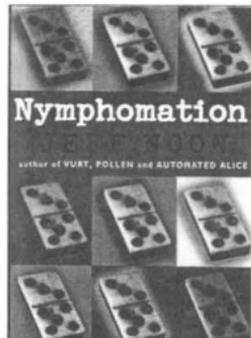
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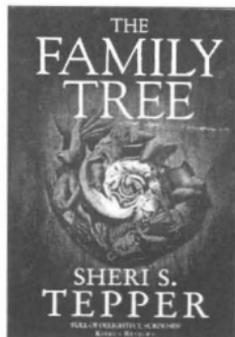
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