

March/April 1999

£2.25



**Peter S. Beagle**

**Books and Films of 1998  
SF and Classical Music**

**Vector**

**204**

**The Critical  
Journal of  
the BSFA**

# Vector

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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**COVER:** Detail from the cover, by Michael Dashow, of Peter S. Beagle's most recent collection, *The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche* (Tachyon 1997)

## VECTOR

Published by the BSFA © 1999. ISSN - 0505 1448

All opinions are those of the individual contributors and should not necessarily be taken as the views of the editor or the BSFA.



The BSFA  
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of Reading

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## The British Science Fiction Association Ltd.

Limited by guarantee. Company No. 921500. Registered Address:  
60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent. CT19 5AZ  
The BSFA is a non-profitmaking organisation, staffed by unpaid  
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Editorial • Editorial

To compliment our review of the films of last year I'm devoting most of this column to looking back on the sf television of the year gone. I only have the four national terrestrial channels, but even without the proliferation of satellite, cable and On Digital, there has never been so much sf and fantasy on television. Even ITV, decided they could no longer ignore the genre. They offered *Oktober*, a three part Stephen Gallagher sf thriller, which fitted neatly with the network's predilection for crime and conspiracy drama. It was solid entertainment, but didn't resolve some of the more interesting plot strands. Also from ITV came the latest up-date of *The Invisible Man*. *The Vanishing Man* proved to be a surprisingly engaging, though very lightweight, SF romantic-thriller-comedy. The potential of the previous year's pilot was largely squandered, but Neil Morrissey and Lucy Akhurst made the series most watchable.

*The Vanishing Man* was originally scheduled on Saturday nights against the BBC's light-weight SF-action-thriller *Bugs*. Except that for this, the fourth series, the Corporation bizarrely decided to turn the show into a hi-tech crime drama. They also dropped the tongue-in-cheek humour. Without the wild gadgets and deranged plots, and missing Craig MacLachlan – who ever thought anyone would miss an *ex-Neighbours* star? – *Bugs* became just another cop show. Still, the BBC also wasted our licence money on the most expensive SF series in British television history. But just like Hollywood flashes the cash, they forgot the script for *Invasion: Earth*.

This was six episodes rehashing the SF *Cardiac Arrest* writer Jed Mercurio grew up with in 1978-79. The plot came from the final *Quatermass* serial, was dressed with *Alien*-style bio-mechanics and climaxed with the 'trench run' from *Star Wars*. There were some powerful set-pieces, and effective black and white flash-backs to the Second World War, but the plotting was absurd, and most of the cast were, well, miscast. *The X-Files* could have told it in a two-part to much greater effect.

Despite the tacky, cash-in title, *The Sci-Fi Files* – four one-hour programmes shown at peak time on Saturday nights on Channel 4 – was rather good. A serious, general introduction to the genre, presented without condescension. An effort was made to place the development of SF into an historical context. The only criticism could be that sometimes the script appeared to revolve around which film clips were available – and those from *Forbidden Planet* were of inexcusably poor quality.

Highlight of the year was undoubtedly Channel 4's *Ultraviolet*. Only six episodes, but with, I think, the potential to run for many more. If C4 have the sense to re-commission a second series, this could be the British answer to *The X-Files*, and the biggest British cult show since *The Avengers*. Writer/director Joe Ahearne crafted an intelligent, multi-layered and genuinely science-fictional reinvention of the vampire legend. His direction was as good as his writing, and he has real imagination. Unfortunately the show was probably just too good for its own good, dropping out of the C4 top ten ratings halfway through its run.

Unhappily C4 blotted its copybook over the finest American import series to grace our screens. Still, they weren't alone. The BBC tried it first with the second best import, *The X-Files*, hoping to turn a cult success into

a mainstream Saturday night BBC1 smash. Of course it didn't work, the ratings fell and the show was unceremoniously taken off the air mid-season, only for it to return to a Wednesday slot months later in the New Year.

This had nothing on Channel 4, which suddenly halted the fifth and final season of *Babylon 5* a mere five episodes from the end. Then after a couple of months, and without any publicity the network decided to bury the last episodes in a late morning slot post-Christmas as part of some infantile nonsense called *The Bigger Breakfast*. They also censored the episodes and superimposed a huge logo – complete with digital clock – over the screen. They were deluged with complaints, apparently almost in record numbers. It was clear C4 had no idea of its audience – and to-date haven't had the decency to answer my letter of protest – but they did about-face sufficiently to schedule almost immediate repeats. Hopefully C4 has learnt a lesson and SF will be treated with more respect in the future, but I doubt it.

Last December Paul Kincaid announced that he wished to retire from editing the book review section of *Vector*. In consequence, as of the first of January, Steve Jeffery, until now BSFA Publications Manager, is *Vector* Reviews Editor – with Vikki Lee France lending assistance. For the last two years Steve has been responsible for getting the BSFA magazines onto a more regular schedule, and a sterling job he has made of it. Together Steve and Vicki run Inception, the Storm Constantine information service, and indeed, the author's 1994 novel, *Calenture*, was dedicated to them. We need have no doubts that the book review section is passing into safe hands.

However, while we welcome Steve and Vikki, we don't really say goodbye to Paul. Indeed, we may see more articles from him now than in the past, as part of his reason for retiring as editor is to have more time to concentrate on his own writing. Even so this seems an appropriate moment to pay tribute to the long service Paul has already given the BSFA, and I am greatly indebted to Andrew Butler for the following information, to Dave Barrett and Michael J. Cross, from whom the information is derived, and to Paul himself for checking the details. Any remaining mistakes are of course entirely my fault.

Paul made his first contribution to *Vector* in January 1978. He was Features Editor [under the overall editorship of Geoff Rippington] on #102 (June 1981) to (#115) August 1983. In 1985 Alan Dorey asked Paul to return as Editor, but unsure if he wanted to do so, he suggested having an editorial team. He did however edit the double issue 124/125 (April 85) while a team was being assembled. He then assumed the role of Reviews Editor (#126 – June/July 1985), in which position he continued to #157 (August/September 1990). Un-credited, he single-handedly created issue #183 (July 1995), then returned to being Reviews Editor from #185 (Sept/Oct 95) to date. Paul has also reviewed over 200 books for *Vector*.

We wish Paul well with all future projects, with the BSFA and elsewhere.

by Gary Dalkin



LETTERS TO VECTOR

From Penny Hill via email

Many thanks for *Vector* 202. I think the new covers are great and should be kept up as long as possible. It really 'lifts' the magazine.

I enjoyed the letters page – especially disagreeing with Martin Clarke about reviewing. Personally, I find the cut-down plot summaries the most off-putting things about amateur reviews. No matter how well-executed a plot may be, reading a fifty-word summary makes it seem banal. I would far rather the reviewer used those fifty words to give me an idea of the flavour of the work – what does it achieve? Was it well-written? Did the reviewer enjoy it? What were its weaknesses?

My contribution to the Wookiee book debate is to ask – would it be helpful to consider a divide along the Art/Craft lines. Hence, good Art and good Craft are equal but different, just as a good Wookiee book is striving to do different things from a good original work. We the readers are looking for different things and are as likely to be disappointed by a bad original work as by a bad Wookiee book.

Is it possible to argue that one is more likely to lead to bad writing than the other? Are we in fact more disappointed by a bad original work due to higher expectations?

One of the writers of the Wookiee articles, Daniel O'Mahony responds to criticism from Pam Baddeley, [Letters, V203] that his article was 'buried in ponderous "serious critical pseud".'

#### From Daniel O'Mahony, via email

In my defence I'd say that I don't believe that my article was particularly impenetrable. I don't tend to use or like jargon (mostly because I'm afraid of being caught out). On the other hand if you're juggling semantics then you can't get away from it.

Bad jargon is boring. Good jargon is as playful and deliciously readable as a review by John Clute.

I'm just ploughing through the new Vector [203]. I enjoyed the piece on *Alien*!. Having seen William Gibson's draft before I'm wondering if anyone's wooden to dig up a copy of Vincent Ward's crack at the story – wooded space-stations, homosexual monks and cow-busters (allegedly) included? I'd've liked to have seen that one.

However, I do have one small correction: On page 15 [‘Keep Watching the Skies: The Legacy of *The War of the Worlds*’ – Eds] Gary S. Dalkin states that ‘Even into 1940 the Hollywood studios were forbidden by the Hays Office to depict Nazi Germany in an unfavourable or critical light’. I think this is a mistake. The Hays Office was a moral rather than a political censor and I don't think any of its regulations referred specifically to appeasing Hitler. Most of the big studios steered clear of anti-Nazi sentiments because they didn't want to alienate one of their biggest foreign markets.

Contrary to Gary's statement, anti-Nazi Hollywood pictures were made prior to 1940 – mostly by Warner Bros. who ditched their commitment to ‘appeasement’ after the murder in 1938 of Joe Kaufman, their Jewish Berlin agent. The first fruit of this was *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* in 1939.

It was actually the much more politicised British Board of Film Censors who screened out anti-Nazi sentiment from British films right up to the outbreak of the war.

*Gary responds: Apologies for overlooking Confessions of a Nazi Spy. I stand corrected. However, this doesn't invalidate my argument that Orson Welles used The War of the Worlds to deliver an allegorical warning to the USA, a good few months before the Warner Brother's film was released. What I'd like to know now is, what on (or off) earth are 'cow-busters'?*

*In his piece about The War of the Worlds [V202] Gary Dalkin suggested that: 'It is important to remember – and almost impossible for us to imagine – that until just over a century ago, war was a limited activity, the province of professional armies and navies. Armies retired to the countryside to resolve the disagreements between nations in bloody but isolated conflict. Most often women, children, the elderly and the ill were not directly involved. There was not the indiscriminate bombardment of cities. There was not the technology of mass destruction.' One reader takes issue:*

#### From Pete Lancaster, Maldon, Essex:

Thank you, Gary, for your fascinating article in V202 on *The War of the Worlds*, particularly for the details of the Orson Welles 1938 broadcast of which I was ignorant. (I'd understood it was a hoax too).

However, I must take issue with the idea that war was a limited activity etc. Perhaps Gary's history books are in one of L J Hurst's alternative worlds? Perhaps Attila et al were just little headache for the local constabulary of those worlds on a typical Saturday night? To name but a few infamous events: *Cartago delenda est*; the fall of Constantinople; the Hundred Years' War; the Thirty Years War. I would say that warfare has almost always been carried out in the most appalling manner.

Reference the Roswell incident: to say that the material was probably from a US weather balloon (a phrase I've also read elsewhere) is perhaps to mislead the reader. It was not from a balloon used for collecting weather data as implied, but from a chain of balloons, one chain of many, in Project Mogul. Mogul was an attempt by the US military to sample the upper atmosphere for radioactive fallout from a Russian bomb. Producers/authors et al of flying saucer

films and book cashed in on that public gullibility displayed in the Welles broadcast – during the cold war this nonsense was not going to be exposed by those in the know. *The Skeptic* (Vol 11 No 4) recently reviewed two books on the subject, thereby producing a neat summary of the whole sorry saga.

*Pete adds that The Skeptic is published from PO Box 475, Manchester, M60 2TH. The two books were Frazier, Karr and Nickell (Eds) The UFO Invasion (Prometheus, ISBN 1573921645) and Philip Klass, The Real Roswell Crashed Saucer Cover-up (Prometheus, ISBN 1573921319)*

#### From David Curl, London

There are undoubtedly some people in the science fiction field whose obsession with issues of industrial output rivals that of the World Bank. There are people who write ten thousand words every evening after eating a big dinner, on principle, and there are people who revere the great such and such, who'd written a million mostly rude words by the age of seven. Science fiction novels, as you say in your editorial [Vector 202], seem to be getting longer, sometimes reasonably so, and two cheers for David Wingrove, embarking on his Chung Kuo sequence as a conscious reaction against British SF's alleged post New Wave littleness.

There is something in me, though, that shies away from much of what's published as long, or serial sf. Partly, it's the threatened ache of starting what I then don't finish; partly it's the sense that there are many other equally worthy books asking for my attention, so why should I make such a large commitment to just this one; partly it's the reality principle, telling me that I need time to work, make marriage work, help to run a household, fulfil my social duties, and pursue other interests, the whole messy and involving business of human life. As you seem to do, I like to warm myself by the fire of the 180 page novel (or up to three hundred, I'm easy), short enough to be read in a couple of sittings, and yet long enough to be a humane novel of ideas. With the short story, the shorter forms of novel forms part of the genre's structure, the architecture without which it would fall down. Without the literary-historical scaffolding of Time Machines, Cases of Conscience, Electric Sheep and Female Men, the genre that we know and love would be non-existent or in the gutter.

If what I require is not literature but rather the mere pleasing of my eyeballs for some arbitrary length of time, then I resort to MTV, which also adds to the gaiety and joy of life when deployed in areas of recreation, such as bowling alleys, gymnasias, and so forth. Many thanks for your championship of brevity.

*GSD replies: What can I say, but that I'm always glad when someone agrees with me and takes the time to write and say so. Thank you.*

#### From Norman Finlay, Edinburgh

In Vector 202 you write that in the branches of Forbidden Planet outside of London they sell adult magazines. I doubt that these provide the bread and butter of Forbidden Planet but they will do very well from selling such material.

In my native Edinburgh I can think of three bookshops which sell second-hand paperbacks – sort of trading posts for used paperbacks. There are probably more than three in the whole of Edinburgh but I wish to write about what I know. All three do a very large trade in adult material. That is a fact.

In the shop I visit regularly (because it's the one with the best Western section, and, believe it or not, genre Westerns are hard to find) I know the lady behind the counter very well. She tells me that without the adult material the shop would cease trading.

These small independent shops were where many people bought their first sf, especially back in the '60s. Is it not rather ironic to think that without the spanking mags, etc., etc. there might not be a shop left in a city the size of Edinburgh where one can buy second-hand paperbacks at reasonable prices! I know, there's always the charity shops, but somehow all one sees are lots of Frederic Forsyth, Jack Higgins and Sidney Sheldon.

My guess is that either the sf readers don't part with their books or

they are all skimmed off before they ever reach the shelves.

*GSD replies: I'm surprised a city the size of Edinburgh can only manage three second-hand bookshops. The Bournemouth/Poole conurbation has at least six, plus several others that sell books as well as other second-hand items, and only one of these sells pornography. We also have an independent 'fantasy' shop, which sells comics and graphic novels, but not 'adult magazines'. Probably such material is kept out of our mainstream bookshops by the presence of two licensed sex shops in town, and two others which sell what I think used to be called 'marital aids'. Second-hand sf is in fairly good supply here, and my favourite bookshop even has a fair selection of Westerns.*

*NEXT, a brief response to Andrew's editorial in V203, which alluded to an MP on Clapham Common and how people thought to be in the wrong place are often thought of as being in the wrong: 'a place for everyone, and everyone in their place. And if that's the viewpoint we end up endorsing, even if unconsciously, that really puts into question our trust in a genre that supposedly prides itself on different people and different places.'*

**From Colin Greenland, via email:**

I was just reading your editorial in the latest issue – very good stuff, I thought, though the conclusion seems unnecessarily depressive. Surely it's the fact that we're aware of the pull of conformism, and unhappy about it, that makes us exercise the slowly hardening arteries of our imagination with frequent joyful doses of wilfully deviant fiction?

*AMB: I suspect I was unnecessarily depressed at the time... I hope you're right.*

**Martyn Taylor, Morpeth**

Many thanks for V203, as stimulating an edition as I've read in a long, long time. It almost made me want to take sf seriously again, almost...

Ian J Simpson's discourse was intriguing, although necessarily partial (a necessity I discovered when I did a similar exercise for Vector on Television sf way back in the dark ages of *Dr Who*) I do feel bound to remark upon one surprising omission.

Ian refers to CSN's 'Wooden Ships', but if he looks to the writers of that song he will see, along with David Crosby and Steven Stills, the name of Paul Kantner, he of Jefferson Airplane, the same Airplane who included the definitive version (surely) of 'Wooden Ships' on *Volunteers*. The same Airplane whose first album as Jefferson Starship was *Blows Against The Empire* which, as I recall, won a Hugo. The Airplane's interest in sf – fascinating to those archetypal California heads Paul Kantner and Marty Balin – preceded their name change and carried on until at least Kantner's 'Planes' on the eponymous album of 1989. Surely a Hugo for a pop group deserves some consideration in an examination of sf in pop?

Similarly, the works of Ayn Rand appear on many lists of top sf titles (showing the genre's fascination with all things crypto-fascist and

maudlin) Why was there no mention of Rand's pop disciples Rush? This is a band which sold (and still sell) considerably more product (such an apposite term, that!) and had more influence than some of the bands Ian did mention.

I know it's all taste and judgement, and I don't want to argue with the substance of the article, but surely an article published in the BSFA's mighty critical organ should have mentioned The Mekons!

*GSD replies: To be fair to Ian Simpson, he did want to write much more on the subject of pop/rock and sf, though if space had permitted whether he would have rectified the omissions noted I can't say. What is clear is that sf and music is a vast subject. This issue sees the publication of the second article in our 'Music of the Spheres' series, with Tanya Brown on 'SF and Classical Music'. Even at 6000 words the article covers only part of the material Tanya really wanted to address, her initial draft being twice as long. The problem is, we will always be in the position of having to set a maximum length for each article, so as to be able to have a balanced selection of different articles, better to provide something of interest to every reader.*

*And finally a word from Paul Kincaid, who is retiring as reviews editor:*

**From Paul Kincaid, via email:**

It's never easy to let something go, particularly when you've been involved with it as long as I've been involved with Vector (though I must admit I was more than a little scared and shocked to realise quite how long I had been involved).

However, one of the best things about being Reviews Editor has been the reviewers. Most of them I've never met, but I feel I know them well. I have been taken aback by the messages of support that I have received from all of the reviewers since they learned I was giving up the post.

So, I want to take this opportunity of saying thank you. I can only say that I'll miss you, and I'm sure Steve will be an excellent successor.

*AMB: I'm sure all of us would like to thank Paul for all the work he's put in over the years, both visibly and behind the scenes. It's worth remembering that the BSFA, whilst a company limited by guarantee, is staffed entirely by volunteers, and Paul has done more volunteering than most. The good news is that we can start hassling him for more contributions and the fruits of this so far include a major piece to mark the centenary of Borges. We wish him luck in all aspects of his life.*

*Next time we suspect a deluge of letters pointing out glaring omissions from the two pieces published on sf and music: please let us know your missing favourites as soon as possible.*

Letters to Vector should be sent to Gary Dalkin, 5 Lydford Road, Bournemouth, BN11 8SN or emailed to [ambutter@enterprise.net](mailto:ambutter@enterprise.net) and marked 'for publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.

## 1998 – CINEMARTYR

Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc review the most notable genre-interest movies of 1998

1998 will not, in all honesty, go down as a classic year for cinema and, in the high budget world of Hollywood science fiction, will be signposted as 'Year of the Bloated Eye Candy' for generations to come. The big three science-fiction films this year (*Lost in Space* [Stephen Hopkins], *Godzilla* [Roland Emmerich], *Armageddon* [Michael Bay]) were all over-hyped, over-budget, over-long and over here for the best part of three months apiece, three long, long months of celluloid vacuum. But it was not all doom and gloom, little packets of happiness were opened occasionally and their fairy dust contents sprinkled around in some of the more surprising corners of the film world. It was also the year that films got made simultaneously to much the same end – *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg) was *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven) but with sentiment

rather than satire, *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott) was *The End of Violence* (Wim Wenders) with a deafening soundtrack, and *Armageddon* was *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder) with Bruce Willis and a host of misused cult actors.

### GIANT INSECTS AND MONSTERS

It's just not PC to have any particular race being portrayed as the bad guys any more. We're one big happy world and that's all there is to it. So against whom can we now fight for freedom, justice and liberty?

*Starship Troopers* opened the year in grand guignol style, a technical tour de force of effects, every cent flaunted on visuals. However Paul

Verhoeven's aggressive attack on fascist dogma was not to everyone's liking, the line between criticism of the Baywatch/Hiller Youth main characters and relishing the regalia and trappings they represent, was uncomfortably thin. Whatever the political motivation for the film, it is undeniably fun for those of strong stomach. Like Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* it features a level of violence unsurpassed in mainstream western cinema, they revel in it, guts, brains and other sticky bits galore. They both, inexplicably, received a '15' rating from the BBFC for cinema exhibition and they both feature minimalist plot structures to allow for maximum carnage.

Where they differ is on political and ideological stance, *Starship Troopers* keeps its politics on an ambiguous level, you can quite happily flit away two hours blissfully unaware of any political subtext, but can derive rich interpretations should you so desire. *Saving Private Ryan* wants to have its cake and eat it, on the one hand it endeavours to be the great 'War is Hell' message movie but in reality it's just a standard *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich - 1967) (well eight) clone with viscera and all the more insulting because of it. When *Starship Troopers* ends you know that the victory is cynically portrayed, *Ryan* ends in gratuitous sentiment intended to mirror *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg - 1993) but which ultimately demeans it.

**Mimic** - Guillermo del Toro's contemporary horror film mixes the standard 1950s science-gone-wrong scenario with the 1970s ecaparanoia sub-genre to produce something that is irritatingly close to art/entertainment perfection but blows it all through minor faults. Looking like a cross between *Starship Troopers* and *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore - 1989), del Toro's second feature wears its European look heavily on its shoulders. Shots of the cobbler and his son are so exquisite they look painted, and the church interiors reek of gothic malevolence. Scenes of the young boy facing the (largely unseen) foe are amongst the most tense of any this year. Where it all falls apart is the conflict between the subtle tension of a well crafted gothic horror film (the pre-credit sequence is worth the price of admission alone) and the glitzy 'Big Bug' special effects. Additionally there are a number of intriguing plot strands left dangling while the *Aliens* (James Cameron - 1986) style running-down-corridors shenanigans are pushed to the fore. Ultimately you have the reverse of the Hollywood problem: in most Hollywood films you sit through the talk/tension and wait for the action, here you want the action to end so that the real film can be given the space it needs to breathe.

**Godzilla** (Roland Emmerich) - With the promising trailers running over a year before the film finally shipped, expectations for *Godzilla* were suitably high. Sadly it was not to be a Terry Gilliam film as originally intended (now that really would have been a cause for celebration) but with nearly half a century of quality heritage (we'll ignore the misguided cartoon spin-off) to underpin it and a budget topping the \$100 million mark, how could it lose?

The warning signs were there from the start: cheesy double entendre tag line ("Size does matter"), a director familiar with high-budget, high-concept, low-quality popcorn fare and, crucially, the apparent lack of any Japanese connection. *Cojira* (Honda - 1956) used the horror and monster genres to create a dark and oppressive metaphor for the American occupation and fear of the atomic bomb, it was one of the few forms of expression acceptable under the oppressive American regime that forbade criticism of its actions and intentions. Subsequent films saw *Godzilla* become a lighter character but, crucially, he remained amoral, finally merging fear and kitsch in a series of modern dramas made by directors who were not even born at *Godzilla*'s conception. And then he died, beautifully and tragically.

Roland Emmerich's exhumation and desecration of the corpse is not only ill-conceived but insulting. Naturally the first step to go is any possible criticism of America, so instead the French pick up the tab for unleashing the devastating power of atomic testing. Cue Jean Reno in a woefully under-explored role. However the greatest fault is *Godzilla* himself, or should that be herself, as a ludicrous sub-plot involves *Godzilla*'s egg-laying capacity. Initial pre-production designs show an impressive, sleek design of rare reptilian muscle, a marked contrast to the portly figure we have been accustomed to. But by the time this athletic vision has been translated to the big screen we were effectively left with nothing more than a standard CGI dinosaur with nothing to distinguish it from any number of predators such as those in the lamentable *The Lost World* (Steven Spielberg - 1997). Also, like the aforementioned Spielberg bore-a-thon, *Codzilla* outlives its

welcome by running to the wrong side of two hours. Significantly.

Another 'modern trend' exploited here is the attempt to have your cake and eat it (c.f. *Saving Private Ryan*). *Godzilla*, we are informed, is a creature of nature, a ruthless carnivore, and yet by the film's close we are meant to sympathise with him/her/it at a human level - *Godzilla* has become one of his own rivals, King Kong. While it would be unreasonable to expect the sublime rubber suits of the classic *Godzilla* film, the lacklustre CGI does no justice to our nuclear-enhanced reptilian friend. Add to that the double whammy of pedestrian direction and a cynical collection of modern songs on the soundtrack and you have a film that would have been better monickered *Dogzilla*. Stick to *Gojira*.

**Lost In Space** (Stephen Hopkins) - Somewhere along the line someone must have questioned the purpose of *Lost In Space* and its tenuous relationship to the concept of plot, but came to the conclusion that audiences would turn up regardless. Those who expect coherence will be bitterly disappointed as *Lost In Space* is full of plotting but devoid of plot, so, harsh as it may seem, your duty as a viewer is to ignore the narrative in its entirety and just treat the experience as an aesthetic one. If you do you will be amply rewarded for your troubles with a non-stop barrage of bubblegum science fiction imagery and space opera ethics, perfect for those of short attention span or a predilection for sf book covers. Although the boast that over 70% of the film was created 'in computer' does not seem like idle puff and the quality of modelling on show is exemplary considering the scale of the task, the fault remains that computers can't write good scripts (yet) and this is ultimately where the whole exercise fails.

**The X-Files** - This was three episodes' worth of science-fiction paranoia with all the expected attachments: moody lighting the colour of Cigarette Smoking Mans nicotine stains, claustrophobia, running down tunnels, helicopters with BIG searchlights, a bit of extra-terrestrial stuff and more conspiracies than you can shake a grassy knoll at. The advantages are obvious, the higher budget and extended shooting schedule allow for greater scope and development and film appears more polished than its occasionally stunning small screen counterpart. The problem is that either you 'get it', in which case you've probably seen it a few times and have a large collection of *X-Files* videos and paraphernalia, or you don't. The film is so tightly entwined with the series that it is all but impenetrable to the uninitiated. This is not going to convert the casual viewer into an X-Phile and as such *The X-Files* remains a marginal experience strictly for the fans.

## MINERALISM

Just in case the use of insects as arch-enemies could be construed as any less than entirely politically correct, Hollywood seems to have reached the conclusion that only the inanimate should have any chance of destroying the world, so that absolutely no offence can be inferred by anyone, not even entomologists. Mind you, rocks have rights too....

**Armageddon** (Michael Bay) - *Titanic* may well have been given all the press for its extreme budget but minute for minute *Armageddon* was the pricey one. A reputed \$160 million (for 151 minutes) was spent to bring this 'vision' to your local multiplex, and the opening few minutes are indeed promising in their brainless wonder. Having watched the dinosaurs being wiped out by a large meteor, we swiftly cut ('65 million years later' the subtitle helpfully informs us) to New York, just in time to watch that get impressively wasted too, along with an 'oh-so-funny' *Godzilla* toy mauling gag. Then we realise that there's a really big meteor heading right for us.

Just as we seem to be set on course, the film veers wildly for the next hour or so for a 'build up' (read: 'boring bits') as we view the unlikely spectacle of podgy Mr Willis and his band of merry oil platform workers limbering up for confrontation with a large rock, a task apparently unsuitable for those with engineering or astrophysics qualifications, space travel experience or brains. Stereotype plot strands are introduced including the ever popular 'I was a bad father but I'll prove I'm worthy by going into space' scenario and daughter's love affair with the virile soundtrack-enhanced oilmeister head. After this tedium we can get on with the rock bashing, male work naturally, so the daughter/lover gets to watch at mission control and

whimper while the men folk save the world, pausing only to wreck the Mir spacestation and pick up the most embarrassingly overacting Russian crazy in the history of motion pictures.

To be fair, *Armageddon* is not meant to be realistic or artistic, as it proudly states. It is patriotic 'bad' entertainment for the masses and on that level it works. It is loud, big, brusque and filled with rock ballads and big sfx. It is at times tense, silly, exciting and pathetic, often all at once, and there are more plot holes than craters in the meteor. But who cares? It's one for the cinema and those who missed it there will be well advised to avoid any video release – the sheer scale of the exercise will be lost, leaving you with just an embarrassing stain on your television.

Those seeking alternative hard rock action may like to consider the quieter *Deep Impact*, a soap opera version of *Armageddon* with an additional ethical centre concerning the Noah's Ark style treatment of a group of under thirties and the doomed OAP's left outside to fend for themselves. Unfortunately all the hugging, weeping and string accompaniments cannot shake the image of Dr. Strangelove (himself perhaps behind the plan) waiting for the opportunity to breed for his country...

## VAMPIRES

You can wait years and years for a half-decent vampire film, then what do you know, two come along at once, though it's difficult to class these in the same category, far removed as they are in style, content and execution. Add to this the intriguing, intelligent *UltraViolet* on the small screen and you have a sucking-good selection of undead morsels.

*Blade* (Stephen Norrington) was Hollywood's attempt at updating the Vampire myth, while simultaneously trying to prove that its swordplay scenes can rival those of Hong Kong cinema. It can't compete with HK (it doesn't come close), but the film does work rather well in its own right. *Blade* (Wesley Snipes), half human, half vampire is on a mission to rid the world of the undead, particularly a new 'lower class' breed, led by Frost (Stephen Dorff of *Space Truckers* [1997] fame) who have broken away from their traditional lifestyle and are now intent on excessive partying and the eradication of all the stuffy vampire elders. Oh, and world domination. It's more of a die fast, live young existence.

The film works perfectly well as a piece of solid Hollywood entertainment, but not much more. It's fast paced, action-packed and engaging throughout; it's not particularly scary however, the main problem being that the vampires seem to have a much better time than our hero, so it's hardly surprising that you end-up siding with them instead.

Where *Blade* attempts to subvert the vampire myth, *Razor Blade Smile* (Jake West) embraces it with loving arms and a warm vampire kiss. A British production filmed on a minuscule budget, but with access to decent post-production equipment, *Razor Blade Smile* is a film made with genuine love and affection for the genre. Lilith Silver (Eileen Daly), a vampire 'born' a couple of centuries ago, is a hit woman by day and fraternises with vampire wannabes in seedy clubs by night, mainly to relieve the boredom of being able to live for eternity. She becomes involved with killing members of an Illuminatus sect, who are naturally rather irritated and thus begins a game of cat-and-mouse which may lead her into more danger than she realises. This is her story and in the many direct to camera scenes, she draws the audience into her world to confirm or dispel myths about her vampirism. A tight plot, with a genuine twist at the end, and stunningly designed throughout, it is a great pity that the film is fundamentally flawed. Although Eileen Daly (the model from the Redemption video label) looks quite delicious in full fetish gear, she cannot act, and unfortunately the rest of the cast range from wooden to formica (David Warbeck excepted). It's mean to denigrate the film at such a basic level, but it does detract from what should have been a fantastic rollicking romp. B+ for effort.

## CONSPIRACY

They're coming to get you....

*The Truman Show* (Peter Weir) – Gattaca's script writer meets Peter

Weir and Jim Carrey in shockingly good film. Carrey's character, Truman Burbank, lives a perfect middle-class life in a lovely island-based small American town. Sure, he has a few hang ups, his job isn't so great, but generally he's a pretty contented and jovial kind of a guy. What he doesn't know however, is that he is the star of the longest continually running TV show in America and that millions of people are watching his whole life second by second. The slow realisation that his life is a soap is tense and moving. Carrey perfectly cast to portray 1950s 'Hi honey I'm home' wholesomeness with intense paranoia, enhanced by the audience's privileged position outside of Truman's world. Lovingly crafted with some superb spy camera angles and subtle escalation of pace, *The Truman Show*'s ace card lies in its adoption of a hopeful existential ending.

*The End of Violence* (Wim Wenders)/*City of Angels* (Brad Silberling)/*Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott) – A filmmaker who used to make good films is Wim Wenders. A one time darling of the art circuit – New German Cinema's main export following the untimely death of Rainer Werner Fassbinder – he adapted American genres (the road movie, noir private investigation and so on) to give them a wholly European outlook, before developing into a true master with *Das Himmel Über Berlin* (1987 aka *Wings of Desire*). This was a film primarily remade this year as *City of Angels* with Meg Ryan and Nicholas Cage. Top tip: rent the Wenders version.

Since then Wenders has directed a pointless sequel (*So Far Away, So Close*) and throwaway fashion documentaries. His only saving grace was the under-rated *Until The End of the World* (1991), a truly epic science-fiction film that originally ran close to eight hours but which was cut down to under three for general release. Ten years on from *Wings of Desire*, *The End of Violence* sees a return to form with its reflective but disjointed style, a gradually unfolding tale of conspiracy and treachery. Taking its cue from spy satellite paranoia, Wenders's piece features a gruesome puzzle concerning adaptive SDI technology and some headless bodies, manipulative high-fliers and obsessive film producers. If, as he has stated, this is a call for the end of cinema violence he has failed, but as a thought-provoking piece of Euro-paranoia it deserves repeat viewing.

Wenders' artful covers similar ground to the deafening *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott), a mix of every previous Jerry Bruckheimer (*Armageddon*) production and Coppola's *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola – 1974) with an hysterical level of computer-based surveillance complementing a politically motivated murder revealed at the beginning. Indeed the whole film is revealed in the opening credit sequence, a wonderful montage of pixelated security footage, although the viewer only pieces this together in the next two hours. This is exciting and gripping stuff, the plot never patronises and Will Smith makes a sympathetic and believable lead. Also, surprisingly, it attempts to make a number of political points regarding government control – a case of watching some action without leaving your brain in traction. Also worth a watch is Brian de Palma's *Snake Eyes* – Nicholas Cage in a 'let's see that again from a different angle' multi-layered assassination piece.

## BRIGHT, BOLD AND BRASH

*The Avengers* (Jeremiah Chechik) – Critical mauling of the year, if not the decade, went to *The Avengers*, the medium budget update of the cult sixties and seventies favourite. It is hard to believe the amount of vitriol levelled at this amiable, if heavily flawed, fun film. Taking its fashion from the Emma Peel days (Uma Thurman yet again taking for the queen of fetishism crown) and its plot from the Tara King episodes, *The Avengers* wisely sticks to the spirit of the series in its gleeful celebration of English eccentricity and pop-art surrealism. Indeed the main problem that can be levelled at the film commercially, is that it is all but impenetrable to the American market in which it needs to succeed. Lines like 'St. Swithin, he's the patron saint of weather' do little to explain cultural references to the uninitiated and patronise the rest of the audience. What is left is a *double-entendre* laden funfest of dayglo costumes, mad technology and aristocratic settings, the Britain of a parallel universe still recovering from an acid-dazed sixties. Everyone involved is clearly enjoying themselves and this is infectious, the sight of Sean Connery declaring world domination to a room of brightly coloured teddy bears (to disguise their true identities, of course) is hysterical in all senses of the term and recalls the very best excesses of top *Avengers* writer Brian Clemens (who, amongst many

others, penned the Hammer sex-changing horror classic *Dr Jekyll & Sister Hyde* [Roy Ward Barker – 1971]. The flaws are numerous, and the plot-holes gaping, but *The Avengers* is sheer fun from beginning to end. Treat yourself to a self indulgent 90 minute smirk of a movie, you deserve it.

Gregg Araki's *Nowhere* is the ultimate slacker movie, but with an added sf ingredient that makes it all the more enticing. A portrait (well, graffiti) of a community of kooky teens ranging from the streetwise, the more streetwise younger siblings, the shy-sensitive types, the vacuous image obsessives, all with no other purpose in life than to sleep with each other, consume copious quantities of drugs and party all night long. In a society where image is everything, their world is dominated by intense colour, outrageous clothes, designer decor and tv indoctrination, so it's hardly surprising that a passing alien (in designer rubber suit) wants to get in on the action.

Although their nihilistic world is thoroughly depressing in its lack of any values, the film itself is a total scream, thoroughly engaging and a beautifully designed reflection of modern teen society – live for today, who cares what happens tomorrow?

The obvious parallels are with Kevin Smith's seminal slacker masterpieces *Clerks* (1994) and *Mallrats* (1995). However, important differences lie in the respective societies created by each director. In Smith's works, the characters have dropped-out or exist on the periphery of a society we recognise; they may reside within their own fantasy worlds, but they still have to cope with life. Araki's world though, is completely self-contained, there is no hint of a context, apparently no need even for money, as everything seems to be provided: it is simply outlandish. Also displaying shades of Richard Linklater and John Waters, this is definitely the cult science-fiction film of the year, but don't take your granny.

**SIMPLY CLASSIC**

The 'Gem of the Year' award without doubt goes to *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol). With the unpromising tag line 'There is no gene for the human spirit' and no hype to raise audience awareness, *Gattaca*

depicts an Orwellian world, set in the not too distant future, where genetic engineering has advanced to the stage that peoples whole lives are determined by their DNA. The story follows Vincent Freeman (Ethan Hawke), born with a heart defect (his parents didn't risk a natural conception with his younger brother) whose sole ambition is to travel into space. Clearly unable to be considered for such a job with his genetic record, he has to assume the identity of a genetically perfect man and work his way into the Gattaca corporation. However, the world has changed dramatically with inspections routinely performed on every individual, everywhere; identity has become everything.

The most inspiring aspect of *Gattaca* is that, although it was filmed on a much smaller budget (\$30,000,000) than almost all of the Hollywood films mentioned above, it is rich in resourcefulness and intelligent in execution, at no stage is the audience patronised by cod science or brainwashed with flashy techniques. Beautifully photographed with no special effects (apart from one piece of stock footage), the film owes its ambience to cinematographer Slawomir Idziak. Additionally, the production design created by Jan Roelofs, who was responsible for many of Peter Greenaway's films, gives the film a gentle, subtle tone reminiscent of de Stijl abstractions.

The subject matter, too, is relevant in so many aspects – the technology isn't science fiction anymore, and with people aiming to become more beautiful and intelligent, insurance companies already probing into clients' genetic histories, many firms performing routine checks on their employees, it is quite worrying how close our society has become to that portrayed in the film.

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*Colin and Mitch are regular contributors to Vector, having last appeared in V201 with an appreciation of Shinya Tsukamoto which, despite our perhaps overcautious warnings, seems to have failed to upset any one. When not watching Babylon 5 or Hong Kong cinema or juggling, they can be found exploring such culinary delights as pickled chillies, Peking duck pizzas and cheesy puffins. Colin's covers for Focus recently won coveted nominations for the BSFA Award for Best Artwork.*

# Films of 1998: An Annotated Checklist

Our annual listing of sf, fantasy, horror, slipstream and associational films (which is say films from directors usually associated with fantastical films). As usual we exclude re-releases. Comments, unless otherwise designated, are mostly by Andrew M. Butler. Other contributors' initials: CO and MLB (Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc), GSD (Gary S. Dalkin) and JA (John Ashbrook).

Key to star system:

- \* Recommended, with reservations
- \*\* Highly recommended
- \*\*\* A Great/Must-See Film

**ANASTASIA** – animated version of the fate of the Romanovs from the Don Bluth stable. 'Marvellously animated, crass, tasteless, racist, trash' GSD.

**ANTZ** – Woody Allen, Sylvester Stallone and Sharon Stone, Christopher Walken and Gene Hackman together at last, in CGI cartoon tale of an oppressed ant.

**ARMAGEDDON** – Not exactly *Die Hard* in space, and it disproves Willis's tastes in descent sf (after *12 Monkeys* and *The Fifth Element*). From the makers of *The Rock*, so inexplicable editing, loud music, misplaced patriotism and a decent cast wasted. Still, better than *Deep Impact*. 'Appalling' GSD.

**THE AVENGERS** – a summer blockbuster remaking the 1960s TV series. Lost forty-five minutes after its preview in Phoenix, Arizona, and was released without press shows across the world to beat bad word-of-mouth. Only Colin and Mitch seem to have liked it...

**BABE: PIG IN THE CITY** – sequel attempt to bring home the bacon.

**BARNEY: THE MOVIE** – unconvincing dinosaur movie (er, isn't that *Godzilla*!).

\* **THE BIG LEBOWSKI** – Coen brothers' reworking of *The Big Sleep*, in their usual mixture of stylised realism and fantasy.

**BLADE** – reinvention of the vampire genre, with Wesley Snipes as a vampire-human hybrid, Stephen Dorff as chief villain and an underused Kris Kristofferson.

\* **THE BUTCHER BOY** – Neil (*The Company of Wolves*, *Interview with a Vampire*) Jordan's adaptation of Patrick MacCabe's novel: nuclear paranoia and visions of the Virgin Mary. Eamonn Owens in the leading child rôle was excellent: 'I doubt you'll see a more haunting performance this year.' AMB, M131.

**CITY OF ANGELS** – Wim Wenders's classic uprooted from pre-fall-of-the-wall Berlin to Los Angeles; Dennis Franz can't quite be Peter Falk, Nic Cage can't be Bruno Gantz but this is as close as a Hollywood remake has got to being bearable in recent years. 'Go see the original instead.' CO and MLB.

\* **CUBE** – low budget Big Dumb Object: can half-a-dozen strangers solve the mathematical puzzles and get the crystals out of the cube before it kills them or they kill each other?

\*\* **DARK CITY** – reinvention of the vampire genre with Rufus Sewell as an amnesiac in city designed by Magritte. '[A] genuine Science Fiction film, probably the best since *Twelve Monkeys*.' Dave M. Roberts, M132. 'As audaciously plotted an sf movie as ever was made, marred by overly murky photography and an eccentric performance by Kiefer Sutherland.' GSD.

**DEEP IMPACT** – 'You only blew the comet in two? How many nuclear bombs did you use? Four? But you had eight on board... I appreciate that you were trying to save us money, but we did these calculations, right, and we clearly sent eight for a reason. We now have two comets heading our way. Gee, thanks.' More tush from DreamWorks SKG.

- DEEP RISING** – variation on the heist movie: *Alien*-esque retreat of 20,000 Leagues under the Seas. Little seen and apparently even littler liked.
- THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE** – Keanu Reeves's lawyer is in league with the devil, Al Pacino.
- DIVORCING JACK** – near future black comedy thriller set during the elections of a newly independent Northern Ireland; starring David Thewlis and Robert Lindsay, who here bears an uncanny similarity to Tony Blair.
- DR DOULTLE** – remake with Eddie Murphy.
- THE DOOM GENERATION** – Surreal teen drama from New Queer Cinema director, Gregg Araki, the man who put the homo back into homicide in *The Living End*. This is part of his Doomed Generation trilogy (alongside *Totally F\*\*\*ed Up [sic]* and *Nowhere* [see below]) which has sort of been released before but probably didn't get beyond the Festival Circuit.
- \* **THE END OF VIOLENCE** – Wim Wenders's meditation on violence and spy satellites, with Gabriel Byrne watching the close circuit TV screens and the late Sam Fuller cameos as his father.
  - \* **ENEMY OF THE STATE** – noisy Tony Scott techno-thriller starring Will Smith as a man who realises they are out to get him. Gabriel Byrne has wandered in out of Wenders's *The End of Violence* and Gene Hackman has wandered in out of *The Conversation*.
  - \*\* **ESKYA** – *Goodfellas* by way of Sergio Leone: Turkish magic realist tale of bandit going to the big city to track down the man who betrayed him thirty years before, and who befriends a wannabe gangster.
  - \*\* **EVER AFTER** – retelling of the Cinderella tale.
  - \*\* **FAIRYTALE – A TRUE STORY** – Charming retelling of the story of the Cottingley Fairies, produced by Mel Gibson. 'Delightful fantasy, a miniature gem.' GSD.
  - \* **FALLEN** – resonant of early Stephen Gallagher police procedural horror *Valley of Lights*: someone survives his execution, by passing from body to body. With the obligatory obvious twist ending.
  - \* **FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS** – stunning direction from Terry Gilliam, superb acting, and yet... depends if you like watching the drug trips of others.
  - \* **FLUBBER** – remake, with Robin Williams.
  - \*\*\* **GATTACA** – Ethan Hawke, Jude Law and Alan Arkin shine in Andrew Niccol's superior and serious dystopia. '[I]t joins the ranks of the films that don't quite make it.' Dave Roberts, M131. See also letters in M132. Andrew M. Butler, 'Gattaca: A Scientific [Queer] Romance', V201. 'A hairsbreadth short of a masterpiece' GSD.
  - \* **GODZILLA** – Big Lizard attacks New York. Yawn. 'I wasn't as disappointed as I'd feared I'd be, but I was still disappointed.' Ian Simpson, M133. 'Go see the original instead.' CO and MLB.
  - \*\* **GOOD WILL HUNTING** – What if Robin Williams won an Oscar? But yes, he can act, as he does in films where he is bearded; Matt Damon is working class maths genius in this modern day parable.
  - \* **HALLOWEEN H20** – Or Halloween 7, for those still counting. Jamie Lee Curtis returns to cash-in on the *Scream* cycle.
  - \* **IF ONLY** – another chance to screw-up your life comedy.
  - \* **KILLER TONGUE** – bizarre comedy horror spoof.
  - \* **LOST IN SPACE** – a summer blockbuster remaking the 1960s TV series. 'It has beautiful production, exquisite special effects and nary a braincell to its credit.' JA, M132.
  - \* **MA VIE EN ROSE** – charming tale of the fantasies of a boy who wants to be a girl.
  - \* **MAGIC SWORD: QUEST FOR CAMELOT** – cartoon Arthuriana.
  - \* **MIMIC** – something nasty in the subway in good looking but ultimately disappointing sf-horror. 'Certainly worth a look, but not if you are at all squeamish.' AMB, M132.
  - \* **MORTAL COMBAT: ANNIHILATION** – videogame kickboxing fantasy.
  - \*\* **MOUSEHUNT** – DreamWorks SKG produced, dark-tinged comedy which is too grim for kids, not evil enough for adults; with an underused Christopher Walken. 'Inventively madcap, but not as funny as you'd hope.' GSD.
  - \* **MULAN** – Disney racist Chinese culture. 'Routinely animated, crass, tasteless, racist, trash.' GSD.
  - \*\* **NOWHERE** – surreal youth drama which got zero stars from the *Daily Mail*'s Christopher Tookey. Part of Gregg Araki's Doomed Generation trilogy. 'Beautifully designed slacker nihilist movie.' CO and MLB.
  - \* **PAULIE** – talking parrot comedy.
  - \* **PAWS** – Australian talking dog movie.
  - \* **THE POSTMAN** – Kevin Costner saving civilisation. Pass the cyanide.
  - \* **THE PRINCE OF EGYPT** – cartoon version of Moses from the DreamWorks SKG animation arm. Next, Disney does Leviticus. 'Another Spielberg production with Jews being led to freedom. Lacks the historical integrity of *Schindler's List*, but is not as dreadful as *Anastasia* and *Mulan* might have led you to expect. Good animation, only implicitly racist.' GSD.
  - \* **RAZOR BLADE SMILE** – reinvention of the vampire genre. 'Heavily flawed, hugely enjoyable and terribly British.' CO and MLB.
  - ⊙ **RUSH HOUR** – ok, not sf or horror, not really fantasy or association, but it features *Chris Tucker* and therefore should be avoided at all costs. This has been a public service announcement. Now back to that skiffy stuff.
  - \* **SCREAM 2** – the intelligent slasher movie returns, full of debate about the racist nature of movie violence and the rules of sequels; *Scream 3* will follow.
  - \* **SLIDING DOORS** – Parallel worlds comedy which offers two versions of the same affair. '[A] light and frothy way to spend an afternoon.' AMB, M132.
  - \*\* **SMALL SOLDIERS** – welcome return of Joe Dante, with a biting satire about war and corporate greed.
  - \*\* **SPECIES II** – sequel to *Species*. Nuff said.
  - \*\* **SPHERE** – Samuel L Jackson, Dustin Hoffman and Sharon Stone sink in underwater first contact from the creator of *Jurassic Park*, Michael Crichton. Don't we ever learn? 'You can't blame Crichton for this, *Sphere* remains his best book, and only a "talent" like Barry Levinson could make such a mess of it' GSD.
  - \* **STAR KID** – cyberspace allows a kid to take revenge on a bully. Fun for all the family. Ahem.
  - \*\* **STARSHIP TROOPERS** – Verhoeven satirises Heinlein's fascist novel or glorifies his patriotic manifesto. 'The most apt and telling review would be to stick with an overheard comment by a member of the preview audience; "Was that a spoof or what?"' AMB, M130. See also letters in M131, M132, M134... 'It's such an enjoyable, wild slice of space opera, for once who cares what it means?' GSD.
  - \*\*\* **TITANIC** – the one about a harmless iceberg menaced by a nasty large ship; proof again that even with state of the art effects and photogenic leads, you still need a decent plot. 'Flawed as historical epic, but a great James Cameron movie. Visually astounding, intensely moving and almost unbearably harrowing. Sometimes the most popular movie really is the best.' GSD.
  - \*\*\* **THE TRUMAN SHOW** – From the script of Andrew Niccol, Jim Carrey is actually rather good and Ed Harris brilliant in this parable of the media society.
  - \* **TWILIGHT OF THE ICE NYMPHS** – dreamlike fantasy.
  - \* **WHAT DREAMS MAY COME** – Robin Williams in afterlife fantasy which takes the idea of the computer paintbox too literally; from Vincent Ward who gave us the excellent *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey*.
  - \* **WISHMASTER** – Wes Craven-produced horror; Wes Craven produced, horror! Repunctuate as necessary.
  - \* **U-TURN** – Oliver Stone thriller with Lynch/Roeg surrealism. 'Intelligently made but far too twisted to like.' GSD. 'Twisted enough to be thoroughly enjoyable' CO and MLB.
  - \* **THE X-FILES** – CinemaScope version of cult TV series which didn't pull in any non-fans. 'Lacks the tension of the best TV episodes, muddles the plot and only occasionally looks like \$60 million. Yet still infinitely better than any of the other summer sf pictures.' GSD.

ONE OF THE GUESTS OF HONOUR AT THE 1999 EASTERCON IS THE ENDURINGLY POPULAR FANTASY WRITER PETER S. BEAGLE. TO COINCIDE WITH THIS APPEARANCE WE OFFER AN OVERVIEW OF HIS WORK BY MAUREEN KINCAID SPELLER AND AN EXAMINATION OF HIS FIRST NOVEL BY DAVE M. ROBERTS.

## Unicorns, Werewolves, Ghosts & Rhinoceroses: The Worlds of Peter S. Beagle

by Maureen Kincaid Speller

In an article in *The Sacramento Bee*, published in December 1997, Peter S. Beagle described how his father, Simon, would come home from work, and find his son playing in the street. He'd sit down on the kerb and begin to tell him a story. Most often, it would be W.W. Jacobs' 'The Monkey's Paw', a warning to be careful what you wish for. 'I could look around and see that he had all these kids [...] hypnotised' said Beagle. 'I knew that doing this was a form of magic.'

From the age of ten, Beagle knew he wanted to be a writer and he began publishing when he was very young. Early stories, such as 'Telephone Call' (1957) and 'My Daughter's Name is Sarah' (1959) (both republished in *The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche*) already show a writer who isn't afraid to tease and challenge the reader, who is willing to take risks, to leave a thought hanging in the air as the story concludes.

Many people assume that *The Last Unicorn* (1968) was Beagle's first novel, and certainly it is the one by which he is best known, but in fact it was preceded by *A Fine and Private Place* (1960), one of the most extraordinary first novels of modern times. Beagle calls it his 'state-of-grace book' because 'whatever takes care of fools, drunks, and nineteen-year-old novelists looked after me while I was writing [it]'. A ghost story, a love story, it's set in a cemetery in Beagle's native New York and is in many respects a joyous reconstruction of the Bronx of his childhood. Indeed, for me, it is as much the incidental details that bring this book alive, as the wonderful characterisations of Jonathan Rebeck and Gertrude Klapper, two people out of step with their world, and Michael and Laura, two ghosts who find they haven't got 'world enough and time' after all. And at the heart of the novel is the sheer brazen conceit that a man might disappear to live in a cemetery for twenty years, sustained by a raven that steals food for him, and that he might set out to re-unite two ghosts, corporeally separated when one's body is moved to another cemetery. It's a tender book, but funny too, quirky and charming. And most notable of all, it's never questioned that Rebeck can see and talk to ghosts, and to the raven, and that the raven might have long philosophical conversations with the squirrel in between its thieving expeditions; it's simply accepted, and because of that the story works in a way that it never could if it were packed with explanation and justification. Instead, Beagle trusts his readers to work out what's going on, a courtesy that seems to have become a luxury these days.

How could Beagle possibly top *A Fine and Private Place*? He managed it, with *The Last Unicorn* (1968), 'the book that people know who don't know anything else I've written; it will probably haunt the rest of my career'. It's also one of the most delightful fantasy novels written this century, in some ways intensely shocking because it so readily subverts the conventions of the high fantasy novel. Coming to it, as I did, from a diet of high fantasy, in which everything unfolded according to a pre-ordained and familiar plan, laid down through hundreds of fairy stories told over centuries, polished to a high degree of comfort, and having absolutely nothing to do with our world, I initially found it difficult to accept a world in which the magician was entirely inept and working for a third-rate carnival show. It was all so... domestic, and rather grim as well.

This, though, is to mistake the character of the novel, as subsequent re-readings have shown me. *The Last Unicorn* is much more in the nature of a fable, its message being that while one can hunger after beauty, as King Haggard does, to possess it is often to destroy it. In this case, Haggard has hungered after the beauty of the unicorns, and in using his Red Bull to round them up, has driven true joy and beauty from the world, except where the last unicorn lives. When she goes in search of her lost brethren, Schmendrick is one of the few who recognises her for what she is, but in his misguided attempts to protect her, turns her from a unicorn into a girl, and their party, ends up in Haggard's castle itself, trying to work out how to undo the spell.

The novel functions on at least two levels: on one level, it is a fantasy in which good must overcome evil, in which the unicorns must be released from their imprisonment and the last unicorn, Amalthea, from hers. On the second, however, as John Clute notes in

the entry on Beagle in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, the majority of the characters are well aware that they are in a story and well aware of the roles that they should play. This is particularly striking in Schmendrick's encounter with Captain Cully and his band of outlaws, living in the woods and re-enacting the adventures of Robin Hood. As Captain Cully explains, Robin Hood was nothing but a story, while he is the real thing, but with an eye on his own immortality as he is convinced that Schmendrick is really a folk-song collector, the entirely genuine Francis Child, and performs interminable multi-verse ballads to be recorded for posterity. And all the while, the novel is permeated by a sly humour in which allusions to our own world abound, and the reader's expectation is constantly teased and undermined.

After *The Last Unicorn* Beagle worked primarily on screenplays, most notably for Ralph Bakshi's *The Lord of the Rings* (1978 - co-written with Chris Conkling) and a film of *The Last Unicorn* (1982) but there was little fiction except 'Lila, the Werewolf' (1971), a short story which became readers' first introduction to Joe Farrell, the protagonist of *The Folk of the Air*. In 'Lila, the Werewolf' Beagle presents Farrell as a wanderer, currently living in New York, a man who never seems entirely surprised by anything, not even when his girlfriend turns out to be a werewolf, a Jewish werewolf at that. In Lila's mother, Bernice, there are touches of a more malevolent version of Gertrude Klapper from *A Fine and Private Place*, but perhaps the greatest pleasure of this story is, again, its very conceit.

The publication of *The Folk of the Air* (1986) was eagerly awaited but greeted with considerable disappointment when it finally did appear. The basic problem, for many, was, I think, that it simply wasn't *The Last Unicorn*, nor indeed *A Fine and Private Place*. Instead, it focuses on Joe Farrell, newly returned to California, a musician, a man with a curious facility to land on his feet, find work, rediscover old friends wherever he goes; indeed, he has more than a slight flavour of an older, more competent version of Schmendrick about him. This time, however, he seems to have landed in deep waters when his friend Julie introduces him to the League for Archaic Pleasures (loosely based on the actual Society for Creative Anachronism) and he witnesses one of its younger members conjuring up an evil of sorts. He swiftly comes to realise that Aiffe is using the League's events as a playground for her burgeoning talents as a witch, and also to realise that Sia, his friend Ben's lover, is much, much more than she seems to be.

The main thread of story is undoubtedly weak; Beagle devotes far too much time to describing the group's range of activities and gives too little attention to the plot, to the extent that it's difficult to feel much concern about what's happening to the majority of those involved. On the other hand, Beagle's gift for characterisation shines intermittently, particularly in his creation of Aiffe, a most thoroughly unpleasant and spoiled brat, and in Farrell himself, and his sense of place, his instinct for small but telling detail is still there. In fact, the most interesting parts of the book are undoubtedly when Farrell is shown rediscovering the town he left so many years before, comparing the now and then, and Beagle's writing takes on a pleasantly melancholic flavour as a result. Having reread the novel more recently, I think now it's actually a better book than we thought at the time, but its pleasures are quieter and less obvious than those of its predecessors.

With *The Innkeeper's Song* (1993), Beagle showed yet again that he was capable of breaking the familiar mould of fantasy writing and subverting it to his own ends, and also displayed the sheer quality of his craftsmanship as a writer. Indeed, when I think of this book, I tend to remember first that it's a multi-viewpoint narrative that actually works, and that those are few and far between. Think of it less as a novel, more as a series of witness statements concerning events at Fat Karsh's inn, The Gaff and Slasher. Not a good inn, not a bad inn, much as Karsh admits that while he's not a bad man, he's not so great either, but somehow it becomes the epicentre for a battle between wizards, and everyone has their chance to tell their part of the story, from Karsh himself, incidentally no lover of wizards, to the stable boy, to the three mysterious women who arrive at the inn one evening; to

Tikat, the boy following them in search of his true love, Lukassa, who has died and been restored to a sort of life. The effect is one of a rich tapestry of overlapping fragments of story, with no clear single narrative thread. It's very different to Beagle's early work, in many ways; his whimsicality is less obviously apparent but the power of his storytelling is overwhelming. Indeed, Beagle admits that it's his own favourite novel; he missed the characters so much that he later wrote a set of short stories, published as *Giant Bones* (1997), which neatly compliment the main novel.

Most recently, Beagle has published *The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche and other odd acquaintances* (1997), which brings together short stories published at the beginning of his career, including the much anthologised 'Lila, the Werewolf' and 'Come, Lady Death', a truly charming though barbed tale of hubris, arrogance and acceptance, as well as more recent material, such as 'Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros', a story that shows he has lost none of his fascination for unicorns, a love also reflected in *The Unicorn Sonata* (1996).

Beagle has also produced a certain amount of non-fiction, including *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1982), an essay on the work

of Hieronymus Bosch, as well as *I See By My Outfit* (1965), a travelogue which chronicles a scooter ride he and a friend made from New York to California in 1964 and which I personally regard as a very fine piece of travel writing, imbued as it is with the enthusiasm of youth for a journey that no sane person would ever have made.

In the interview he gave to *The Sacramento Bee*, Peter S. Beagle said of himself, 'I write stories about real people in as real a background as I can make. It's just that the rules are different, but they're real rules. In other words, if these characters live in a world where certain fabulous beasts we know as legends are real, I have to concentrate more than ever on making that world real.' This, I think, is what gives his stories that extra intensity, that extra shine, that so many fantasy novels and stories seem to lack. Beagle gets layers deeper into his stories, his understanding of how narrative works stretches right back to those childhood storytellings, and the result is so much richer.

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IN THE SECOND PART OF OUR EXAMINATION OF PETER S. BEAGLE, DAVE M. ROBERTS EXPLORE THE AUTHOR'S EARLY WORKS.

## Love in the Graveyard: Peter S. Beagle's *A Fine and Private Place*

by Dave M. Roberts

Peter S. Beagle published his first novel *A Fine and Private Place* in 1960, when he was only twenty-one. Prior to that he had published a couple of short stories, 'Telephone Call', when he was only sixteen, and 'My Daughter's Name is Sarah', at the age of seventeen. In these stories, he had developed a smooth flowing style, with which he is clearly very comfortable. What stands out is that Beagle has chosen to use this style not to write about the concerns of the young, but instead to write of ageing, death and of what has long-term relevance in life.

The story 'Telephone Call', apparently based on a real experience, is the simple story of a phone call from a young woman which is received at a college hall of residence. The woman has been told by a lover that he lives in the hall, but no one there has ever heard of the man. She is passed from one person to another in an attempt to convince her of this. The reaction of the various people on the phone switches from some amusement, to trying to convince the caller that really, she is not being messed about with by the students but, rather, that she has been lied to by her lover. The narrator's concern clearly lies with the caller, and what it feels like to be rejected in such a way.

'My Daughter's Name is Sarah' is a short piece written from the perspective of a father whose daughter is going to a party on the last day of school. Sarah is convinced that a particular boy from school will want to dance with her and not another girl in the class. Her father watches his daughter with a mixture of great concern – he does not want to see her hurt in any way – and the knowledge that ultimately any rejection at such a young age will soon be lost in the passage of time. Sarah will get over it and most probably forget what she would now consider to be a life-shattering experience. While he knows that it would be just another disappointment that life has to offer, he still wants to protect her, and knows that this cannot be done. This acceptance of the trials of life, mixed with a great love and concern, is something that runs through all of Peter S. Beagle's work.

With *A Fine and Private Place*, Beagle tackles what it means to feel completely outside of society. Set in a cemetery in the town of Yorkchester, it immediately sets out to make the cemetery feel a more human place than the town outside: 'Yorkchester had been built largely by an insurance company, and it looked like one pink building reflected in a hundred mirrors' (p. 7) whereas the cemetery: 'was laid out carefully, with winding streets named Fairview Avenue, and Central Avenue, and Oakland Avenue, and Larch Street, and Chestnut Street, and Elm Street' (p. 8).

The story centres on Jonathan Rebeck, a man who has chosen to walk away from life as lived in Yorkchester – and by extension the modern world – to live for the past nineteen years in the cemetery. In all that time he has never been outside the gates. He survives by the good nature of his only living companion, a somewhat talkative and

opinionated raven, who brings Rebeck food stolen from shops in the town. Rebeck is able to communicate with some of the ghosts of the dead, indicating that he has moved some way from the world of the living to that of the dead. There is no clear delineation between the two. What becomes clear during the course of the novel is that the ghosts who spend time with Rebeck have chosen to stay in the world in much the same way that Rebeck has chosen to leave the outside world.

The motivation for either hanging onto the vestiges of life or allowing it to slip away comes only from the individual ghosts. The time that they remain in the cemetery also depends on how much effort they put into clinging onto life. The ghosts have to construct themselves out of their own memories. At the time of the story two ghosts in particular inhabit the cemetery. First is Michael Morgan, a thirty-four year old whom we meet as he regains consciousness in his coffin. This enables him to attend his own funeral, an event which he undergoes with a remarkable degree of calm acceptance. The other significant ghost is Laura Durant, whom we also meet as she is watching her own funeral. Aged twenty-nine when she was killed by a lorry, she is commenting – somewhat cynically – on the people at her funeral as they make pleasant comments about her. Although younger than Michael, Laura would be quite content to go to sleep and accept her fate. It is Michael's strength of persuasion that holds her back from doing so.

This persuasion becomes questionable as, while Michael believes he was poisoned by his wife, his inquest presents a strong case that he took his own life. This provides some mixed motives for why Michael is so keen to hang on the vestiges of life. Was he murdered, and therefore does he feel robbed of his life? Or did he take his own life, and is he thus driven by remorse to hold onto what is left? The dilemma is that he is unable to remember the precise events leading to his death.

*A Fine and Private Place* has a whole cast of characters who are, or at least feel, isolated from the world of Yorkchester (they are effectively 'dead'). Of all the major players, there are none that have the ability to fit comfortably into the everyday world this everyday world, though it is the Raven that comes closest.

As well as Rebeck there is Mrs Klapper, a widow, who found herself becoming more and more isolated from society following the death of her husband. She has erected a huge monument to him in the graveyard, which is clearly more of a monument to her grief than it is a monument to her late husband. That she refers to it as his House indicates that she has not fully accepted the fact of his passing. In some way she has pulled herself closer to the world of the dead to be nearer to him. This move is reinforced by the way that people now respond to her as the widow of her husband rather than Mrs Klapper, a

personality in her own right.

The final major player is a cemetery guard and gravedigger, Campos. He is the only other living character who is able to converse with the dead. His ability to do this is explained in some way by the fact that he is an immigrant worker who is isolated from his home. While he lives in Yorkchester, he is not part of it and has a greater empathy with the dead. At first this can be read as a reduction of the significance of the link that Rebeck has with the dead. It has the effect of blurring the boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead.

The central narrative is of Rebeck and the forces that push him to reconsider his life, and the possibility of leaving the cemetery. There are three elements in the novel that push this. First is the relationship he develops with Mrs Klapper. The two come, not only to an understanding of the feeling and the situation of the other, but also to an understanding of their own feelings. What is holding each of them in their respective positions is this very lack of understanding of themselves, resulting in their choosing to become isolated and accept this isolation as not only inevitable but desirable.

Second, is the burgeoning love between Michael and Laura. This is the weakest element of the novel, as the two show a surprising intellectual detachment from their own emotions. Maybe being dead does that, and to be fair, their relationship does have some serious complications. They exist only as projections of their own memories of themselves. They can not touch. They are both painfully aware that the relationship is doomed.

The ghosts can only exist for a relatively short time, so the fact of impending death (which all relationships are limited by) is a very large spectre. This is not helped by the possibility that Michael may have committed suicide. Not only does Laura feel betrayed by this, since it was Michael who persuaded her not to simply sleep, but as Michael was a Catholic, there is the possibility that his body will be moved outside the hallowed ground of the cemetery. This would separate the two, so that not only would they have died young, they would also spend the final moments before ceasing to exist in emotional turmoil. While not directly stated, it is clear that Rebeck is not used to being isolated from the ghosts, but to being the most significant companion the cemetery's ghosts have. For Michael and Laura there is no way this

can be true.

The final element that pushes Rebeck towards leaving the cemetery is that Campos is also able to see and talk to the ghosts. Previously Rebeck has set himself up to be in a world which he and only he can inhabit. Rebeck's discovery that Campos can also talk to Michael and Laura pulls this world down and gives him one less reason to keep himself isolated. He finds he is very jealous, and it is highly possible that his discovery could have pushed him the other way, further into isolation. What prevents this is Peter S. Beagle's invocation of the power of music. Beagle is himself a musician, and music features in most of his books, often to a very large degree. Campos, Michael and Laura start singing, increasing Rebeck's isolation, as he feels unable to sing. It seems as if Campos is stealing his world, then, as Rebeck is persuaded to join in, a change slowly overtakes his emotions. The event in itself does not go far enough to suggest to Rebeck that he can fit into the outside world, but he is at least able to feel that he is socialising and communicating with someone that lives across both worlds.

These diverse elements all combine in the course of the novel. Alongside this, Rebeck's lifeline, the Raven, is clearly getting older. He finds it harder work to bring in the food and is also having to fly out further to areas where he is less well known. There is no indication that this plays any part in Rebeck's final decision. What it does show is that, even if Rebeck does not leave at this stage, his life at the cemetery is limited by the normal passage of time.

In *A Fine and Private Place* Peter S. Beagle produced, at a remarkably young age, a greatly moving novel which deals with isolation, dying and the effects of grief. These are themes that require a great deal of maturity, and Beagle exhibits perceptiveness at the age of twenty far beyond that which most writers ever achieve. It stands as one of the few genuine masterpieces of fantasy.

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All quotations are taken from the London: Corgi, 1961 edition.

Dave M. Roberts has previously contributed articles on Terry Gilliam and Tim Burton to Vector. He lives in Hull – Eds.

## Books of the Year

compiled by Paul Kincaid

Every year at around this time we ask BSFA reviewers and committee members to choose their favourite books from the previous year. And every year we get a very wide variety of responses. In the end, 35 people responded to the questionnaire, and nominated a total of 145 books. For now, I'm just going to let everyone speak for themselves, but out of interest I have listed separately the 15 books that were mentioned more than once. On this reckoning, the book of the year is *The Extremes* by Christopher Priest.

### ANDREW ADAMS

*The Cassini Division* by Ken MacLeod – A refreshingly compact 240 pages of tightly-plotted sf. An adventure story, combined with deft social and scientific speculation. The finale features a wonderful bunch of malevolent artificial intelligences, but the main characters are funny and roundly human.

*The Thief's Gamble* by Juliet E. McKenna – An incredible debut, this is a fantasy novel with few obvious differences. The difference is in the writing. McKenna has a wonderful style, pulling you along with believable characters in a not overly complex plot that nevertheless draws you in to the story. Lots of promise for the future.

*The Nano Flower* by Peter F. Hamilton – The third and last of the Greg Mandel books by the author of the much talked-about *Night's Dawn Trilogy*. The Greg Mandel books show the development of Hamilton's talent. Each book is good, but the development of style towards the complexities of the *Night's Dawn Trilogy* are obvious when reading the trilogy together.

*Davy* by Edgar Pangborn – An oldy but definitely a goldy. In a mere 200 pages Pangborn lays out a complex story of a post-holocaust

world and the background of a failed rebel: something a modern author would probably have stretched over a trilogy.

*Beggars in Spain* by Nancy Kress – The first and best of Kress's three books about 'The Sleepless' and their effects upon the world. A wonderful piece of social and genetic science-fiction, adequately followed by the others which are worth reading even though they lack the sparkle of the first.

### CHRIS AMIES

*Strandloper* by Alan Garner (Harvill, 1996) is the story of William Buckley, who is deported to Australia, and becomes an Aboriginal shaman. It is a lament for a world which has grown 'one skin more and one dream less'.

Iain Sinclair's *Lights Out for the Territory* (Granta, 1997) also has a theme of regret, this time for London, as a city with ever less space for its people. In *Lights Out* Sinclair walks through London and relates the people, places and history he finds there.

*Borderlands* by Mike Dash (Arrow, 1997) is a comprehensive examination of Fortean phenomena. In the best Fortean manner he does not dismiss anything as impossible without considering the alternatives; but he puts to rest a lot of persistent claims and evident hoaxes.

*Second Nature* by Michael Pollan (Bloomsbury, 1991/1997) is not simply a gardening book; it is about humankind's place in nature, and how as we have changed the environment we must become responsible guardians of it.

*Dictionary of the Khazars* by Milorad Pavic (Penguin, 1989) is a work of fictional erudition on a vanished people. It is a mystery that satisfies by reaching no absolute conclusion.

## GRAHAM ANDREWS

Brian Aldiss – *The Twinkling of an Eye* (Little, Brown)... or *Written to Replace Bury My Heart At W.H. Smith's*. Well, no. This latest Life-of-Brian volume is actually subtitled *My Life as an Englishman*, setting it apart from Bury's more limited *A Writing Life*. 'The West Country'; 'The School'; 'The Parents'; 'The Forgotten Army'; 'The Funeral' (of his father, Bill); etc., etc. It isn't until Chapter XXI (out of XXXII) that we reach 'The Writer' (The Year was 1965. I was Guest of Honour at the 23rd World Science Fiction Convention...).

Ben Bova – *Twice Seven* (Avon Eos). Ben Bova's *Privateers* (1985) is the most unintentionally hilarious science-fiction novel yet written. And *Twice Seven* (why not *Fourteen*?) reinforces my opinion that Bova should play more to his short-form writing strengths, 'Conspiracy Theory' and the 'Great Moon Hoax' or 'A Princess of Mars' demonstrate his talent for intentional hilarity. 'Remember, Caesar' has been made out of sterner thematic stuff; it's an extravagant fiction that really should become cold fact tomorrow. The remaining eleven stories are full of vim and vigour, well seasoned with piss and vinegar. Ben Bova, then, at his best or near best.

Thomas M. Disch – *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* (The Free Press). Disch pleads the case that 'science fiction has come to permeate our culture to such a degree that its basic repertory of images – rocket ships and robots, aliens and dinosaurs – are standard items in the fantasy life of any preschooler... [But] today's twelve-year-olds have been warped away from the Gutenberg galaxy' to movies, TV, and the computer screen. And he backs up his argument with compelling, if not always incontrovertible, truth. A turn of the millennium *New Maps of Hell*.

Core Vidal – *The Smithsonian Institution* (Little, Brown). Core Vidal is probably best-known for such political and/or historical novels as *Julian*, *Washington D.C.*, *Burr*, *Creation* and *Hollywood*. But he has

also dabbled in the science-fictional black arts: *Messiah*; *Myra Breckinridge*; *Myron*; *Kalki*; *Duluth*; *Live from Colgotha*. *Smithsonian* is his latest 'invention' – analogous to the 'entertainments' of Graham Greene. It's even further beyond mere book-review description than the fabulous *Duluth*. If one-tenth of 'real' science-fiction was this good, we'd be in clover.

James White – *Mind Changer* (Tor). James White started merrily recounting the medical misadventures of staff and patients on deep-space Sector Twelve General Hospital over forty years ago. *Mind Changer* is Volume Eleven – and there'll be at least one more. I prefer to think of it as *O'Mara's Book*. The irascible Chief Psychologist/Major O'Mara ('My job is to shrink heads, not swell them') has been with Sector General since he helped build it as a lowly construction worker. But now O'Mara faces temporary promotion to chief hospital administrator, followed in due course by leave and long overdue retirement.

## K.V. BAILEY

Two 'sequence' novels satisfyingly reaching climactic or culminating stages: David Zindell's *War in Heaven* and Dan Simmons's *The Rise*

of *Endymion*. The former moves towards a balancing of life and death, the transitory and the timeless, Nevertheless its abiding emblem; the latter goes relentlessly on to its messianic conclusion, but en route backtracks over Simmons's wonderfully imagined locations, allowing time and occasion for Aeneas's expositions and revelations.

In a millennium-oriented year, I read two intriguing treatments of 'apocalypse', each strikingly on the nerve of the times. Elizabeth Hand, in *Glimmering* localises a millennial transition on a disintegrating Manhattan, while making the temporal element a more fluid affair. The climax is pitched somewhere between the surreal and the

transcendental. Greg Egan's *Diaspora* is a hard sf exploration of what (in)conceivable evolving and expanding modes of consciousness might survive cosmic disaster.

My fifth mention,  *Holding Up A Mirror*, by Anne Glyn-Jones, is a new analysis of (to quote its subtitle) How Civilisations Decline. Its theory based on Sorokin, it uniquely uses, as the title metaphorically indicates, the theatrical arts of Greek, Roman, Mediaeval and Post-Renaissance cultures to reflect patterns of ideological/political/social change.

## CHERITH BALDRY

Last year's *The Sparrow* made its sequel, *Children Of God* by Mary Doria Russell, essential reading; though I didn't think it was as outstanding a novel I still enjoyed it very much for the way it tackled the questions the first book left unanswered.

The best surprise this year was, I think, *The Family Tree*; Sheri Tepper often irritates me because of how she lets her social/political beliefs dominate the story, but the theme and the narrative fitted together

much better in this book, with that beautiful shift in perspective when we realise how the two halves fit together.

*Gate Of Ivory* by Robert Holdstock I enjoyed for its original interpretation of Arthurian legend, and its humour.

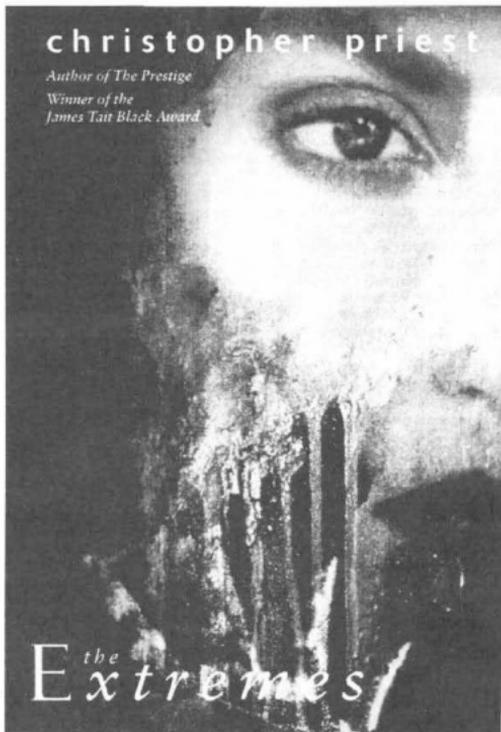
*Inversions* is one of my favourite Iain M. Banks novels, very complex, very elegant in the way the two stories are structured and reflect on each other.

Though it's purely historical, I enjoyed *Lord Of Sunset* by Parke Godwin for an original view of an almost clichéd historical event, the Battle of Hastings, and for the structure where each of the story's participants is allowed their own voice.

## ELIZABETH BILLINGER

I made a serious attempt this year to catch up with sf books and authors that I've missed along the way. I had some fun doing this and it yielded one of my selections for the year, *The Calcutta Chromosome* by Amitav Ghosh. Hot, sticky and hypnotic, it felt like a fever dream.

Two books come from a course on Latin American literature: *Labyrinths. Selected Stories and Other Writings* by Jorge Luis Borges and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* by Manuel Puig. Borges' stories masquerade as small, contained things, until it slowly dawns that there



is an enormous idea lurking in there. Puig's novel is a fascinating and moving celebration of seduction and Hollywood B-movies, written almost entirely in dialogue.

Jon Swain's *River of Time* was part of my continuing exploration of writing about Vietnam and Cambodia. Swain was a journalist during the Vietnam war who fell in love first with a Vietnamese girl and later (and more permanently) with Cambodia; very personal and very moving.

Lastly, I've chosen *Snow Falling on Cedars* by David Guterson, a whodunit set in a fishing community in the Pacific Northwest, because it was a book I just couldn't put down. It tantalises with unreliable witnesses, explores attitudes towards Japanese-Americans in the wake of Pearl Harbour, and constantly sidetracks to fill in the seemingly unnecessary, but nonetheless gripping, back stories.

**PAUL BILLINGER**

Did I just read the wrong sf books in 1998 or was it a disappointing year? Many of the sf books read were ones that I was eagerly awaiting, from authors whose work I usually like, but this year most of them failed to engage me.

One that did not disappoint was *Children of God* by Mary Doria Russell, sequel to *The Sparrow* and as such it needed to be very good indeed. It may not quite reach the heights of *The Sparrow* but it's close, continuing the story of Father Emilio Sandoz, the effects and consequences of the earlier events on him.

*An Instance of the Fingerprint* by Iain Pears is a murder mystery set in Restoration Oxford. Divided into four parts each telling the same events from the view point of a different narrator, each of which contradicts the preceding ones until you are left wondering if any of them are right. A book that demands to be re-read.

Two works of journalism were particularly striking: *River of Time* by Jon Swain and *Purple Homicide* by John Sweeney. The first describes Swain's time in Indochina, the Vietnam War and Cambodia's killing fields, very simply but movingly written. Sweeney's writing is the opposite, long sentences loaded with metaphors used to chronicle the Tatton election of 1997, definitely not politically unbiased.

The fifth book should be the complete works of James Ellroy but if I had to narrow it down to one it would have to be *American Tabloid* which is his version of 1958 America leading up to the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Very unconventional style but horribly compulsive.

**COLIN BIRD**

A very poor year because my reading rate has dropped catastrophically and my to-be-read shelf bulges under the weight of probable nominees by Hamilton, Banks, Brin and Haldeman. At least best book of the year is easy: *Jack Faust* by Michael Swanwick; not the first revival of the Faust legend but surely the most apt for our times.

Second choice would be *Freeware* by Rudy Rucker; insanely inventive and genuinely funny.

Third choice: *The Rise of Emdynion* by Dan Simmons. These *Hyperion* books are getting a bit flabby but Simmons can still write vivid sequences that burn into your memory.

Now we're getting into moderately entertaining books rather than genuine book-of-the-year candidates like Jack McDevitt's *Eternity Road* and Robert Sawyer's *Frashemith*. Enjoyable, if hardly mould-breaking fiction. No Kim Stanley Robinson this year – I wish I could say I enjoyed *Antarctica* but, for once, the author's diligent research swamped a thin story.

Not a very good snapshot of the year then but next time I promise I'll polish off that backlog shelf!

**LYNNE BISPHAM**

If I had to choose just one book of the year, it would be *The Castle of the Winds*, an addition to Michael Scott Rohan's *Winter of the World* series, in which smithcraft is equated with magic and the world is threatened by the Powers of the Ice. This is a well-written, intelligent and original fantasy. A close second would be *Atilla's Treasure* by Stephan Grundy, which combines Norse myth, legend and history in a powerful, epic tale, followed by Patrick McCormack's *Albion*, which is set in post-Arthurian Britain. In both these books, the fantastical elements are subtly integrated into a convincing historical background. As usual, Barbara Hambly manages to make something original out of the fantasy genre's well-worn traits in *Iceland's Quest*, though you do need to have read the earlier books in her *Darvath* series to

appreciate this novel which focuses the Icelfalcon, a minor character in the preceding volumes. And finally, *The Eye of the World* by Robert Jordan. Despite my reservations at embarking on a series of books with no discernible final volume in sight, within the first few pages I was well and truly hooked – the next eight volumes should keep me occupied in 1999!

**CLAIRE BRIALEY**

*Earth Made of Glass* – John Barnes (Orion, 1998) contrasts human relationships at the micro/personal and macro/public levels and demonstrates how vital, and how elusive, genuine understanding and empathy are. The novel works well not only in its own right but as an example of a successful sequel which develops and twists the themes and protagonists of the earlier books.

*Moonseed* – Stephen Baxter (Voyager, 1998) is a highly complex disaster movie in book form, an astoundingly visual book presenting a threat from space which must ultimately be met in space. A wide array of viewpoint characters give a chillingly realistic depiction of the collapse of Earth's geology and society, with a nonetheless hopeful conclusion.

*Time On My Hands* – Peter Delacorte (Gollancz, 1998) can do little which is original in time travel terms, but presents the familiar dilemmas through a poignant plot in the fascinating and well-drawn setting of 1930s Hollywood. The inclusion of old photographs effectively emphasises changes in society across 60 years.

*The Extremes* – Christopher Priest (Simon & Schuster, 1998) is a mind-bending and thought-provoking novel about the nature of reality, how we interact with it and what we can make of it, woven into the intensely personal experiences of the indirect victims of gun massacres – the ones who survived. In opening questions about our choices of reality, this is a novel whose potential to intrigue continues well beyond the closing text.

*Cavalcade* – Alison Sinclair (Orion, 1998) presents a microcosm of human society learning to live both with the many diverse parts of itself and with the even stranger aliens which have offered thousands of people a new life in space. In many ways it also presents a summation of the year's narrative trends: multi-viewpoint characters, a panorama of human relationships, and a conclusion which opens almost endless possibilities.

**TANYA BROWN**

In alphabetical order:

*Slaughtermatic* – Steve Aylett

*Centuries* – A A Attanasio

*Tam Lin* – Pamela Dean

*The Hundred Days* – Patrick O'Brian

*War in Heaven* – David Zindell

I can't define a common thread to these novels, except the authors' feeling for the English language, and an attention to detail that can make even a commonplace metaphor evocative. *Tam Lin* is the sort of fantasy novel that is all too rare – beautifully understated, to the extent that it isn't clear until the last twenty pages whether anything at all magical is happening. *The Hundred Days* (latest in the Aubrey-Maturin series, and thus a treat to be cherished in any case) is understated in a different way – and not the 'stiff upper lip' beloved of the British establishment, either. O'Brian's characters are reluctant to discuss their feelings, but this has more to do with dignity than face: the author's eye for significant detail reveals far more about his characters than most written dialogue. *Centuries* is here because, despite the occasional clumsiness of Attanasio's dialogue, there are some glorious images. The notion of 'compact dimensions' – whole dimensions within incomprehensibly small spaces, at the heart of which 'the blue dragon of creation' lies coiled. That sense of mystical science is also present in *War in Heaven* – included although I haven't read either of the predecessors. Zindell writes as though he is in love with the entire universe; his protagonist is intensely alive. A flawed novel, but one that I was desolate to have finished. *Slaughtermatic* is included because, unlike the other four, it doesn't lift me into another world: it simply made me laugh out loud more than any other book I read last year. Elegant prose, black humour, an intelligent, philosophical plot, and some truly nasty ideas.

**ANDREW M. BUTLER**

This year much of my reading has been of nineteenth-century literature. Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* was my surprise favourite; despite

initial scepticism I have to say I was charmed throughout and fascinated by the unreliable narrator.

I also frequently turned to crime, and Christopher Brookmyre's *The Country of the Blind* is my favourite: Tartan Noir, with humour and violence in equal measures, and a political bite.

More politics can be found in Michael Moore and Katherine Glynn's *Adventures in a TV Nation*, a record of the investigative journalism and satire of a fine American programme underwritten by BBC2. Would the Welsh be sold to the Argentinians? Is US, Canadian or Cuban health care superior? An exposure of the racism, sexism, bigotry and corporate corruption of the Land of the Free from America's finest living ironist.

Pat Cadigan made a welcome return with *Tea from an Empty Cup*, a triumph of wit, insight into the information age, and how to be brief, which demands rereading.

Mary Doria Russell overcame the traditional second book curse with *Children of God*, taking Emilio Sandoz (back to Rakkhat. Yes, it lacks *The Sparrow's* emotional punch (which is even more impressive on rereading), but it ties up the majority of loose threads from the original in ways that satisfy without always being comfortable.

#### MAT COWARD

Science fiction at the moment reminds me of Virgin Trains – for all its hip new livery, it doesn't actually seem to be going anywhere. No doubt this situation will change, but for now, if you want interesting fiction you're better off reading cri-fi than sci-fi.

Still, I was very impressed by Kristine Kathryn Rusch's *The Fey* series (Millennium), which combined sf and epic fantasy, to produce something quite fresh and very readable.

Harry Turtledove's books are notoriously variable in quality, but I think *How Few Remain*, a US Civil War story, is his best yet, displaying all of his virtues and few of his faults.

Larry McCurtry's Wild West *Lonesome Dove* quartet (Orion/Pan) does everything that great literature should do – wonderful, unforgettable.

I finally got round to reading *The Winds Of December* (Macmillan 1980) by Dorschner and Fabricio, a gripping, superbly researched hour-by-hour account of the late 20th century's most important event, the Cuban revolution.

A book that will stay in my mind for years is *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned* by private eye writer Walter Mosley: a master class in how to write serious, angry fiction without losing the reader's attention for a single second.

#### GARY DALGIN

By far the best of novel I've read this year must be *Inversions* by Iain M. Banks, an elegant, subtle and haunting planetary romance, equal but different to anything the author has written before, and a welcome return to form after *Song of Stone*. Also very impressive, though ultimately failing to add anything to what he has already achieved in *A Dream of Wessex* and *The Affirmation*, was Christopher Priest's *The Extremes*. Simon and Schuster could have had a major hit by promoting this as the most controversial novel of the year. Read it and see why. My most enjoyable re-read is either a Wyndham or Coney. I'll settle for the latter's *Hello Summer, Goodbye*, and just hope the currently-being-written sequel doesn't spoil things.

Better than any of these were two historical epics. *Byzantium*, by sf and fantasy writer Stephen Lawhead, sometimes lapses into inappropriate American idioms, but is still everything *The Sparrow* was acclaimed to be but wasn't.

My final choice combines wonderful writing, marvellous imagination and a powerful story, in what is simply Great Literature as it was recognised before the academics, the prize-givers and the broadsheet review sections devalued the currency. It's *Credo* by Melvin Bragg, and it's as great a book as any British novel published this decade.

#### ALAN FRASER

*A Clash Of Kings* by George R. R. Martin – After I read *A Game Of Thrones* I couldn't wait for this sequel. I was really fed up with the swords and sorcery stuff till I read this. Unlike some popular fantasy, this is a book which takes you and sticks you into the muck, disease, temperature extremes and unpredictable viciousness of a mediaeval world. Ironically, this series is recommended by 'big names' like Raymond Feist and Tad Williams, neither of whom can hold a candle

to Martin when it comes to grabbing the reader and keeping their eyes glued to the page.

*The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell – Not perfect, but another attention-grabber in spades. The relationship between the Earth missionaries on the planet of Rakkhat is so folksy that it actually makes it worse when it all ends in blood and pain. I'm waiting impatiently for *Children of God*.

*Infinity's Shore* by David Brin – Sequel to *Brightness Reef*, to be followed by *Heaven's Reach*, where humans are one of the races of illegal settlers on the planet Jijo and the cosmos-shattering events of the earlier *Uplift* novels catch up with them. I've read them all, but this was the one that really grabbed me, and made me realise I hadn't read them after all. Gripping, and now back to *Sundiver*.

*Adiamante* by L.E. Modesitt Jr. – Modesitt is known here for his fantasy books about Recluse and now the new *Spellsinger* series, rather than for his sf. However, with *A Fall Of Angels* he set Recluse firmly in the Darkover camp in more ways than one, as its founders are revealed to have been the crew of a damaged space warship. In *Adiamante* a depleted Earth with a Utopian society is threatened when cyborgs from the planet Gates (ho! ho! ho!) return for revenge against the planet that exiled them ten thousand years before. The Earth people must defend themselves without breaching the strict code of ethics and environmentalism that has ensured their survival. There's a link to the Recluse series, since one of the human worlds is named as Syrah, from which the 'angels' in *A Fall Of Angels* came.

*Heartfire* by Orson Scott Card – Latest fantasy in the Alvin Maker series that doesn't rely on the swords, dragons and elves stuff. Alvin is a wizard, of course, and a very powerful one too, but the 19th Century alternative America setting makes this such a refreshing change. A very folksy tale this time, and one that doesn't advance the Alvin story that much, but I liked it nonetheless.

#### LESLIE HATCH

Anne McCaffrey – *Masterharper of Pern*: the long-awaited Story of Robinhood. Told largely from his viewpoint, it dovetails at its conclusion with the events surrounding Lessa being Searched (as described in *Dragonflight*). Despite one tiny continuity error that a diehard Pern fan would notice, it's a great novel, and I recommend it.

Mary Doria Russell – *The Sparrow*, which provides a unique first contact story. Told part in flashback and part in present day, it's an impressive novel that I would recommend to anyone.

Katie Waitman – *The Merro Tree*, a young adult novel that nevertheless appealed to me. Written in the same style as *The Sparrow*, it's the story of Mikk the Mastersinger, who is on trial for performing a prohibited art form. There's a clever twist, which I won't reveal.

Judith Tarr – *Pillar of Fire*, a unique rendition of the life of Akhenaten, heretic Pharaoh of Egypt, giving a convincing resolution of his later years.

Stephen Lawhead – *The Iron Lance*. Set against the Crusades, and in Scotland, this was compulsive reading.

#### CHRIS HILL

It was a tough choice this year. While I felt nothing was jump-up-and-down brilliant, there was a lot of good stuff. All of my final list are sf/fantasy, but a half-dozen non-genre novels were just bubbling under. The final list is:

*Sacrifice of Fools* – Ian McDonald: An examination of identity in an alien/human co-habited Ireland.

*Man in a Cage* – Brian Stableford: A psychologically-damaged man is chosen as the pilot of an experimental FTL spacecraft.

*One of Us* – Michael Marshall Smith: A professional dreamer of other peoples' nightmares gets involved in a murder. Then things get seriously weird...

*Winter Rose* – Patricia McKillip: A stranger returns to inherit his father's home. But he is not what he appears to be.

*To Say Nothing of the Dog* – Connie Willis: Removing something from the past endangers the space/time continuum.

Reasons? The McDonald, Stableford and Smith, in my opinion, are the best books they have written. Any new McKillip is an event as far as I am concerned and this is a fine example of her intricately plotted fantasy. Finally, the Willis, a time-travel/comedy/romance is just enormous fun. And why not!

## PENNY HILL

My quest for the best books in 1998 was hampered by the fact that I've only been keeping records since half-way through June. So anything I enthused about in the first half of the year I have now forgotten, no matter how brilliant it was.

With that proviso in mind, my final selection is, in no particular order:

**The Mistress of Spices** – Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (recommended and lent by my sister)

**Capitan Corelli's Mandolin** – Louis de Bernières (bought after seeing the BBC advert after years of hearing people rave about it)

**Queen City Jazz** – Kathleen Ann Goonan (been on the bookshelves for ages)

**To Say Nothing of the Dog** – Connie Willis (my Christmas present from Chris courtesy of Amazon books)

**One of Us** – Michael Marshall Smith. (bought it as soon as I saw it).

I can't think of anything to say in my remaining fifty words that will convey quite how special these books were - but if you haven't read any of them, stop everything until you have! I am certainly looking forward to re-reading them later.

## EDWARD JAMES

The book I enjoyed most last year was Homer H. Hickam's **Rocket Boys: A True Story** (Fourth Estate, 1998), a lightly novelised autobiography that was much more fascinating and moving than most novels. It's about growing up in a depressed mining area in West Virginia in the 1950s, reading Heinlein and Van Vogt, designing and firing rockets with his school friends, and eventually working for NASA. The wonderful book that I have dipped into and will refer to again and again is Everett F. Bleiler's **Science Fiction: The Gernsback Years** (Kent State UP, 1998). I thought Christopher Priest's **The Extremes** (Simon & Schuster, 1998) one of the best sf books of the year; Diana Wynne Jones's **The Dark Lord of Derkholm** (Gollancz, 1998) one of the best fantasies. Finally, a confession (and a cheat, since there are seven books here). I didn't come across the Laurell K. Hamilton books about Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter, until recently, even though the first (**Guilty Pleasures**) came out in 1993. Guilty pleasures indeed. Anita Blake is like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for adults: much more complex and erotic, but just as fun.

## STEVE JEFFERY

1998 saw commendable novels from Banks, Barnes, Baxter, Holdstock, Greenland, Sullivan, and collections by Baxter and Hand, several of which might have made it into my top five. Holdstock's **Gate of Ivory** might have made it if it hadn't sent me back to re-read all of his Mythago novels, and the still-astonishing **Lavondyss**, which remains the highpoint of Holdstock's Mythago cycle.

Stephen King's **The Dark Tower** sequence, starting with **The Gunslinger**, a curious and intensely self-conscious apocalyptic western fantasy based on the poem 'Child Roland', sparked another trail of associations and cross-references that ran from Scottish ballads to Alan Garner and beyond.

Of 1998's sf novels perhaps the obvious choice is Mary Doria Russell's **Children of God**, less a sequel than a second part of an extended novel that started with **The Sparrow**.

Tricia Sullivan's **Dreaming in Smoke** starts on a surreal opening sentence, and later had me falling off the chair laughing (with a reference to '70s pomp rock band Yes) and later wincing at a harrowing treatment of abuse and power relationships between kidnapper and hostage that operates on a number of levels.

Finally, out of a number of previous Booker Award winners (from Arundhati Roy, Peter Carey and Julian Barnes), I have to include A. S. Byatt's **Possession**, for Byatt's wonderful ear for the cadences of Victorian apocalyptic poetry, and of modern day academics and biographers, woven into a tightly plotted romantic mystery.

## PAUL KINCAID

There's no doubt about the sf novel of the year for me: **The Extremes** by Christopher Priest. It started out to be a quickie thriller and ended up as an incredibly complex and convoluted novel which returned to the themes and the questions (about identity, individuality, moral worth) which have been at the heart of all his finest books, from **A Dream of Wessex** to **The Prestige**.

The best collection of stories was in **Starlight 2** edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden. I cannot remember encountering any original

anthology series of this quality since the heyday of *Orbit*, *New Dimensions* and *Universe* in the mid-70s. Even the weakest stories are good enough to make you stop and think, while the best, by Ted Chiang and particularly by Carter Scholz, bring you up short with a whole new appreciation of the genre.

The debut I enjoyed most was **To Hold Infinity** by John Meany. Not a great book, but one full of fire and colour and promise which suggests future novels could be well worth looking out for.

Most fascinating book of the year was **Low Life** by Luc Sante, an enthralling account of the thugs, criminals, saloon keepers, whores, showmen and politicians who infested the poorer quarters of New York from the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early years of this. Anyone who has read *The Alienist* by Caleb Carr will be fascinated to discover how many of the peripheral characters in that novel were real people.

And for sheer fun: **To Say Nothing of the Dog** by Connie Willis, the first really substantial novel she has written for some years, and one that manages to combine some of her best comic writing with a wonderfully complex time travel plot that I had real pleasure unravelling.

## DAVID LANGFORD

Avram Davidson & Grania Davis, **The Boss in the Wall** – presenting the late great Davidson's one unpublished novella of outright horror. The central unpleasantness, developed from one of his real-life nightmares, effectively and characteristically shades off into a fog of interlinked US rural legends, rationalizations, conflicting scholarship, petty academic rivalries, a frustrating labyrinth of texts and clues. Although the connections are elusive, there are good and nasty glimpses of something both horrific and pitiable, something with the grisly solidity of M.R. James's best bogeymen.

Guy Gavriel Kay, **Sailing to Sarantium** – opens *The Sarantine Mosaic*, a magical alternate-history trilogy which recreates the Byzantine empire rather as *The Lions of Al-Rassan* reinvented mediaeval Spain. Good scene-setting, clever talk and intrigue, and some subtle magic which nods to Yeats's Byzantium poems and makes remarkable use of those artificial singing birds.

Christopher Priest, **The Extremes** – returning to the conundrums of seamlessly lifelike virtual reality which he touched on in *A Dream of Wessex* and now handles with far greater assurance. Priest's slightly chilly narration presents the violent background of simulated and actual killings (and their increasing entangledness) in a distanced fashion, as though safe behind glass: but inexorably the glass begins to crack...

Walt Willis, **Fanorama**, ed. Robert Lichtman – 96 pages of enjoyable and often timeless old fan columns from Scotland's 1950s sf magazine *Nebula* (mostly). At one point Willis interestingly ponders why so many sf fans were fond of C.S. Forester, a piece which could be published today with the substitution of Patrick O'Brian.

## VIKKI LEE

Not exactly a debut of good books to read this past year, more a death of time in which to curl up with a good book. My faith in the storytelling abilities of David Gemmell were restored by **Sword in the Storm**. Powerful characterisation carries this one along and makes it a very memorable read. J. V. Jones, in **The Barbed Coil**, continued the promise shown in her first three books. Not so many laughs in this one, but a good solid read and very involving. No list of mine would be complete without a mention of Sheri Tepper, and she has managed to enthrall me twice this year. Less so in **Six Moon Dance** than in **The Family Tree**, though this may be because *The Family Tree* is probably going to rate as one of my all time reads, and certainly the most 'recommended' book to read by me throughout 1998. *Six Moon Dance* was always going to struggle after that one, and I think Tepper knew this as well, having difficulty in tying the plot together at the end of the book. A new author, for me, though, takes the top step on the podium. David Farland's **The Sum of All Men** was an extremely well thought-out and racy, gaming-based fantasy. Different, dark, and involving – definitely my read of the year.

## FARAH MENDELSSOHN

**Rocket Boys**, an autobiography by Hiram Hickam couldn't be more Heinlein-esque if you tried. Hickam grew up in a West Virginia coalmining community in the 1950s, became interested in rocketry after Sputnik went up and, encouraged by his mother and elementary

school teachers (and initially opposed by just about everybody else) and five friends began to build rockets, inadvertently becoming the focus of the political and social stresses which racked the town in the early 1960s. Eventually, the rocket club became the route out for these boys of otherwise 'no-hope' backgrounds.

In Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meat* the protagonist is asked to produce a programme, *My American Wife*, for a Japanese TV company, the programme to be sponsored by an American meat exporting company. The format is simple: an American wife is interviewed and then shown cooking a meat dish, preferably beef. As the filming schedule proceeds, however, the protagonist begins to subvert (not initially intentionally) the aims of the tv company executive.

Douglas C. Baynton in *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language, 1847-1920* explains how American Sign Language was developed to bring the gospel to the deaf, who as mutes were considered innately closer to God. As missionary work it was placed in the hands of college-educated young men who hoped to equip the brightest of the deaf to teach others, creating a community of well-educated deaf people. In the 1890s, deafness became linked with primitiveness: educational emphasis switched from ASL to speech. Such training was time-consuming so constricted the educational possibilities for the deaf but, aimed at younger children, it opened a new profession for women.

#### ANDY MILLS

Jack Vance's *The Night Lamp* received a poor notice in Vector, well, you either love the master or he leaves you cold, and whilst this novel isn't exactly an original outing for Vance, it contains all those welcome Vancian hallmarks: the language, the cultures, the pacing, the humour. Treasure him whilst we've got him. Perhaps given choice number one it wasn't surprising that *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* by Michael Swanwick struck a chord with me: rich science fantasy in a darker vein. My final three choices for the year were all short story collections from very different authors: rising star Paul Di Filippo with *Ribofunk* (and it was tough and go whether or not I included instead his *Fractal Paisleys*); George Saunders' (of whom I know nothing) linked collection *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*; and another oldie, Ray Bradbury with *Driving Blind*. For me, the short story and sf are inextricably linked, and, despite the death of the short oft being proclaimed, these writers at least have shown the single author collection is alive and kicking.

Postscript: just realised there's no British authors in this list. Now there's a pity.

#### JOHN NEWSINGER

Like most people I have a backlog of books waiting to be read but of those I have managed to get through this year the following are among the best.

The first volume of Paul McAuley's 'Confluence' trilogy, *Child of the River* was outstanding. My only criticism is that it should have been longer. Volume two is eagerly awaited. Another excellent read was Ian MacDonald's *Kirinya*. Not his best book by any means, but still tremendously powerful stuff.

At the moment of writing (New Year's Eve), I've just finished Joe Haldeman's *Forever Peace* which has to be a must for anyone interested in sf. Two other impressive novels that I caught up with in 1998 were Jonathan Lethem's *Gun, With Occasional Music* and Tricia Sullivan's *Someone To Watch Over Me*, both outstanding in very different ways and definitely two authors to look out for.

#### JOHN D. OWEN

A year of series and sequels. First, Ian MacDonald's *Kirinya*, following the wonderful *Chaga*, and a lesser book, but still full of amazing imagination and scintillating characters. MacDonald's first sequel, and I hope there is more to come.

David Brin's *Heaven's Reach* is next, where the Streaker finally makes it back to Earth, after a truly epic adventure. If the story often reads a bit like the Perils of Pauline the overall scope leaves you gasping with admiration by the end.

Dan Simmons' *The Rise of Endymion* brings to a conclusion a tale that began in *Hyperion*, and Simmons puts it to bed with a wonderful concoction of adventure and religious philosophies that almost had this old atheist looking for enlightenment at the feet of his central characters.

Ken MacLeod's second novel, *The Stone Canal* showed just how much he has learned from Iain Banks. It's a corkscrew of a novel, ranging from eighties British politics to far future encounters with artificial intelligences. MacLeod co-ordinates his characters and storyline with a practised fluency. He's frighteningly good.

Terry Pratchett's *Carpenter Julium* redeemed the Discworld maestro after the frankly disappointing *The Last Continent* (good while the merry men of the Unseen University are present, poor when it is down to Rincewind). The Lancrè coven's battle to prevent ambitious modernising vampires from taking over their turf both sets the modern trend for rewriting the vampire tale on its ear, and shows how good Pratchett is getting at plotting very intricately indeed.

#### STEVE PALMER

My books of 1998 have shifted towards non-fiction more than usual – perhaps, though I'd like to think otherwise, because the sf and fantasy didn't seem that inspired. But they say the millennium will give sf a boost. Most interesting book of the year was *Life, An Unauthorised Biography* by Richard Fortey (Fleming 1998), a marvellously written account of the origin and evolution of life on Earth, that provided a perfect accompaniment to the year's best television, *Earth Story*. Earlier in the year I came across *The Ages of Gaia* by James Lovelock (Oxford 1989) in a junk shop in Sidmouth. In a Glastonbury shop I found *The Myth of the Goddess* by Anne Baring and Jules Cashford (Arkana 1993), a stunning examination of the female image in world culture. Also a fascinating read was *Grooming and the Origin of Language* by Robin Dunbar (Faber 1996), in which the author offers a compelling and plausible account of the origin of language in the biology and sociology of our species – and our ancestors. The only fiction worthy of mention was *The Wild Road* by Gabriel King (Arrow 1997), a fantasy novel of cats and feline life written by HarperCollins editor Jane Johnson and M. John Harrison.

#### IAN SALES

If I was afraid that sf was 'blanding out', with too many writers sticking to tried and tested formulas at the behest of the 'market', 1998 has shown that there is room for science fiction that does anything but that. The World Wide Web has, for me, proven particularly useful in keeping abreast of the current state of the genre – more so American sf than British; we have the BSFA for the latter...

Without a doubt, the book of the year was William Barton's *Acts Of Conscience* (Aspect 1997). I've long been a fan of his, and can quite happily say that each of his solo novels has been better than the last. Barton's real strengths may lie in his characterisation and world-building, but he is also a very 'knowing' writer, and I rate him highly as much for the sf references with which he peppers his novels as I do for his excellent prose.

This year I finally got around to reading Bruce Sterling's *Heavy Weather* (Phoenix 1995). It's perhaps not as good as his *Holy Fire* – it's a little thin on plot, for one thing – but no one puts extrapolated technology in the hands of his characters quite as believably as Sterling.

I came late to Ken MacLeod, but I'm busy catching up. His *The Star Fracture* (Legend 1995) proves that politics and sf do mix... and it doesn't, as George Turner once said, necessarily have to 'smack of jackboots'. Political sf finally grows up.

Carolyn Ives Gilman produced a strong debut with *Halfway Human* (Avon Eos 1998), a story of gender politics firmly in the tradition of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The story takes place on two worlds, both of which are drawn extremely well. Gilman writes well, and *Halfway Human* is never less than involving.

Another strong debut was Susan R. Matthews' *An Exchange Of Hostages* (AvoNova 1997), in which she introduced the character of Andy Kosciusko, a torturer for an interstellar state. Getting a reader to identify with a character who tortures for a living is not an easy task, but Matthews manages to do so.

#### ANDY SAWYER

Good but not great, is the year, although Christopher Priest's *The Extremes* (Simon & Schuster), has, as Paul Kincaid said in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, put him deservedly back at the centre of science fiction and is a remarkable book from a remarkable writer. Iain M. Banks's *Song of Stone* (Orbit), sticks in the memory: one imaginative use in it was set fair to create a whole new theory of Banks as a metafictional fantasy writer. Fortunately for my reputation as a

Rigorous Academic, I asked the man himself who revealed that I had completely misinterpreted the use of the word. Stephen Baxter's *Moonseed* (Voyager), splendidly destroys Edinburgh: I have nothing against Edinburgh but the book could make a much better film than *Armageddon*. Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (Penguin), isn't science-fiction (apart from being partly a novel about the science of psychology) but is a splendid historical novel: Why is Siegfried Sassoon such an icon nowadays? Finally, I disagree fundamentally with the conclusions of Gary Westfahl's *The Mechanics of Wonder* (Liverpool University Press) – one of my students has justly pointed out, though, that the subtitle stresses 'the idea of science fiction' rather than 'the history of science fiction' – but I agree with a lot of what he says along the way. It's the critical book of the year.

ANDREW SEAMAN

In *Moonseed* (Voyager, 1998) Stephen Baxter has written an almost indecently enjoyable end-of-the-world novel. It's all immensely readable, but what impresses most is Baxter's skill at interweaving both global disaster and personal tragedy alongside his recent obsessions.

The unclassifiably strange *Irrational Fears* (White Wolf, 1998) by William Browning Spencer manages to and bleak terror (often in the space of a few lines) from its alcoholic hero's attempt to save the woman he loves from a sinister Lovecraftian cult.

Linda Nagata's *Vast* (Bantam Spectra, 1998) has something of the chilly perspectives of Stapledon in its moving description of a beleaguered remnant of (trans-) humanity cast adrift in a hostile universe.

A similar bleakness pervades William Barton and Michael Capobianco's *Alpha Centauri* (Avon Eos, 1998), a story of planetary exploration in the mold of their first collaboration, *Iris*. Despite the distraction of some graphic sex scenes, at the heart of this thought-provoking novel is a fascinating study of alien anthropology and cosmology.

Finally, *Underworld* (Picador 1998) is not sf, but Don DeLillo's kaleidoscopic study of America's Cold War history memorably captures the spirit of our pre-Millennial 'strange days' in striking images and glorious prose.

MAUREN KINCAID SPELLER

I'm always interested to see what fellow sf fans read when they're not reading science fiction, and having spent most of the summer looking at foreign bookshops and reading other people's bookshelves, this has influenced my choices for 1998. Patrick O'Brian's books about Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin, sea captain and ship's surgeon-cum-spy, have been tremendously popular with many sf fans, and rightly so. Life on a ship during the early eighteenth century is about as alien as it comes, and O'Brian painstakingly evokes this as well as offering us two extremely well-rounded characters. Similarly, Luc Sante's *Low-Life* brings nineteenth-century New York vividly to life with its cast of fantastic characters (and it's a must for anyone who's read Caleb Carr's *The Alienist*). John McPhee is an American essayist whose writings on the geology of the United States have been recently collected in *Annals of the Former World*, a marvellous chronicle of geological wonders and the people who've studied them (and I'm told his book, *Oranges, on, er, oranges*, is well worth reading). Joseph Mitchell's *Up In the Old Hotel* takes us back to New York, and one man's exquisitely-written vision of the city he loves. And last, Peter S. Beagle's *The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche* is a new collection of stories and articles from one of my favourite fantasy writers, still clearly on top form.

BRIAN STABLEFORD

The best sf novel I read in 1998 was *Luminous* by Greg Egan – a fine collection of stories by a writer of genius.

Among the sf novels I read I was most impressed by *The Extremes* by Christopher Priest, which offers a careful and sensitive

extrapolation of one possible use of virtual reality technology.

The best fantasy novel I read (slightly ahead of its scheduled early-1999 publication date) was *The Eternal Footman* by James Morrow, the concluding element of the 'post-theistic' trilogy begun with *Towing Jehovah* and *Blameless in Abaddon*.

My favourite horror novel was the harrowing historical fantasy *Darker Angels* by S. P. Somtow.

The most interesting antique I managed to unearth (thanks to the efforts of the invaluable Xavier Legrand-Ferronnière) was *La Ville-Vampire* by Paul Féval, a marvelously grotesque parody of English Gothic novels written – if the internal evidence is trustworthy – in 1867. I started looking for it after reading the introduction to *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, where Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi cite it as the text which inspired the book; I liked it so much I translated it into English (as *Vampire City*), although it is too soon to say whether anyone will publish the translation.

JON WALLACE

It's been a strange year, what with one thing and another. Illness and stress and overwork and stuff means that I've been dividing my reading time between old (mostly comfortable) favourites, technical stuff and my review books. This makes the choice of my five best books

difficult. And idiosyncratic. Anyway, I'll just shoot on and do my best.

Stephen King added another volume to his occasional series chronicling the quest of Roland, the Last Gunslinger. *Wizard and Glass* prompted me to dig out and re-read the entire series so far. I hesitate to say that I enjoyed them, as they are far too downbeat for that, but I am eagerly awaiting the next instalment...

The mantle of comfortable favourite was worn this year by Adam Hall. His series of books about the shadow executive Quiller saw me through the tough time when my thyroid overacted. I find Quiller's ability to overcome all odds to complete his mission inspirational, and Hall's writing style just makes the pages turning.

I'm going to pretend that those count as two books, and pick another three. Of the books that I reviewed, Tom Cool's *Secret Realms* showed most promise, despite a seriously flawed approach to pacing towards the end. If he manages to discipline himself, he'll get better. But Adam Lee's follow-up to the *Dark Shore*, *The Shadow Eater*, is as good, gaining the edge perhaps because he sustained his early promise right to the end.

And for a good laugh, I'll have to forgo the traditional Pratchett, and say that I enjoyed Robert Rankin's *The Brentford Chainstore Massacre*. Totally off the wall.

GARY WILKINSON

Of the new books I read this year, two were outstanding: Iain M. Banks' *Inversions* and Ken MacLeod's *The Cassini Division*.

*Inversions* is another Culture novel. Or is it? It is defiantly another of Iain's puzzles in which the full nature of the book has to be worked out by the reader. We have a complex double narrative based around two love stories which although sf has all the elements of an historical romance. A nice contrast to, and inversion of, *Excession*.

MacLeod's *The Cassini Division* rounds out his two previous novels. It is an irresistible mixture of anarchist politics and high frontier space opera. Both the human and post-human character's intentions keep us guessing to the last minute with its slam-bang wide-screen finish.

Other notable books included Peter F. Hamilton's short story collection *A Second Chance at Eden*, offering fresh insight which rounds out the background to his epic *Night's Dawn Trilogy*. Some of the stories are a bit rough and ready but Hamilton seems to be getting better all the time. I'm eagerly waiting for the final book of the trilogy – hurry up Peter and get it finished!

Also enjoyed another instalment of epic sf space opera in David Brin's continuing Uplift series with *Brightness Reef*. It just gets better and better.

IN THE SECOND PART OF OUR CONTINUING INVESTIGATION OF THE INTERSECTION OF SF AND MUSIC, TANYA BROWN EXAMINES THE ROLES OF CLASSICAL MUSIC IN SCIENCE FICTION, AND SCIENCE FICTION IN CLASSICAL MUSIC.

## The Music of the Spheres: Classical Music and Science Fiction

by Tanya Brown

### INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on written sf, rather than the cinema. That serendipitous coupling of Strauss and space in 2001: A Space Odyssey (dir. Kubrick, 1968: featuring Richard Strauss' 1896 *Also Sprach Zarathustra*) won't be discussed here. Neither will *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (dir. Spielberg, 1977), in which a simple five-note motif becomes a means of communicating with aliens. Portrayals of future music are also omitted, such as the alien diva's rendition of the Mad Scene from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) in *The Fifth Element* (dir. Besson, 1997). Music, like other effects, is limited by the technology available when the film is made: written sf is limited in its effects only by the imagination of the reader. Besson's opera singer may have blue skin and more than the usual number of limbs, but her voice remains that of the Albanian soprano Inva Mulla Tchako.

Yet these films mirror three of the ways in which science fiction writers treat music. There is the use of the music of the past to illuminate a vision of the future (2001): the exploration of what music might become, given different bodies and minds (*The Fifth Element*); and how music might become a way of communication when language proves inadequate (*Close Encounters*).

Any definition of a field as broad as classical music – or science fiction – must include or exclude particular works on a relatively arbitrary basis. The lines between classical music, progressive rock and new age music are becoming increasingly blurred, with the advent of electronic amplification and the increasing tendency of rock musicians to compose works combining classical techniques and instruments with those used in rock music. The 'new age' label is applied to a multitude of musical sub-genres: contemporary composers are often included, as are several progressive rock groups who focus primarily on instrumental music. The latter – while often using science-fictional themes as inspiration, and sounding ethereal and other-worldly – can't be said to be playing classical music: there is nothing inherently classical about instrumental pieces, however long or traditionally-constructed.

For this article, 'classical music' is defined as the existing classical canon, and the music which will occupy that niche in the future – music that, in Robert Silverberg's 'Gianni' (1981: coll. *The Conglomeroid Cocktail Party*, 1984) is defined as 'serious music that belonged only to an elite and [is] played merely on formal occasions'. To this definition I would add, 'music from the Western tradition that is regularly performed for decades or centuries': most of the stories surveyed here assume that classical music will still be played in the future.

This is a survey rather than an in-depth critical study: it covers only a fraction of sf references to classical music. ('Science fiction', for the purpose of this article, excludes fantasy or horror – although fantasy novels are often permeated with music.) The exchange of ideas is not one-sided: there is also an overview of some of the ways in which classical music has used science-fictional themes.

### SCIENCE FICTION IN CLASSICAL MUSIC

Science fiction is primarily a twentieth-century genre, and thus the majority of the classical canon predates it. Additionally, it's difficult to ascribe science-fictional themes directly to programme music (music that is intended to suggest a series of images or moods). James Blish, in *The Tale that Wags the God* (ed. Chauvin, 1987) deprecates the idea that a human might comprehend alien music. Discussing Thomas Wilson's 1952 story, 'The Face of the Enemy', he observes that:

The account in the story makes it very clear that this is program music; it appears to be a historical composition describing how one tribe triumphed over another and how beautiful towers arose

thereafter. All this comes very clearly to the hero's mind, despite the fact that even the most sophisticated Terrestrial music lover, encountering a piece of Terrestrial program music for the first time, will be very lucky if he can tell you whether it describes a battle or a love affair.

Even when the title of a piece indicates some science-fictional connection, it's not easy to distinguish any direct relation between the music and its title.

Traditional orchestral music based on science-fictional themes is rare; however, such themes are not entirely absent from the concert hall. Purists would deny David Bedford a place in the classical canon, since the electric guitar, which features largely in many of his works, has not yet been assimilated into the classical orchestra. Yet Bedford's compositions – including *Tentacles of the Dark Nebula* (1975), from Arthur C. Clarke's story 'Transience' (1949), and *Jack of Shadows* (1973, based on Roger Zelazny's 1971 novel of the same name) – are generally played in symphony halls, rather than rock venues, and use the paradigms and structures of orchestral music.

Generally, however, orchestral music seldom refers explicitly to science fiction. An exception is Michael Daugherty's *Metropolis Symphony* (1993), a 'musical response to the myth of Superman'; each movement of the symphony explores a different aspect of the story, from 'Krypton' to 'Red Cape Tango'. (As a listener, I found that the music evoked the story only when I was aware of the title of each movement.) And, of course, there is the ever-increasing body of orchestral music composed as soundtracks to science fiction films.

SF has made a number of predictions concerning musical technology, some of which have already been fulfilled: for example Charles Harness's 1953 novella *The Rose* features a programmable synthesiser. Increasingly, too, musicians are devising new – almost science-

The entire  
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a hyperpercussion

fictional – ways in which to compose and perform music. Stephen Taylor, a contemporary American composer, integrates Andrew Yee's recordings of the sound waves of solar oscillations into his music. Professor Todd Machover (of whom more below) is part of MIT's Media Lab, which produces new musical instruments using the latest technology. Machover's projects include the Conducting Jacket – which measures the wearer's movements and 'gives more complete, and more anticipatory, views of gestural control' – and 'squeezeable music', a new generation of musical 'interfaces' that will give direct tactile

control over complex sound systems.

Stockhausen's work on musical theory, if not his music, indicates an awareness of science fiction. In *Towards a Cosmic Music* (1989) he writes of his *Klavierstücke* (1952 onwards), an ongoing group of compositions for piano, as 'small musical spaceships and time machines'. Stockhausen invites the actively participating listener to 'empathise with temporal and spatial experiences of other living beings which live faster or slower, narrower or wider than human beings (insects, birds, fish, plants, trees, clouds, etc.)'. Stockhausen seems to hold the view that music can be a means of communication with, or comprehension of, non-human intelligences. Whether his theories are evident in his music is a question that is, fortunately, beyond the scope of this article. The inability of many humans to understand Stockhausen's music does not bode well for any aliens who may be listening.

There are a growing number of science-fiction operas. Science fiction works often have a distinct narrator or protagonist, while opera plots tend to be in the third-person, with characters who take it in turns to describe what is happening. However, the dramatic gestures and improbable plots of opera are comparable in scale to the more grandiose works of sf. This wasn't lost on a group of fans who, in

1990, approached the New York Metropolitan Opera with the idea of staging an opera based on *Star Trek* for the 25th anniversary of the show in 1991. Sadly, the project was doomed: it takes much longer than a year to write, rehearse and produce a new opera.

The first opera to deal with an sf theme was probably Haydn's *Il Mondo della Luna* ('The World on the Moon'), composed in 1777. It's an allegory, rather than a literal account of space travel: they don't actually get to the moon. However, it shows an early awareness of extraterrestrial themes in the world of classical music.

Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffman* ('The Tales of Hoffman', 1880) includes an automaton, Olympia, who dances and sings marvellously (if you like French operetta) but eventually malfunctions and is destroyed. Another of Offenbach's operas is *La Voyage dans la Lune* (1875), the plot of which drew heavily from Jules Verne's *De la Terre à la Lune* ('From the Earth to the Moon', 1865).

Twentieth-century operas with science-fictional themes are more abundant, perhaps because of the increased popularity of science fiction and the explosion of the pulp sf market in the USA. Janáček's *Věk Makropulos* ('The Makropulos Case', 1925) is based on a story by Karel Capek – inventor of the word 'robot' – about an immortal opera singer who is three hundred years old. In *Vlčety pana Broučka* ('Mr. Brouček's Journey', 1920), drunkard Brouček dreams of a trip to the Moon, whose inhabitants are effete and pretentious creatures. They live for art and nourish themselves by sniffing flowers.

The science fiction opera – that is, opera as a work of science fiction in its own right – began to flourish in the 1950s. A notable example is Blomdahl's *Aniara* (1959), based on the poem by Harry Martinson. A spaceship abandons a post-apocalyptic Earth to colonise Mars: a fault develops and the ship goes off course, doomed to drift forever. *Aniara*, an eclectic piece including taped electronic music and combining modernist twelve-tone techniques with neo-Romantic orchestration, is still performed regularly.

Gian Carlo Menotti's *Help, Help, the Globolinks!* (1968) is a children's opera about alien invasion, in which the power of music becomes a potent weapon against the Globolinks. Musical instruments are the only defence against the aliens, who can penetrate walls and doors, but are frightened and repulsed by the children's music.

Many operas are based upon best-selling novels: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), for example, has inspired at least four operas. The most recent of these is a version by Libby Larsen, which was named by *USA Today* as one of the eight best classical music events of 1990. Larsen is no stranger to science fiction: she has also composed an opera based on Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), and has been rumoured to be considering an opera based on an Ursula Le Guin novel. Philip Glass has composed two operas with librettos by Doris Lessing, from her own novels. *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (1982) and *The Marriage of Zones Three, Four and Five* (1997). The latter (also a source for the American composer Paul Barker) was produced by English National Opera in 1997, to mixed reviews.

There are a number of other science-fiction operas which are not based on existing works: however, these plots are seldom novel or thought-provoking. *The Games* (Meredith Monk and Ping Chong, 1983) is set on board a generation starship, where children's games have acquired a ritual status. Paul Dresner and Rindred Eckert's *Power Failure* (1989) tells the story of a man who has spent his entire wealth on the development and production of an immortality machine: as he is about to use it, a power failure traps him, along with various downtrodden employees, in his underground laboratory. *Rigel-9* (David Bedford, 1985) shows that even the involvement of as august a personage as Le Guin, who wrote the libretto, does not elevate the plot. It deals with that staple of science fiction, a group of spacemen alone on a strange planet: only one is sensitive enough to perceive the alien city. While these tales may be strange and wonderful to the average opera-goer (who, given many traditional opera plots, must have learnt to suspend disbelief), readers familiar with science fiction may well find them simplistic.

The idea of alien intervention, while no longer specifically a science-fictional theme – it has become part of mainstream culture – has been aired in several operas. Sir Michael Tippett's *New Year* (1988), features three alien visitors. The computer genius Merlin, the space pilot Pelegrin and their female commander Regan appear in a space ship from 'Nowhere' and 'Tomorrow' to change the lives of a corresponding trio from 'Somewhere' and 'Today'. Tippett also updates the idea of the *deus ex machina* in *The Ice Break* (1976) by

introducing an alien visitor, rather than a god or a ghost, to resolve the plot.

Perhaps the most innovative use of a science-fiction text in opera is Todd Machover's *VALIS* (1987). Based on the novel by Philip K Dick, the opera recounts the story of Dick's alter ego, Horselover Fat. The *VALIS* (Vast Active Living Intelligence System) experience, which may be a technological experiment, a nervous breakdown, or a true spiritual experience, is portrayed via electronic music, song and spoken text. Machover, as mentioned above, is also active in the field of musical technology: *VALIS* represents the first use of hyperinstruments, which use computers to augment natural musical expression. The entire 'orchestra' for *VALIS* consisted of two instruments, a hyperkeyboard and a hyperpercussion.

#### CLASSICAL MUSIC IN SCIENCE FICTION:

It has become almost a cliché to have the protagonist of a science fiction text listening to the ancient, obscure music of some twentieth-century band. Less frequently – although perhaps more credibly – such a character relaxes to the strains of Beethoven or Mozart, whose music has already lasted ten times longer than that of Janis Joplin or Jimi Hendrix. Such cultural references seldom enhance the plot: when the reference is to a classical piece, it often fails to give any impression except that of pretentiousness. Kim Stanley Robinson, in *Iccheng* (1984), describes the rings of Saturn as 'like the music that Beethoven might have written had he ever seen the sea.'

Robinson, though, can be forgiven on the basis of his description of a radiation storm in *Red Mars* (1992): like a masterly film director, he provides as a soundtrack the 'Storm' Movement of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony (1808). Arkady, who puts the recording over the PA system, is using music as a sort of social control. The idea of the power of music to soothe, or to excite, dates back to Ancient Greece: Robinson returns to it repeatedly, and other authors have explored it with varying degrees of success.

All too often, the classical music that future listeners cherish dates from well before the author's time. That music might be a way of indicating a particular cultural context, or of evoking a specific mood or image. The better-known a work or composer is, of course, the more chance the reader has of recognising the reference – and of believing that the person or the music will be remembered in the future. But it can't be assumed that the classical canon will remain fixed. Arthur C. Clarke, in *The Songs of Distant Earth* (1986) is one of the few science fiction writers to assume the integration of today's experimental music into the artistic mainstream. The canon implied in Robinson's *The Memory of Whiteness* (1985) seems to skip from Mussorgsky to composers in our future, the past of the novel.

Bach, Beethoven and Mozart are more likely than any other composers to be mentioned in science fiction. Their music is ubiquitous today, and seems likely to last. Fashions change, though, even in classical music: Mozart was seldom heard in nineteenth-century England, while Telemann (who wrote more music than any other composer) seems out of favour with contemporary concert programmers. Perhaps there is something so timeless about the music of the Great Three that it will remain popular and accessible in the future: conversely, it may be the writers' prejudices, rather than their predictions, which elevate these three to immortality.

If the writer is referring to a particular composer or musician – especially in alternate history and time-travel stories – the historical individual might stand as a cipher for the time or place in which he flourished. Some of the possibilities are explored in three stories that resurrect famous composers. While these stories may seem at first to include the musical aspects simply as background, they all ask questions about the role of art – in this case, music – in the life of the composer.

'Mozart in Mirrorshades' (1984), by Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner, has spawned many imitations. An instance of the eighteenth century has been opened up for commercial enterprise, and a young Mozart is introduced to recordings of the music that another version of himself will have written. He's awed – and ambitious, especially when he realises that, in some way, his future has already happened. 'History says I'm going to be dead in fifteen years! I don't want to die in this dump! I want that car and that recording studio!' Influenced by the contemporary music brought back from Realtime, his style changes: eventually his songs are sent back up the line, and he tops

the Billboard charts. In a twist of the classic 'interference' time travel story, Mozart emigrates from his own time with neither a backward glance nor a Requiem Mass. The music of that other Mozart, presumably, still exists in the time to which he travels, but it will never be written in the time that he leaves.

Silverberg deals with a similar theme in "Gianni" (1981). The eighteenth-century composer Pergolesi is 'time-scoped' from the year 1736, just 18 days before his death – thus having written all the music that he was ever to write – and transported to 2008. He is brought rapidly up to date on the evolution of music since his time and, eschewing classical music altogether, joins an 'overload' band. Accused of turning his back on 'serious' music, he says, 'I starved to death composing that music... I renounce nothing. I merely transform.' Unlike Sterling's Mozart, however, he doesn't cheat death: he dies of a drug overdose. 'Self-destructive is as self-destructive does, and a change of scenery doesn't alter the case'. Interestingly, this story predates 'Mozart in Mirrorshades'.

The two pieces, taken together, give alternate versions of a classic time-travel dilemma: can the past – or an individual's fate – be changed? Both stories also pose the question of whether a historical personage is rooted in their own time and culture. You can take a man out of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but can you take the 18<sup>th</sup> century out of the man?

'A Work of Art' by James Blish (1956: coll. *The Best Science Fiction Stories of James Blish*, 1973) – who was also a composer, and was working on a study of Strauss' operas – recreates Richard Strauss in the year 2161. Strauss (composer of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*) has been dead for 212 years. He has been resurrected to write an opera, and finds the music flowing as he remembers it doing in his previous life. There is wild applause at the opera's premiere: but it isn't for the music. Barkun Kris, the mind sculptor, has not resurrected Strauss after all. Instead, he has recreated the composer's personality in the mind of Jerom Busch, a man with no musical talent at all. 'Strauss', however, knows enough to recognise – unlike the audience – that the music he's written is unoriginal and uninspired. 'He need not tell Dr. Kris that the 'Strauss' he had created was as empty of genius as a hollow gourd. The joke would always be on the sculptor, who was incapable of hearing the hollowness of the music.' Blish illustrates the uniqueness of genius and the nature of art: the Frankenstein-like scientist cannot recreate Strauss' creativity, for it is not amenable to scientific law. Dr. Kris doesn't recognise the subjective worth of what he has created, and is only interested in the objective, scientific results.

Sterling, Silverberg and Blish all focus upon composers, almost to the exclusion of the music they composed. Sterling's Mozart hasn't written the music for which Mozart is famous. Blish's Strauss, an empty husk of the original, produces empty music. Pergolesi, in the Silverberg story, ends up performing music quite different to that for which he is known, although the narrator constantly reminds him of the glory of his famous *Stabat Mater*.

In *Dirk Cently's Holistic Detective Agency* (1987), Douglas Adams turns the situation on its head: what about a world in which a composer and his music don't exist? Richard MacDuff programs computers, trying to find the formula that will decode the music that he believes is inherent in naturally-occurring number sequences, such as those derived from the flight of swallows. He finds himself aboard an alien spaceship, listening to the 'music of life itself', the sounds of Earth recorded and transformed by the ship's computers. One tune stays in his mind, and he is most disconcerted to hear it again back on Earth. 'Who wrote it?' he asks. "Bach." Richard's regard over Bach: until this moment, he has been living in a world in which Bach's music did not exist. Only by the intervention of Reg, a slightly mad professor with a time machine, has the 'tiniest scrap' of the music he heard on the spaceship been saved – and attributed to a historical figure who had never written any music of his own.

When the reader must supply contextual information to understand a story, the point may be lost. An example is Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's masterful, if obscure, 'The Fellini Beggar' (1975: coll. *Cautionary Tales*, 1978). A reporter visits a former actor – now a beggar – who lives alone near the ruins of the Vatican with a vast collection of opera

scores. His payment for playing a harrowing, life-threatening film role was Puccini's own score of *Turandot* (1926), which the composer was working on when he died. The score for which the beggar almost died contains Puccini's version of the last scene of the opera, which is now lost. Yarbro suggests that the composer's ending was quite different to the happy resolution supplied by his musical executor: thus, the beggar possesses the only true version – an important artistic relic, presently lost but perhaps to be recovered. The reporter – echoing, I suspect, most readers – fails to appreciate the significance of this: 'You could have gone to the library, or bought it!'

That tale ultimately stands, or falls, on the reader's comprehension of the middle. More accessible is Yarbro's 'Un Bel Di' (1973: coll. *Cautionary Tales*, 1978), which translates the plot of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904) to another planet. This Butterfly is an asexual alien who is assigned to a brutal diplomat for his pleasure: as in the opera, he returns to his home, leaving Butterfly determined to wait for the 'fine day' on which he will return. This story doesn't require the reader to be familiar with the opera's plot: it supplies a substantially different setting for a classic tragedy, which is effective in itself rather than as a product of a particular cultural context. The tale is tragic even if the reader doesn't recognise its source.

Julian May uses operatic themes in several of her novels, referring both to music and to plot. In *Jack the Bodiless* (1991) she explores some of the ways in which the performance of music might change in the future. The novel features a 'metapsychically operant' colouratura soprano, Teresa Kendall: 'the disparagers of her legend like to hint that the voice's effect was a mere psychocreative illusion, a mesmerising of the audience by the mindpower of the singer', though her recordings prove otherwise. Snowbound in a log cabin, Teresa performs Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Snow Maiden* (1882), complete with psychically-created visual and emotional projections that bring the music, and the scenes, to life.

Anne McCaffrey, a former opera singer and producer, is also aware of the possibilities of the human voice. Helda, in *The Ship Who Sang* (1969), is a cyborg, grafted into a spaceship which becomes an extension of her senses. Given this technology she finds herself able to sing – not just in the traditionally female soprano and alto ranges, but also tenor and bass. Although she can never perform on a stage, her magnificent voice transcends the limitations of the human body. Her voice later becomes a weapon: with superhuman vocal control, she drives another ship-person to madness and death.

The alteration of the human body opens up a potential multitude of new musical skills. Lois McMaster Bujold's quaddies – humans genetically engineered to live in freefall, with four equally dextrous 'hands' – can play a 'double dulcimer' ('Labyrinth': coll. *Borders of Infinity*, 1989). *The Einstein Intersection* (Samuel Delany, 1969) introduces a mutant who plays a twenty-hole flute with both hands and both feet. Aliens, of course – not being limited to human physiology – may play a variety of improbable instruments, requiring multiple limbs or mouths.

Conversely, there may be a return to old techniques, albeit by different methods. For over two hundred years, the castrato voice – that of a male castrated at puberty to preserve his voice – was regarded as the height of vocal achievement. This practice has fallen into disfavour for moral and ethical reasons. In *The Alteration* (1976), Kingsley Amis posits a parallel twentieth century in which the Reformation, and associated social reforms, never happened: castration is still performed on promising boy sopranos, such as the protagonist Hubert Anvil.

Orson Scott Card – himself a singer – also reinvents the castrati. *Songmaster* (1980) tells the story of one such figure. Ansett is raised in the Songhouse, where he is 'castrated' by means of drugs and hormones – thus deprived, unlike the original castrati, of the possibility of any sexual relationship. Ansett's voice is fantastically affecting: it can induce ecstasy or self-destruction in his listeners. The power of that voice almost destroys the singer: finally, he is reduced to the role of a servant, and socially silenced lest his songs affect others.

Music can be dangerous, both to the individual (as with Ansett and Helda) and to society. Lloyd Biggle Jr, a composer and musicologist at the University of Michigan, has dealt with the social power of music in several works. 'The Tunemith' (1957: coll. *The*

You can take a man out of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but can you take the 18<sup>th</sup> century out of the man?

*Metallic Muse*, 1972) is set in a world dominated by advertising music. Erlin Baque finds ways to play his own compositions, which do not extol the virtues of any product, and which are much longer than the jingles commissioned by advertisers. The 'new music' is tremendously popular, and inspires others to compose and perform classical music. New concert halls are erected, and opera is broadcast live for the first time in two centuries. Baque hears none of it: through the machinations of an enemy, he is convicted of murder and sentenced to hard labour on Ganymede. Finally paroled, a deaf old man with mangled hands, he takes pride in the cultural renaissance he has wrought.

In *The Still, Small Voice of Trumpets* (Biggle, 1968) a society undergoes a more traditional revolution. Forzon is a Cultural Survey officer who is sent to Kurr, a planet where progress in the harp-like *torril* is greatly prized. Unfortunately the King's punishment for criminals is amputation of an arm. Appalled by social conditions, and angered by the sentencing of a particularly fine musician, Forzon introduces the trumpet – an instrument that can literally be played single-handed. Thus empowered, an army of ex-musicians and other 'criminals' marches on the capital and overthrows the corrupt regime.

The theme of the mutilated musician surfaces again in Orson Scott Card's 'Unaccompanied Sonata' (1979; coll. *Unaccompanied Sonata*, 1981). In a pastoral future, talented composers live in isolation, forbidden to hear any other music lest it taint their own compositions. Christian Haroldsen is given a recording of Bach, and the Watchers realise from his sudden avoidance of anything Bach-like that his music has become 'polluted'. First he is taken away from his instrument: unable to live without music, he plays piano in a bar. The Watcher hunts him down and cuts off his fingers. Christian joins a road construction team, but is heard singing; the Watcher returns and makes him dumb. For many years, he is a Watcher himself: but finally, in retirement, he hears a street corner band singing one of the songs he wrote. Despite his mutilations, his music has survived and will be remembered: genius, Card seems to be arguing, cannot be suppressed or destroyed.

Whether music will be a part of the future, as it is part of past and present, is another question that has been addressed in science fiction. Music can be suppressed – as in Orwell's *1984* (1948), where music is a vehicle for propaganda – and it can be transformed to something that is not recognisably music. J. G. Ballard's story, 'The Sound Sweep' (1960; coll. *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare*, 1963), is set in a world where waste noise is gathered and disposed of by a 'sonovac'. Mangan is the 'sound sweep' who encounters former opera singer Madame Giaconda, now living in an abandoned radio station. Her dearest wish is to sing again, but there is no longer any demand for audible music: instead, the great classics have been rescored for ultrasonic instruments, and give 'an apparently sourceless sensation of harmony, rhythm, cadence and melody, uncontaminated by the noise and vibration of audible music'.

Ballard's inaudible music of the future is reminiscent of the Martian music described by Isaac Asimov in his early story, 'The Secret Sense' (1941; coll. *The Early Asimov*, 1974). Fields, a self-confessed aesthete, is tantalised by the knowledge of Martian music composed from patterns of electrical current – music that no human can perceive. He persuades a Martian to inject him with a preparation which will allow him to 'hear' the music for just five minutes, after which the relevant part of the cortex will be burnt out, never to be reactivated. Fields listens, and is entranced: the electrical music consists of 'pure waves of enjoyment'. Then it fades, and he is 'blind' forever.

Many descriptions of alien music stress its overwhelming effect on human senses. Langdon Jones, in 'The Music Makers' (*New Worlds* #156, November 1965), reiterates the theme of music as a weapon: his Martians, uniting to drive out the colonists, play music that kills any human listener capable of appreciating it:

It was music that he would never have dreamed could exist. It said all there was to say. It was beyond emotion... It spiralled around him, catching his brain and his bowels and his lungs. It made breathing impossible...

Music may play an important part in the process of communicating with, or at least contacting, aliens. In *The Lives of a Cell* (1978), biologist Lewis Thomas suggests that radio broadcasts of classical music might impress any aliens who may be listening. He proposes continual broadcasts of Bach's music as a way of 'bragging' about our own culture: '[Music] may be the best language we have for

explaining what we are like.' (Intriguingly, Thomas also refers to Bach as a 'mutant').

But would the aliens be impressed by earthly music? Would they glean any meaning, or any information about life on Earth, from the sound alone? From Blish's comments on terrestrial programme music, quoted above, it seems more probable that aliens hearing human music, or vice versa, would be incapable of accurately reading any great level of meaning into that music. An incorrect interpretation with shattering consequences is described in *The Sparrow* (Mary Doria Russell, 1997). Beautiful alien music emanating from Proxima Centauri inspires a Jesuit-funded mission to 'God's other children'. Sandoz, and his Jesuit colleagues, believe that the beauty of the alien songs must indicate a form of religious worship: 'All the music that sounds most similar to the extraterrestrial music is sacred in nature.' The harrowing climax of the book leads to the realisation that Jana'ata music is 'not prayer but pornography': the Jesuit mission, and the listeners on Earth, have comprehensively misinterpreted what they've heard in the context of terrestrial culture.

Unlike other art forms, music is dependent on time. A piece of music cannot be appreciated as a whole: it has duration, a beginning and an end. ('Only God,' said Beethoven, 'is outside time.') Music consists of a series of instructions about pitch and duration: as Douglas Adams' protagonist discovers, these instructions can be translated into mathematics, and vice versa. Musical works derived from data series have been used by several writers to convey a sense of 'natural harmony', and of the innate beauty of mathematics. In *Children of God* (1998), the sequel to Russell's *The Sparrow*, interspecies harmony – in both senses – is signalled by music that encodes the genetic structures of three sentient species. Not all of the music thus derived is harmonic: nothing is perfect. What remains when the dissonant passages are removed is 'uncanny' and 'glorious' – unlike any music he had ever heard'. Russell suggests that music is one of the ways in which humans make sense out of chaos.

Fred Hoyle's *The Black Cloud* (1957) describes an alien intelligence inhabiting a cloud of black dust surrounding our sun. Humans eventually succeed in communicating with the cloud, and transmit Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* piano sonata (1818). This elicits a surprising response: the cloud wants the piece to be retransmitted at a faster tempo. Given that there is still controversy about the speed at which this sonata should be played – Beethoven's metronomic markings, which specify beats per minute, are regarded by many pianists as being unplayable – it's implicit that the alien prefers Beethoven's original version to the mundane slower tempo. Perhaps this validates Stockhausen's inclusion of 'clouds' as one of the classes of 'living beings' with which humans can empathise via music.

What is the alien's experience of this music? Is there some 'hidden meaning' in it? Kim Stanley Robinson, though he does not refer to the earlier novel, suggests one possibility. In *The Memory of Whiteness* (1985), he introduces the Orchestra – a complex musical instrument that is believed to have been invented to replace a traditional orchestra. It was devised by the physicist Holywelkin, who was also responsible for the theoretical physics that led to 'whitsuns' – miniature 'suns' powered by whitenities of energy from the Sun itself. Holywelkin, dead for three hundred years at the time of the novel's events, claimed that understanding of the Orchestra would lead to understanding of the nature of reality. The current Master of the Orchestra, Johannes Wright, embarks upon a Grand Tour of the solar system. His growing comprehension of the deterministic universe implied by Holywelkin is mirrored in the music he plays. Wright's 'Piano Concerto with Mechanical Orchestra, by the Universe' consists of 'phrases in the whole range of audible sound... five or six melodic lines that tumbled across each other in a wild, thick contrapuntal mesh, all to the rhythm, the rhythm, the dance...'

While he plays, Wright realises that the music already exists, 'implied in the big bang so long ago': an ultimately deterministic creation. It is not only his own music that encodes this 'secret knowledge': Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* piano sonata is used to illustrate 'the mad energy of the universe'. Wright's final performance evokes the solar system, the whitenities that tie together the myriad inhabited worlds, and the indomitable fragility of the human spirit. In this part of the novel, Robinson uses the music itself as a metaphor for the physics he describes. It's a powerful and remarkably successful example of music as mathematics, as – like science fiction itself – a tool for philosophical exploration.

In all but the darkest of futures, music – the music familiar to us now, as well as the music yet to be written – is a part of human, and often alien, life. Science fiction has explored the roles of music and the musician within society, and suggested an astounding variety of ways in which music might be more than mere entertainment.

Music is one of the least representational arts. When it attempts to mirror the function of a text – as in programme music – it often fails, because there is no direct correlation between verbal and non-verbal imagery. In *The Memory of Whiteness*, music is a move towards representation – and deeper understanding – of objective physical truths. The structured nature of classical music, rather than the spontaneity of popular music, might be the most fitting vehicle for the

transformation of mathematical data. Music may not provide an alternate vocabulary, but it can encode emotional and physical truths in ways that language cannot.

With thanks to K V Bailey for Stockhausen, Mark Plummer for Real Books, and Claire Brialey for clarity.

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20 YEARS AGO THIS MARCH THE LITTLE KNOWN SF WRITER RICHARD C. MEREDITH DIED. HE WAS IN HIS EARLY FORTIES AND HAD PUBLISHED HIS FIRST NOVEL, *THE SKY FILLED WITH SHIPS* [1969] JUST A DECADE BEFORE. HE PUBLISHED TWO MORE NOVELS, *WE ALL DIED AT BREAKAWAY STATION* [1969] AND *RUN, COME SEE JERUSALEM!* [1976], BEFORE HIS MAGNUM OPUS, *THE TIMELINER TRILOGY*.

## A Man Out of Time: *The Timeliner Trilogy* by Richard C. Meredith – A Retrospective by Gary S. Dalkin

The three books which comprise *The Timeliner Trilogy* by Richard C. Meredith, 'At the Narrow Passage', 'No Brother, No Friend', and 'Vestiges of Time', were originally published in America in, respectively, 1973, 1976 and 1978. There were no equivalent British editions, and the books have only been published once in the UK, in 1987 as a revised single-volume in the Venture SF/Arrow Books imprint.

*The Timeliner Trilogy* takes the form of a first person narrative by one Eric Mathers, a mercenary officer in the pay of the Kriths, beings who are naturally able to move between parallel worlds, or 'Timelines'. The Kriths, employing human agents, are working behind the scenes on hundreds of parallel Earths to manipulate the course of history, so that as many Timelines as possible will be sufficiently technologically advanced to meet a threat foreseen in the mid-distant future. The Krith's originate far to the 'temporal east' of our earth, but the threat from the future is the same in all the Timelines, and so human and Krith interests coincide. At least, this is what Mathers believes when we first meet him.

In 'At the Narrow Passage' Mathers, taking the role of a British army officer, is involved in a Krith plot to kidnap a German Count in a Timeline which is fighting an equivalent of The Great War. There are, though, significant differences. In this Timeline's trenches it is 1971, there has been no American independence, George X is on the throne and Europe is dominated by the Holy Roman Empire. The Great War of our history did not happen and the Old Order did not collapse.

The kidnapping goes wrong, largely due to the intervention of a second, previously unsuspected, faction which also has the ability to cross Timelines. Mathers finds himself a prisoner in an underground rebel city in the equivalent of Florida, where he is confronted with the possibility that the Kriths are not what they claim, their intentions less than benign. A labyrinthine war is being fought across the Timelines by Kriths, Humans and Paratimers, and the stakes are much higher than Mathers had thought.

The first two-thirds of 'No Brother, No Friend' adds little to the overall story, consisting of formulaic chase-capture-escape sequences interspersed with military machinations in a German-Gothic America. The volume climaxes with a re-complication of the plot through a series of dramatic revelations on the Kriths' home Timeline. It is, though, the final volume, 'Vestiges of Time', which really makes the sequence rewarding.

Meredith shifts the narrative to a caste-dominated America colonised by Asians. Here starships are a reality and the elite live in decadent luxury, while revolution breeds below the slums of Varkhosh. Mathers becomes a rebel general, trained to psychically control an army of clones. From this point the sheer verve and ingenuity with which Meredith weaves his sprawling plot together is quite dazzling. An enormously complex tale twists and turns through time and across parallel worlds, then spirals in upon itself. Yet every detail is accounted for, and moments which had previously seemed convenient coincidences slot neatly into place.

In an author's note written in September 1978 Richard C.

Meredith explains how the single volume edition gave him the opportunity to 'eliminate some of the errors, inconsistencies and redundancies that existed in the previous editions.' Indeed, for such a long and complex exercise in storytelling the three books are exceptionally coherent and logical. They are however, even in the revised edition, riddled with redundancies and repetitions. Much of this can be blamed upon the decade of which the books are so firmly a part, for though Meredith's story was clearly imagined as one long narrative, the exigencies of genre publishing in the '70s resulted in the tale being divided over three books. [Such have been the changes in sf publishing that today it would be, in length if not subject, eminently suited to the market.]

The division of the story is somewhat uncomfortable, and it is regrettable

that Meredith did not make more radical revisions, deleting unnecessary flashbacks in the second and third books, and cutting the essentially irrelevant manoeuvrings which dominate the middle book. As with so many trilogies, book two barely advances the plot, and what important material there is could better have been re-worked so as to appear almost directly after the climax of the first book. The excess material was required to bring the central section up to book length for separate publication, but read as part of a single narrative it only serves to delay the plot.

All three books are, in a very 1970's way, exceptionally sexist pulp adventures. Almost every woman is young and beautiful, with breasts straining to escape inadequate clothing. These women are inevitably enthusiastic to be bedded by Mathers, who for his part performs like an inter-dimensional James Bond. Even so, Meredith places female characters in positions of authority, and give them some of the action beyond the bedroom.

However, for all the padding and sexism, *The Timeliner Trilogy* is a unique work of the imagination. Meredith has a vast story to tell, on what eventually becomes a cosmic scale. He ranges across time, space and the dimensions with great skill, and takes the reader to some marvellous and terrible places: KHL-000, home of the Krith Troma gestalt; a single beautiful civilisation spread across many adjacent Timelines, and which may not even exist; the fourth planet of the star Pollux, the storm-wracked water world home of genetically-engineered colonists; and the Albigensian Timelines, devastated by a terrible war which may yet consume all humanity. At its best it is marvellous widescreen science fiction.

Richard C. Meredith did not live to see the publication of the revised trilogy. I suspect that had he survived he would have matured into a major writer of contemporary sf. Certainly, his imagination was so bold he could not have remained long in obscurity. As it is we will never read the other books he might have written, but I think he would have been pleased to imagine that worlds away other Richard C. Merediths might continue to live and write. Perhaps Timelines away he has just been nominated for the BSFA award. He had the potential to be the best.

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# First Impressions

## Book Reviews edited by Paul Kincaid

**Note:** All novels marked: [ ] are eligible for the 1999 BSFA Award for Best Novel.

All collections and anthologies marked: / contain stories that are eligible for the 1999 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction.

**Bob Eggleton, text by Nigel Suckling – *The Book of Sea Monsters***

Paper Tiger, 1998, 112pp, £14.99 ISBN 1 85585 463 5

**Wayne G. Hammong & Christina Scull – *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist & Illustrator***

HarperCollins, 1998, 208pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 261 10360 1

**Ron Miller, text by Pamela Sargent – *Firebrands***

Paper Tiger, 1998, 112pp, £14.99 ISBN 1 85585 462 7

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

These are three very different large-format 'coffee-table' paperbacks, in which the illustrations are presented as being more important than the text.

The first is a scholarly presentation of Tolkien's art, whose purpose is 'to show, as widely as possible, the unsuspected range of Tolkien's art, and to relate it both to his life and to the writings for which he is most renowned'. Works are reproduced as close as possible to their original size (none are enlarged), almost all coloured originals are reproduced in colour, and previously unpublished works are preferred to works which have already been reproduced (in *Pictures By J.R.R. Tolkien*), though these are cited in the text where appropriate. The result is a beautiful and informative book, covering Tolkien's varied drawing, painting and calligraphy. Works previously seen in isolation (e.g. as calendar art) are given a background and context, and many previously unpublished works are reproduced. The selection demonstrates Tolkien's wide-ranging artistic concerns and interests, and illustrates both the strengths and the limitations of his work – a stimulating and thoroughly enjoyable book.

*The Book Of Sea Monsters* opens by quoting several sober accounts of 'sea-monster' sightings (by Hans Egede, HMS *Daedalus* (a British naval vessel), and Meade-Waldo and Nicoll (Fellows of the Zoological Society)). It then covers sea-monsters in ancient myth and legend, sea serpents, sea monsters other than serpents, and lake monsters. But despite the scholarly-feeling beginning, and despite

being an entertaining read, this is an irritatingly incomplete book, mixing fact, fiction, rumour and legend in an indiscriminate way. There is no index. Despite the fact that the book is presented as artwork-with-text featuring 'original paintings, created by using pencils, watercolours, acrylic paints and even black marker pens rather than computer images', it feels to me like text-with-artwork. Recommended only for sea-monster and Eggleton fans.

And finally, *Firebrands*. The text by Pamela Sargent is a catalogue of significant major female roles in science fiction from pre-1930 to the 1990s, taken at a brisk gallop, and with some comment on women's changing roles in the Real World over this period. Not all the 'heroines' mentioned are illustrated, nor are all the illustrations discussed in the text (though each picture does cite the work it illustrates, with author and publication date). Most (though not all) of the illustrations are of nude or near-nude adolescents. Several very well-known characters are illustrated in inappropriate costume (e.g. Eowyn is in plate half-armor, Wyoming Knott is in a faintly Soviet-looking prison-uniform coverall (and in a Lunar surface tunnel with a picturesque view), and the Lady Jessica wears a slate-blue gown which seems to have been designed by the Court Topologist). Some of the drawing is less than excellent – occasionally it is very poor. I fear that this book exists primarily as a 'Page 3' substitute...

**The Art of The X-Files – Introduction by William Gibson**

Voyager, 1998, 176pp, £19.99 ISBN 0 00 253886 6

Reviewed by John D. Owen

The history of the spin-off media book just took another twist. Previous media spin-offs bearing 'The Art of...' in their titles can be assumed to contain material from the films or TV series in the form of still shots, production artwork, model work, etc. Not so in this case. The 'art' in question here is artwork 'inspired by *The X-Files*', not taken from the series (though the book is also sprinkled with stills from the programmes too). Be warned that the cover does not make this distinction clear at all – if the book is sold shrink wrapped anywhere, *X-Files aficionados* who buy unwarily could be very disappointed.

The art within this volume ranges from cartoons, conventional art and video images, visiting collage and manipulated digital photos along the way. Professing to capture the atmosphere of the series, it is often art with a mysterious bent, murky, ill-formed and elusive. Pretty, it's not. Most of the time, it's boring, too – images appear out of a dark page, blurry and indecipherable, often without so much as a title to illuminate. Sometimes the words of the artist are supplied to explain the view they are taking. More often, the words bear little relation to the image. The layout frequently does the artists



no favours, enmeshing an image within a dark page bleeding into a blurry still from the show. I often had to stop to decipher where still finished and image began, and wondered whether my impression of the art wouldn't have been improved had it been presented more clearly, isolated from the 'noise' of the layout. But then, I guess that's *The X-Files* all over – a great deal of obfuscation overlying repetitive plots and imagery.

The best thing about the book is the introduction by William Gibson. Gibson neatly captures what it is about *The X-Files* that makes it such an interesting programme. He recognises it both as 'a seamless pop artefact', as well as 'a disturbing and viscerally satisfying expression of where we've come from, where we are today, and all those places where we simultaneously yearn and dread to go', and as a symbol of post-modernity. If all the artists had as tight a grasp on the nature of the series as Mr Gibson, then maybe this book would have had some real worth beyond that of his words. As it stands, this artefact offers little other than a series of rather incomprehensible images only loosely connecting into the series. Easily avoidable, at this or any price.

**Clive Barker – Galilee**

HarperCollins, 1998, 582pp, £17.99 ISBN 0 00 223560 9

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

*Galilee* is a bit different to the last Clive Barker book that I read. For a start it's not graphic, gory horror (I think I last read one of the *Books of Blood*). It's also a little bit slow: a lot happens in small, cinematic flashes. There are lots of word pictures to snare the mind's eye and enigmatic snatches of happenings which the author assures you that he'll come back to later (he does). And at first this is all a bit frustrating. Then gradually bits and pieces are revealed about the characters and their hopes and fears and predicaments, and you find that you do want to read more and find out just what is going on, and you're hooked...

This is quite a big book. The plot, if it can be said to have a plot, revolves around the fortunes of the Barbarossa family, descended from the two original Gods. They have lived deep in the swamplands in North Carolina ever since their house was built by Thomas Jefferson. They are all old...

Actually, I suppose that the plot really revolves around the fortunes of the Geary family, descended from Civil War survivors who were befriended by the Galilee of the title, first son of the Barbarossa clan. They are the new American aristocracy...

But really, the story is about both of these things together, and how they are perceived by the viewpoint character, Edmund Maddox

Barbarossa (the author mentioned in the first paragraph above), as he gathers them all together into the history that he is writing, about the war between the Gearys and the Barbarossas. This war is poised on the edge of escalating from cold hostility into open conflict...

But these bald descriptions don't convey the depths of this novel. Edmund's family and their foes, the Gearys, and all of the outsiders touched by their hands, weave in and out and through one another, always enigmatic, always stylised, mostly people that we can care about. As important to the story as the people are the places, and Barker has invented plenty of those. The house, *L'Enfant des la Carolinas*, decaying in its swamp; the glittering New York penthouses of the Gearys; the hand-built beach-house on Kauai. All of these elements are blended together to create one exotic whole. If I was going to complain, it would be that there isn't enough story. This is the first in a two-part series; it contains a certain amount of scene setting and attacks its subject in a leisurely manner, which almost doesn't work. Luckily Barker has skill enough to leave unsaid early on what you want to read later, but says enough that you feel that it would be worthwhile persevering with the novel, and probably even its sequel when that appears.

**Deborah Benstead & Storm Constantine – The Inward Revolution**

Warner Books, 1998, 370pp, £7.99 ISBN 0 7515 1939 1

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

As we reach the much-anticipated Millennium, the publishing industry seems hell-bent on exploiting our fears for the coming century with an avalanche of self-help and personal development books, sufficient to address our slightest dissatisfaction with the world around us. It would be convenient to dismiss *The Inward Revolution* by Deborah Benstead and Storm Constantine (the latter better known to us as a writer of science fiction and fantasy) as just one more title in that massive outpouring but that would be to do it a disservice. Personal development books come in many flavours; in some, the author is obviously looking to do nothing more than put a fashionable spin on familiar and well-worn philosophies, slap down an off-the-peg solution to everything, and make a few bucks into the bargain. Some writers,

however, do take their responsibilities towards the reader much more seriously, making a genuine effort to put together something which may help those who want to create a change in their lives but are uncertain of how to begin and *The Inward Revolution* clearly falls into this latter category. Benstead and Constantine intend their book to help its readers gain freedom from the wide range of fears, anxieties and emotional problems which beset most of us and to achieve a measure of satisfaction in their lives, while recognising that there can be no ultimate perfection; we're all still ordinary people, leading ordinary lives, and this is an attitude which sets this book apart from so many of its fellows. How far we are likely to follow them down their chosen path is a matter for individual taste. Those who don't believe that we

have a life force inherent in us all may find this book, influenced by the teachings of William Reich, not to their liking, while others will find that Benstead and Constantine's perception of our need to awake

the primal force within ourselves chimes with their own feeling. For those, this book may represent a chance to create positive changes in their lives.

### Chaz Brenchley – *Tower of the King's Daughter*

Orbit, 1998, 600pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85723 692 0

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Subtitled 'The first book of Outremer', this book has the usual faults of series-openers: i.e. it stops just as things start to get interesting. It's set in a historical-fantasy version of the Near East, with a vaguely-Crusades background. The various regions of Outremer have been (and are) pacified, patrolled and purified of heresy by a society of noble warrior-monks, the Knights Ransomers, and at least one order of peasant warrior-monks, to which Our Hero, Marron, belongs. Did I say all the regions of Outremer? Sorry, I meant all but Surayon, the Folded Land, fabled realm of heresy and enchantment, which appears to have a teleport spell set on its borders so that nobody can get in...

So we've got Marron, Boy Hero, a wee bit upset as the story starts, after participating in a small anti-heretic atrocity. And there's Sieur Anton, the Knight Ransomer with a Dark Secret in his Past who takes Marron on as squire. We have Julianne, noble-born daughter of the King's Shadow, on her way to finalise her arranged marriage, and with her we have the mysterious Elisande, a girl who travels dressed as a boy and is clearly able to take care of herself in the desert. These four main characters meet, interact, converse inconclusively with a djinn,

fall in love, get nastily (but not fatally) wounded, uncover some unpleasant and surprising facts about Outremer's past and present government, and find out the Big Nasty Secret of exactly what is kept so well-hidden in the supposedly impenetrable Tower of the King's Daughter.

This is a well-written (though verbose) piece of fantasy. I have one specific criticism (of motivation): Julianne meets and instantly falls head-over-heels for her intended husband; she then decides that for reasons of plot-extension she can't bear either to remain with him or to tell him where she's going and why. I hate it when characters do pointlessly stupid things like this), and one more general complaint (high body-count, lots of blood-n-guts; nothing significant ever happens without somebody getting horribly killed. I'm suspicious of a writer who clearly finds it much easier to produce a graphic description of a crucifixion than of an act of consenting adult sex).

But on the whole, I think this is a value-for-money read. It doesn't pretend to be anything it isn't, and it does deliver what its opening pages clearly promise – the first instalment of a well-crafted fantasy.

### Steven Brust – *Dragon*

TOR Books, 1998, 288pp, \$22.95 ISBN 0 312 86692 5

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Stephen Brust is a name that's new to me, although he has already written many novels, of which this is the ninth in his fantasy series featuring Vlad Taltos. Vlad is a human who makes a living as an assassin in the empire of the near-immortal Dragaeras, accompanied by his trusty companion, telepathic winged-lizard Lioish. This latest book is the till-now-untold story for which Taltos fans have been impatiently waiting: the story of Vlad at the cataclysmic Battle of Barit's Tomb.

A reviewer in the *Philadelphia Enquirer* is quoted as saying that Brust brings 'a hipster charm' to fantasy. He certainly does. Taltos is a hip street-smart cool dude living in a 1990s America mapped on to a fantasy world, where psychic communication stands in for the mobile phone, and teleporting for the executive jet. Just before this book, I read George R. R. Martin's *A Clash of Kings*, a book which takes you and sticks you into the muck, disease, temperature extremes and unpredictable viciousness of a mediaeval world. You won't find that here, but maybe Brust fans don't want to be that unsettled.

Anyway, to the story of *Dragon*. Vlad Taltos is hired by the Dragonlord Morrolan as a 'security consultant' to look after a hoard of ancient weapons of immense power left behind by the Morganti. Despite Vlad's efforts, one of these Morganti weapons – a mediaeval 'rogue nuke' – is stolen by a rival Dragonlord, Fomia. Morrolan immediately raises an army to fight Fomia, who of course raises his own. Vlad is sent along disguised as a common soldier in Morrolan's

army (fully-integrated, as all mediaeval armies of course were) with the secret objective of making sure that, whatever the outcome, Fomia doesn't keep the Morganti weapon. The two armies meet, as you can guess, on the plain below Barit's Tomb for their decisive battle.

Since this is an apocryphal episode from some years before the point where the Taltos series now stands, we obviously know Vlad survives. What made the book difficult for me was that Brust has a very irritating habit of jumping forward and backwards in time. Once we settle into the book there are two strands proceeding alternatively – the 'now' of Vlad in the army preceding the battle and a short flash-forward to Vlad facing Fomia at its climax, which eventually becomes the 'now' itself. These two threads are complicated by occasional flash-forwards to further in the future with Vlad discussing events with Morollan's general, Sethra, plus interludes (maybe further into the future still) of Vlad dallying with the beautiful Cawti. I was too frequently hopelessly confused!

How do I sum this up? If you like hipster fantasy novels that are really set in today's world, you may like it. Vlad's reptilian pal Lioish provides comic interest and gets in some good jokes. Brust could go the whole hog and head off into Terry Pratchett territory, but for me *Dragon* falls down into the gap between serious and comic fantasy. And the chronology did my head in!

### Lois McMaster Bujold – *Komarr*

Earthlight, 1998, 314pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 671 01783 7

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Just after reading *Komarr*, I had – as they say – occasion to re-read an old Reference Library column by P. Schuyler Miller ('In Defense of Stories': *Analog*, August 1967). This fortuitous juxtaposition prompted me to think about sf storytelling in general – and the 'Miles Vorkosigan' series in particular.

Miller's keynote review considered *Of Other Worlds*, by C.S. Lewis. In a perceptive essay ('On Stories'), Lewis wrote that there are two totally different ways of enjoying books read 'just' for the story. Sometimes the same book may be read both ways; sometimes the writer aims at one or the other market. One type of reader seeks mere excitement; suspense, danger, razzle-dazzle, intricate plot and counterplot, naughty bits, all-powerful villains to be overcome. Ian Fleming's *Dr. No* is a classic example. The other reader wants the creation of a weird and wonderful world that can be explored at his/her leisure. Burroughs (Edgar Rice and William S.), Robert E. Howard, Tolkien – the usual good old stuff.

Both Lewis and Miller advocated a synergistic meeting of the

ways. Lewis had already practised what he preached (or vice versa?) in *Out of the Silent Planet*, if not its comparatively turgid sequels. Miller went on to cite some 'real' sf examples: 'A Kind of Artistry' (from *Who Can Replace a Man?*), *The Sword of Rhianon*, *Needle and The Genetic General*. That very *Analog* contained Poul Anderson's 'Starjory' – hard science-fiction at full speed ahead.

Bujold lies in direct literary descent from those 19<sup>th</sup> century authors who served up strong plots as a matter of course. The early sf magazines also told stories; the better ones told them very well indeed, vogue vignettes and meaningless conversation pieces came along much later. But the born storyteller who can combine drama with style, exotic background and wee thinky bits will win every reward going. 'Bujold's popularity is easy to understand' (*Asimov's*)

*Komarr* is the latest good case in point. Our hero has just turned thirty years of age. Emperor Gregory dispatches Miles to Komarr to investigate a space accident, where he finds old politics and new technology make a deadly mix' (from *Miles Vorkosigan/Naismith: His*

*Universe and Times*). More specifically, Emperor Gregory is about to marry a Komorran Princess, and he wants no inter-stellar argy-bargy. The 'space accident' involved an orbital solar mirror that is vital to Komarr's long-term terraforming project.

Although Bujold gives all due attention to Barrayaran political theory and hard sf stuff like post-cryonic seizure disorder, she doesn't skimp on the mood-lightening comic relief. I enjoyed this little reminder about Miles's part in a mass prisoner-of-war camp breakout (see *Borders of Infinity*): 'I understand from Vorkosigan that the Marilacans are engaged in producing a holovid drama on the subject.

The Greatest Escape, or something like that, they're calling it...'

As evidence, however, that even Hera nods: 'She swallowed startlement'. One cannot choose but wonder: what does startlement taste like?

Also, the wordage could have been harmlessly cut by at least one-third. But I'll make no more critical bones about it. *Komarr* is an excellent novel in which things happen, with the tension of high adventure heightened by life-or-death problems that must be solved under the temporal cosh.

## Richard Calder – *Frenzetta*

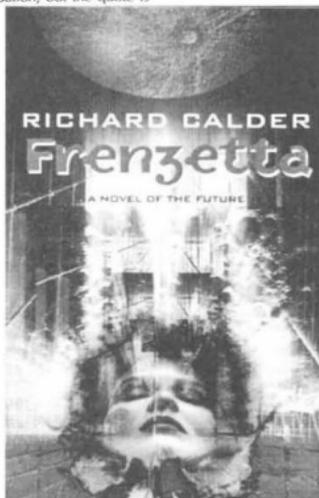
Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Orbit, 1998, 268pp, £5.99 ISBN 1 85723 683 1

'Explodes in your face like a fistful of fireworks' says Paul J. McAuley on the cover. This hardly seems a recommendation, but the quote is present because *Frenzetta* reads like a remix of the bio-future of *Fairyland* flavoured with Moorcock's *Dancers At the End of Time 60's* decadence, decorated with Ballardian shattered landscapes and encrusted with *Book of the New Sun* ennui.

It is to this very considerable extent – and I could cite further resonances, such as the work of Mark E. Geston – that Calder fuses familiar elements into a very strange dying earth narrative of some two millennia hence. The old technology no longer works, but the world has been remade in the image of myth. Atlantis and Cathay are again fading powers, and here we find Duane, once an Atlantean, now a reanimated corpse able most conveniently to astrally project himself, a rebel undead soldier seeking a sanctuary with his mutant rat-lover, Princess Frenzetta. In four sections, which read almost like linked novellas, Calder takes us on a global tour of bio-perversity: the towers of Atlantis are falling into the sea, Venice is still haunted, Cathay awaits the final firestorm, and even the moon is a drying world, having once been irrigated.

A little way off, in the gentle swell of a crater, was a seaside villa, it's walls crumbling, it's garden baked, frozen, destroyed, the promenade ran past the front door overlooking but a sea of dust, the machines that had pumped water across the barren plains, kept out the killer vacuum



and powered the artificial gravity well, no longer functional.

For anyone who has enjoyed the entropic romances of Ballard and Bradbury there is an appeal here. Unfortunately, while interspersed with moments of stark poetry, *Frenzetta* equally often nauseates. Calder is unable to resist extremes of fashionably self-disgusted sordidness, and this is a book rich with the scent of rotting fruit. Duane breakfasts on human brains, scooping them out of the skull as if it were an egg-cup. Climactically, having been impotent for most of the book, Duane is able to have sex: 'I attacked her intact, pricking and perforating her hymen with the monstrous lead-filled hose pipe that sallied forth from the folds of my coat.'

Much of the prose which isn't merely risible is over-written to the extent that reading it is a chore. The publisher's blurb claims that this is cutting edge sf, but that would involve the development of new science-fictional ideas. This is a worn patchwork of other people's fictions, only on the edge in that it is rendered with about as much obscenity as current mores will allow.

It might be argued that the whole confused mosaic of this future, in which even the hero is a dead man, is a parable for our spiritually dead, confused, chaotic present. But if so Calder hasn't the courage this idea might suggest, for in the end he evades any real consequences, fleeing into a hackneyed hippie mysticism which is tired, lazy and thirty years past its sell by date.

## C.J. Cherryh – *Fortress of Eagles* (1)

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Voyager, 1999, 335pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648370 4

I enjoyed this book, and found it unsatisfying at the same time.

It's the sequel to *Fortress in the Eye of Time*, and continues the story of Tristen, brought into being by the mage Mauryl Gestaurien to defend his world from evil, and Cefwyn, who has recently succeeded his father as king. This book begins very soon after the end of the previous one, and develops the political situation, in particular how Cefwyn will establish himself as ruler and manage his own quarrelling barons as well as insurrection in the neighbouring country, whose Regent he is about to marry. The whole novel covers the relatively short space of time leading up to the wedding.

One of the strengths of the book, and one of the problems, is the detail Cherryh brings to these events. Other fantasy writers, who shall be nameless, might well have whisked the whole lot into a prologue. Cherryh develops her settings, the political complexity of the background, and the relationships between factions, religions and different types of wizardry, so that we know them very well, but this gives the book a very slow pace. If as a reader you like a lot of fast action, then this probably isn't for you.

In contrast, at the very end of the book, I felt that a bit more development would have helped, in the final revelations about what has been happening. I wasn't entirely clear who had betrayed whom,

or why, and what would happen to them now.

There is a strong sense all through the book that the smaller actions are more significant; Cherryh embodies this idea in the character of Tristen, newly created and still naïf and unsure of himself. He examines his world, his companions and himself in exhaustive detail because this is the only way he can make sense of them, and there's a powerful contrast between this, and the way he has been created for a large design. It's interesting that he is able to intervene at the book's climax, to avert a civil war and save Cefwyn's marriage, ultimately because of his concern for his servant's horse. It's this detail, and care for small things, that makes the fantasy setting particularly dense and realistic. This goes along with some vivid descriptive writing, of a leaf, snow over the city, pigeons on a window ledge, the kind of concrete and specific creation which is often missing in genre fantasy.

Cherryh starts off by summarising the history of her world, and the events of the previous volume, and so it's easy for a new reader to pick up the threads. It's clear that there will be more, and to some extent this is a bridging volume. This is the reason why I feel unsatisfied; I'm not sure *Fortress of Eagles* is completely successful by itself. But it has made me look forward to the next volume, and finding out more about her characters and her world.

**Simon Clark – *The Fall***

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

Hodder &amp; Stoughton, 1998, 337pp, £17.99 ISBN 0 340 69610 9

In *The Fall*, Simon Clark has taken the sf standard of time travel and rewritten it in the horror mode. It's not bad, but it could have been a lot better ...

Sam Baker, an American TV Director, and his Welsh assistant are scouting the location of an upcoming live rock concert in rural Yorkshire – a field which happens to contain the remains of a Roman amphitheatre. They take the opportunity to attend a lecture by a local historian in the amphitheatre along with a coach load of tourists and other visitors. The lecture is suddenly interrupted by the impact of a lightning bolt. After some confusion they start to realise that the amphitheatre and the surrounding area have been thrown back a day in time. A few hours later this happens again, just the start of a number of random trips back into the past until they are marooned in the Victorian age. By this time Sam and his fellow time travellers realise there are other, more independent, time travellers – including the mystic hermit Roger Rolle (a real historical character) and the violent tribe of 'Blue Beards'. Sam and the rest settle down to a comfortable new life in Victorian England until they are informed by Rolle that the Blue Beards are planning a major breakthrough into the Victorian age which only they can stop.

*The Fall* is not a bad book but it could have been a great book if it had been better edited. At its heart is has a good idea and Clark, for the most part, keeps it moving, providing enough tension to keep you reading but the end result is unsatisfactory and some of that tension

remains unresolved by the end. For instance, the strange dreams Sam has on each time trip – which seem prophetic and relate to a lightning strike he survived in his youth – are not explained and end up looking suspiciously like padding. We also have interesting subplots which seemed to be leading to a great resolution with the main plot but Clark just lets them fade out. He creates some great characters but does not use them to the best effect.

Most of the horror components come from the chaos resulting from the initial confusion of Sam and the rest. Also living things from the past, both animal and vegetable, start to merge with some of the time travellers with lethal or horrifically non-lethal effect. This Clark handles well. Unfortunately the other horror component, the violent 'Blue Beards', are not handled so well. They are entirely faceless: we do not know where or when they come from and their motivations are never explained or examined.

Clark also has some trouble getting his complicated story over to the reader and has to resort to Rolle popping up when it suits the plot to lecture the other characters on the intricacies of time travel, predict when and where the 'Blue Beards' will appear and explain other vital plot points.

This is the first book by Simon Clark I have read and while I'm not exactly rushing out to buy up his back catalogue it has not put me off entirely.

**Patrick Curry – *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien: Myth and Modernity***

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

HarperCollins, 1998, 206pp, £7.99 ISBN 0 261 10371 7

This is a critical work which contains four chapters between the Introduction and Conclusion (in 160 pages) and follows them with 30 pages of notes and references, developed from a talk written by Curry for the 1992 Centenary Conference. Each chapter develops a theme, identified in its title: 'The Shire: Culture, Society and Politics'; 'Middle-earth: Nature and Ecology'; 'The Sea: Spirituality and Ethics'; and finally 'Fantasy, Literature and the Mythopoeic Imagination'. What becomes quickly clear is that Curry has not gone to the literary critics, but to sociologists for his critical sources (and he sometimes quotes two, three or even four on one page).

If Middle-Earth were imposed on the map of Europe, The Shire would be somewhere on the Dutch/German border, and Mordor would occupy the Balkans. But the heroes of *The Lord Of The Rings* have a distinct taste for British, specifically English, lifestyles. In one of his letters Tolkien wrote "The Shire" is based on rural England and not any other country in the world' and in another, Hobbiton 'is in fact more or less a Warwickshire village of about the period of the Diamond Jubilee.' Although he constructed the trilogy during World War II he was looking back to the same period as other authors of fantasy such as Kenneth Grahame's *Wind In The Willows*, which suggests that Tolkien was defending Victorianism against modernity. Curry, though, prefers to see Tolkien lining up with contemporary ecologists – the tunnellers who are struggling against motorway building are at one with the Ents.

In order to argue that Tolkien has relevance Curry has to accept Tolkien's statement that he did not write allegory, but then argue that the effects of the devices in Tolkien's world are equivalent to those in this world. This leads him to argue that 'the Ring epitomizes the

strongest economic and political power in Middle-earth, which already threatens to dominate all others in one vast autocratic realm. There is no greater power in the material realm.' He can then go on, quite reasonably, to identify the devastation of our industrial areas with those controlled by Sauron.

A question that must always niggle in the minds of readers is: what is the motive power in Sauron's munitions works? Despite lots of smoke and steam and talk of wheels, his power is not steam engines, or even massive water-wheels – his energy sources remain unclear. Saruman offers Gandalf 'knowledge, rule, power', something rejected in their everyday lives by the Elves or even by the Hobbits in The Shire. Curry, though, then calls in another source of power, magic, arguing that Tolkien compares magic and enchantment. A figure like Sauron uses magic, something almost scientific in its expected outcome from fixed rituals, while the good opposite is enchantment. But we, as readers, would have to be under an enchantment to accept that magic is a reasonable motive power. Oddly, although Curry can throw in some odd critical sources (Adorno and Horkheimer in this section), he fails to take 'enchantment' as a key-word and refer to the standard work here, Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses Of Enchantment* (a study of fairy stories and their relevance to the real world, written by a psychologist).

At the end of this quilt of a book, made of patches of all the authors he quotes, Curry argues that Tolkien provides a little hope that the world can be reconstructed: 'On the one hand, of course, even Frodo fails the final test. On the other, the Ring was destroyed' (Curry's emphasis). I agree with what he says, but I am not so sure about the way he says it.

**Peter Delacorte – *Time on my Hands***

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

Gollancz, 1998, 399pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 575 06546 X

Gollancz do not publish this under an sf label, but its scenario makes it kin to a host of novels of the time-travelling sub-genre. It is a clever novel – and playful in that it is evocative of fragments of past literature (Wells's *The Time Machine*; D.H. Lawrence's 'Rocking-horse Winner') while depicting its hero, Gabriel Prince, as advancing himself in the Hollywood of 1938 by plagiarising film scripts which existed (only in some future of that Hollywood, but which, in the 1994 from which he had come existed) in his and in the century's past. Gabriel's mission, imposed by Jasper Hudnut, a maverick, idealistic scientist, is to use a machine, originating from the 22nd Century, to travel back in search

of a young B-movie actor, Ronald Reagan, and by any means short of assassination ensure that he will never become a right-wing-manipulated President of the USA. What Gabriel does or does not do, his actions conditioned and complicated by provisional foreknowledge, pursuit by two 22nd Century thugs, and a passionate love affair, occasion sundry dire happenings which he tries to put right by his travelling to other points in time. These tactics the machine tends to sabotage by virtue of its unreliable date-selecting mechanism, and also by switching time lines, something Hudnut has explained as resulting from quanta 'bleeding', or 'oozing', from one track to

another. (How those measures of minimal energy have become science fiction's overworked maids-of-all-work.)

There's a sequence at the end of the movie *The Great St. Trinian's Train Robbery* where the station-master, bewildered by trains travelling and returning on downline/upline/downline, changing tracks and couplings and wrecking timetables, throws up his hands and says, 'I don't believe this is happening.' Gabriel gets to feel that way as different timeline scenarios unfold, but for the reader, who has suspended disbelief, the shifting perspectives and mutating possibilities, personal and political, are matters of suspenseful pleasure. I won't reveal the denouement, but will say, pursuing the railway metaphor, that you never know where a train may come to rest and I'll advise against reading the final pages ('A Note about the Text') until reading the text has finished.

### Kate Elliott – *Prince of Dogs*

Orbit, 1998, 380pp, £16.99 ISBN 1 85723 625 4

### K.J. Parker – *Colours in the Steel*

Orbit, 1998, 503pp, £9.99 ISBN 1 85723 557 6

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Two tomes, one a first novel, and the other the second part in a trilogy.

K. J. Parker is, according to the cover blurb, 'a remarkable new voice in fantasy fiction'. I can't actually comment on that, never having met the man, but his first novel certainly isn't covering any new ground.

Perimadeia is the jewel in the crown and capital city of 'the known world', and the whole story is centred around it. Three cities in one, effectively, its governors have become lax over the centuries because of its famed impregnability – which, of course, as anyone knows, means it's about to fall. The story follows a young plainsman called Temrai who enters the city in order to learn about its defences, and Bardas Loredan, a 'fencer at law', once a soldier in Maxen's Pitchfork – the infamous city army that kept the plainsman in their place for many years before his death in battle. Temrai soon discovers that Perimadeia no longer has a standing army, and sets about seeking ways to bridge the magnificent walls of the city, and also ways to make siege engines like those that protect the city. His own skills as a swordmaker are the perfect cover for his spying activities.

The hapless Bardas Loredan, having finally decided to retire from law, finds himself catapulted to the rank of General and placed in sole charge of the defence of the city when the tribes become restless.

Although this story is not remotely original, it is quite readable and enjoyable. On the plus side, the characters are all well drawn and likeable, and the several different plot threads add enough variety to keep the reader turning the pages. On the down side however, the

The 25 photographs, snaps taken accompanying the narrative, record events and settings at various time junctures. Their significance is discussed in the 'Note', but, significance apart, they add dimensions of immediacy/reality by exhibiting bygone cars, fashions, landscapes etc. A further pleasure, especially for film-history buffs, is the reconstruction of studio life and routines in the Hollywood of the 1930s, complete with characterisations of legendary producers and directors, and of actors, major and minor – Ronald ('Dutch') Reagan being one of the latter. Recommended to all who like a fast-moving story, revel in a romantic and erotic liaison, have pondered over the ironies of chance and (un)predictability, have worried over the ethics of interference, or have thought about the perplexing nature of time – and that must surely include most everyone.

book is overlong and, at times, downright tedious. Parker spends far too much time explaining just how everything is made, and why, and although he obviously knows his stuff, I don't particularly want to. It's quirky and at times fun, but too long and overpriced for this reader.

Kate Elliott on the other hand, follows up *King's Dragon*, her first published novel in Britain, with the second book in the *Crown of Stars* trilogy. *Prince of Dogs* picks up where the story left off in *King's Dragon*, except the Prince, Sanglant, is not actually dead but captured and held in chains by the Eika king, Bloodheart.

This volume continues to follow four main characters: the now adopted Son of Count Lavastine; Liath, still grieving the death of her love, Sanglant; Fifth Brother, the Eika Prince who has returned in disgrace to his own lands following his capture by the enemy, and of course, Sanglant – the Prince of Dogs.

To be honest, *Prince of Dogs* suffers badly from 'middle book syndrome'. There are endless pages of plodding around on the 'kings progress', a sort of endless state tour, with a bunch of petty, squabbling court dandies and a king who has all but lost the will to live following the death of his best loved son. There are, of course, many other plot threads, some of which are intriguing, several though, tedious. The thread of most interest to this reader however, that of Sanglant's imprisonment, is followed so infrequently as to be relegated to a mere bit-part of the whole. Still, there is enough to keep the momentum of the whole going, provided one has time to wallow through all the padding.

### Raymond E. Feist – *Kronador: The Betrayal*

Voyager, 1998, 352pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 00 224694 5

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

*Kronador: The Betrayal* (Book 1 of *The Riftwar Legacy*) is based on the best-selling computer game *Betrayal at Kronador*, published by Dynamix, Inc. Neal Halford, John Cutter and Raymond E. Feist wrote the original story.

You may or may not recall that Feist's first *Riftwar* novel appeared in 1982. *Magician* – and its almost immediate sequels (*Silverthorn* and *A Darkness at Sethanon*) – drew heavily on his role-playing game experience. The rifts between Midkemia and Kelewan... but if you don't already know the deep background, find it out for yourselves.

I decided that rather than attempt to 'novelise' the game, I would take the core story of the game and tell it in novel form... without most of the sub-quests and side-trips, and without a great deal of what makes a game a game (from the Author's Afterword).

This 'core story' takes place nine years after whatever happened at Sethanon. The Nighthawk bloodletting has started again.



Renegade Tsurani gem smugglers are having the Mockers put on them by someone, or something, known only as the Crawler. Thank heaven for little blurbs.

The story begins with some surely unintentional humour. Sergeant Bales to Locklear, squire of the prince of Kronador's court: 'Get 'er nippy up here, squire.' Cue almost any 1950s British chirpy-Cockney flick, featuring Victor Maddem, Albie Bass, or Michael Ripper. Then: 'It's a fair cop, gov. You've got me bang to rights. Slap on the darbies.' (I made that last bit up, à la the Guardian's Simon Hoggart.)

And I'd like to believe that Feist was feeling feisty when he wrote sentences like this one: 'The dwarf's eyes went from one rider to the other as he regarded both with suspicion' (p.224). A *Riftwar* animated film can not be long delayed.

Feist also does a nice line in one-sentence opening paragraphs: 'The fire crackled'; 'The sentry blinked in surprise'; 'The wind howled through the pass' (I know the feeling, squire); 'Drums thundered across the ridge'; 'The Queen stood' (for no nonsense?). Ditto closing lines: 'Locklear's smile faded' (as well it might...)

The action scenes are equally short and to the sword point. For example: 'The struggle lasted mere seconds as Gorath quickly killed his man. Outside Jimmy bested his own and turned his attention to the one Owyn harried' (p.102).

The prisoner's Village map is a cartological marvel anent its Midkemia equivalent. Wales and southern England would seem to have gone through a chrono-synclastic infundibulum. 'Romney' reminded me of Dr Syn (alias the Scarecrow), while 'Cheam' and Tony

Hancock are, of course, synonymous. But 'Hurrah!' for the vivid wrap-around jacket illustration by Geoff Taylor, which fortunately transcends the fool's gold lettering.

When a movie/TV tie-in novelisation is good it can be very, very good: *The Emerald Forest*, for just one example. I've even read the occasional worthy computer-game adaptation. But *Kronkor: The Betrayal* falls far short of the standard set by Alan Dean Foster's *Shadowkeep*™ (Warner Books, 1984, if you're interested).

**Neil Gaiman – Stardust**

Reviewed by Janet Barron

Spike, 1999, 238pp, \$22.00 ISBN 0 380 97728 1

In *Stardust*, Neil Gaiman offers a pretty soap bubble of a fairytale, saved from archness by his trademark threads of sly humour. Quintessentially – or is that quintessentially? – English in setting, its details charm and amuse, although the whole fails to add up to more than the sum of its parts.

The hamlet of Wall would be a prosaic place, were it not for the fair which takes place on the other side of the wall every nine years, the only time when the sentry watch is relaxed and all who dare can visit the Faerie Market. The mingling of folk and Folk sometimes produces more than commerce, and unknown to himself, Tristran Thorn is one result. Not surprisingly, eighteen years on, his destiny

takes him back through the wall, in search of a falling star to win his true love. Tristran is not the only one on a quest to catch this falling star. Through the star herself is mightily miffed to find herself yoked (with a chain of cats-breath and fish-scales and moonlight, naturally) to a village clodpoll, they find themselves in uneasy alliance against the otherworldly, sinister denizens who are also in pursuit.

In achieving his heart's desire, which is not precisely what he held it to be at the outset, Tristran discovers the truth about his heritage.

Cue, reunions and resolutions.

Cue, happy-ever-after.

Easily read and easily forgotten.

**Neil Gaiman – Smoke and Mirrors**

Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

Avon Books, 1998, 340pp, \$24.00 ISBN 0 380 97364 2

Short story collections are problematic to write about at the best of times. A reviewer feels an obligation to isolate a particular dominant theme, or themes, which will serve as a seed around which the review will magically crystallise. Gaiman's latest collection presents more difficulties than most because of the sheer diversity of the material it contains, not only thematically, but also in the range of forms and genres within which he has chosen to operate.

Herein you will find traditional short stories, a drabble and poems (in various forms from the rondel to the sestina), as well as a gift of a story cunningly hidden in the introduction (as an inducement to those who normally never bother to read them). The thirty-odd pieces, many of them written for theme anthologies, flirt with fantasy, retellings of fairy tales and myth, sf, crime, horror and mainstream realism (or cunning combinations of the above). Understandably, given their author's literary background, what they all share is a fierce joy in the age-old power of Story and the act of artistic creation.

The title and subtitle of the collection provide a clue to Gaiman's serious intentions, however modest he is about them in the introduction. Writing and reading fantastic fiction is like a magic trick

done with smoke and mirrors: a compact between the writer and the reader. The writer sets out to create an outlandish illusion; the reader allows him or herself to temporarily be deceived by that illusion. However, like all good literature these fictional illusions don't just beguile and entertain – they palpably touch the heart and mind, reflecting the everyday world that we know, but ultimately leaving our perception of it subtly transformed.

Thus, an unusual wedding gift takes on sinister significance for a newly married couple ('The Wedding Present'); the story of Snow White is retold with a surprising narrative twist ('Snow, Glass, Apples'); a young boy battles with traditional childhood fears made flesh ('Troll Bridge') and a fallen angel in modern L.A. recounts the tale of the very first murder ('Murder Mysteries'). Throughout the collection Gaiman demonstrates himself to be equally adept with comic and tragic themes (in, respectively, 'Shoggoth's Old Peculiar' and 'Mouse'), as well as being a versatile worker of forms. Taken as a whole the pieces are elegantly written, endlessly inventive and a pleasure to read. One can only hope that this immensely entertaining collection will eventually see publication in this country.

**Kathleen Ann Goonan – Queen City Jazz**

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Voyager, 1998, 465pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648317 8

*Queen City Jazz* was first published in the USA in 1994 and was reasonably well-received, but so few American science fiction books appear in UK editions these days that there is nothing surprising about the lag phase. Indeed, the more surprising thing is that such a thoroughly American book should have been considered worth reprinting for a UK audience – no book as deeply steeped in British popular culture would ever have been reprinted within the USA's broad but ruthlessly parochial boundaries.

Although it carries the sf label *Queen City Jazz* is actually a futuristic fantasy whose magic is justified as nanotechnology run wild. Civilisation has collapsed in the wake of a brief Beholden Age in which the cities converted into vast colonial organisms controlled by hive-like collective artificial intelligences which

condescended to run them for the benefit of their human inhabitants. When the artificial intelligences in question wisely decided to go their own way the human cultures best fitted to survive were those which had clung steadfastly to minimal technological support, including the



'Shakers' whose community provides a starting-point for the plot. When a new apocalyptic threat presents itself, in the form of a nanotechnological 'plague', the young heroine of the novel sets off on one of those river journeys with which American literateurs are obsessed, dragging a dead body in apparent homage to a William Faulkner odyssey (*As I Lay Dying*) whose apocalyptic potential has previously

been plundered by Gregory Benford (in 'To the Storming Gull'). Unlike good Americans, who allegedly go to Paris when the time

comes for confrontation with the infinite and eternal, the significantly-named Verity goes to Cincinnati – the 'Queen City' of the title.

In the years since the collapse of civilisation the collective mind of the Enlivened City has not matured overmuch, seeming rather to have retreated into a kind of obsessive-compulsive schizophrenic fugue. As befits a tomb of the American Dream, it is now rather nightmarish, and such music as it generates – figurative as well as literal – consists of psychotopically-afflicted improvisations echoing a bygone era. This being American science fantasy, however – where hope springs eternal and one can always arise out of the many – Verity contrives to get by in the end. Maxwell Perkins would presumably have advised

the author to stick a father in there somewhere, but she would probably have been correct to resist, on the grounds that one has to move with the times, Daddy-O, and this is 1960 with knobs on.

Personally, I never liked jazz much – or Faulkner, or Huckleberry Finn – so I have to admit that I found *Queen City Jazz* rather difficult to get along with. It is certainly not a bad book, and it features some deft and maybe daring writing, but it is probably the kind of thing which will only appeal to people who have a connoisseur interest in the kinds of things featured within it; how many of those there are likely to be this far east of Cincinnati and New Orleans I would not care to guess.

### Julia Gray – *Ice Mage*

Orbit, 1998, 535pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85723 689 0

Reviewed by Stephen Deas

The remote and wild land of Tiguataya is on the edge of chaos. The menacing volcanoes that dominate the landscape threaten destruction. Repulsive fireworms, marauding pirates and ancient dragons grow bolder every day... The only hope for survival lies with a group of young rebels known as the Firebrands.

It has its moments. The background has a lot of interesting details – many of the characters are telepathically linked to birds, the volcanic environment, the fine line (or lack of it) between magic and madness – Gray at least allows all these things to flesh themselves out. The central conflict too has potential – much more a war of propaganda than of steel.

I get the feeling the world could have been quite striking if the characters that inhabited it weren't so tired – what is it about people in fantasy worlds? The young hero and his friends are all passionate and urgent and direct, the older mentors and villains are reserved and intellectual and scheming. Not that there has to be anything wrong with that, but come on – most of the population are going to get drunk, fart around, make jokes and take the piss out of each other from

time to time, surely. If they're truly human anyway. Everyone in *Ice Mage* is so damn earnest all the time. Only the birds they're linked to manage to appear as distinct individuals.

Oh, and beware. It's a long time before there's any real clarity about who these Firebrands are, why they exist and what the hell it's all about. I reckon there's some who'll find this mightily frustrating while there's others who'll enjoy trying to figure it out. You have to have faith – it all comes together in the end. Well, mostly...

In many ways, this is very average book. Average as in better than some of what's out there and worse than others. Average in that the milieu is neither magical in its originality nor crudely and obviously constructed out of other people's ideas. Average in that the plot is better than transparent but hardly challenging. Average in that the characters are a little more than soulless shrubbery and a lot less than fully living. Average in that it's neither slow nor edge-of-the-seat. Mind candy with a slightly odd and interesting flavour that could have been very moreish if only it had some zest.

### H. Rider Haggard – *She*

Pulp Fictions, 1998, 246pp, £4.99 ISBN 1 902058 03 8

### H. Rider Haggard – *When the World Shook*

Pulp Fictions, 1998, 272pp, £4.99 ISBN 1 902058 07 0

### Dr Gordon Stables – *Kidnapped by Cannibals*

Pulp Fictions, 1998, 287pp, £4.99 ISBN 1 902058 06 2

### Jules Verne – *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*

Pulp Fictions, 1998, 224pp, £4.99 ISBN 1 902058 08 9

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Pulp Fiction is a term usually employed to describe the contents of mass market magazines, printed on cheap paper, which appeared towards the end of the last century. In an interesting, if messy, introduction to the Haggard titles, David Pringle expounds a theory that real pulp fiction began within the pages of adventure magazines around 1905. A theory that, it seems to me, is only necessary to separate genuinely gifted writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling and Conan Doyle from the generally talentless ranks of hacks who wrote exclusively for an audience of pre-pubescent schoolboys.

Whatever your definition of 'pulp fiction', the similarly named publisher has taken the very enterprising decision to base their entire line on a mixture of classic titles from the likes of Bram Stoker and H. Rider Haggard and lesser known works by Edgar Wallace and Dr. Gordon Stables. The unifying theme being that all their books provide ripping yarns and thrilling tales of yore (and are presumably out of copyright!).

The four titles here are pretty representative of the publisher's output with two classics by well-known authors (*She* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*) together with a lesser known Haggard effort (*When the World Shook*) and *Kidnapped by Cannibals* by Dr Gordon Stables, an author I'd previously not heard of.

Setting aside the garish, if apt packaging, and the low-budget typesetting there are some incidental pleasures to be found in all these

books. *Kidnapped by Cannibals* is by far the least sophisticated, making much use of the author's seagoing experiences and being well-stocked with rollicking sailor's yarns. This book has dated badly and wading through the thick Scottish dialect is worthwhile only for reasons of nostalgia and not in pursuit of any literary merit.

The two Haggard novels are clearly the work of a more proficient story teller. *When the World Shook* contains several Haggard staples; an ageless beauty, an exploration team divided into Scientist, Believer and Everyman, a shipwreck (a feature of all four books), and a patronising treatment of native people. The novel is surprisingly readable up until the point where it tails off into dated philosophical discourse. The author's similar *She* is a more recognisable tale thanks to several cinematic versions. The book retains a certain power because of much iconic imagery but, as a story, it is heavily bogged down in an opening section where the author revels in lengthy Latin transcripts of an ancient potsherd.

*Journey to the Centre of the Earth* is also likely to be familiar in its celluloid version. All the classic images from the film are in the source novel; the underground sea, the giant mushrooms, the shadow of Mount Scartaris showing the entrance in the crater of Snaefells Jökull. Thankfully there's no sign of Pat Boone. Verne's clean prose and concentrated storytelling in this brief novel make it, by far, the least dated of the four, despite the author's charmingly inaccurate science.

### Barbara Hambly – *Iceland's Quest*

Voyager, 1998, 307pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648303 8

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

*Iceland's Quest* is a rather strange story. Set in a kind of post-holocaust world in which people eke out a precarious living, it begins with the Iceland of the title being taken in by an unscrupulous mage

by the name of Bekitis and his accomplice Hetha. The latter pretends to have a 'spirit guide' who speaks to her and tells her tales of the old days before whatever dire catastrophe befell their world. She also

sometimes puts on the voice of an old woman when relating these tales. Their aim is to kidnap the young prince Tir, heir to the Keep of Dare, and himself a genuine repository of forbidden wisdom, and they succeed with remarkable ease, aided by some judicious illusion-casting.

Their reason for this is so that the ambitious Vair na-Chandros can use Tir's knowledge to find and bring back to life an ancient Keep. Vair's ultimate aim is to utilise an ancient transportation device in that Keep so that he can use it to invade Dare from within. As a distraction, he raises a siege around Dare. Unfortunately for him, Vair has reckoned without the presence of an insane mage who lives in the appropriated Keep, nor the demons who take possession of his cloned soldiers. As for the clones, an element of farce creeps in with their creation: they have little or no intelligence, and a limited shelf life. Ultimately Vair runs out of men to clone, and has to resort to using

sheep

In addition to Vair's army, there are numerous tribes living outside the Keeps in much the same manner as the American Indians did before America was discovered, and the description of the various tribes, along with their names and their world, was more interesting than Vair and his antics.

Most of the novel is taken up with Icefalcon's quest to rescue Tir. He is aided by his sister Cold Death, a shaman, an enemy of his called Loses His Way, and (unexpectedly) Hethya. The parts of the quest where Icefalcon goes spirit-walking, first in Vair's camp to find its weaknesses and an escape route for Tir, and later in the rediscovered Keep where he is trapped, bodiless, within its magical walls once the great Doors are closed, are when the story really comes to life. But I found this book only mildly interesting, for the most part.

### Gabriel King – *The Golden Cat*

Century, 1998, 350pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 7126 7890 5

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This book is a sequel to the earlier *The Wild Road*, which I haven't read; while that might put me at a disadvantage in getting the feel of the writers' world, at least I can comment from the perspective of a new reader.

An introduction fills in the background of the previous book: how a human being known as the Alchemist tried to engineer the birth of the Golden Cat, a creature of great mystical power, and was destroyed as the litter of kittens which would include the Golden Cat was born. The present book picks up the story a little later. It will come as no surprise that the Alchemist is not destroyed after all, and threatens all three kittens of the litter, for no one knows which of the three is the Golden Cat.

I found this an exciting story that it's easy to become involved with, it wasn't too difficult to pick up the threads, and there are some clever twists in the plot. I especially liked the way that the sub-plot, about rescued laboratory cats, is tied into the main story, and the solution to the question of which kitten is the Golden Cat. There are also some beautifully evoked backgrounds; I loved the library of Uroum Boshou, the reading cat. At the same time, I never felt completely drawn into the cat world, and I thought that some of the characters were probably there because readers of *The Wild Road*

would expect to meet them again, rather than because they were vital to this book. I also felt that the climax, where all the different plot strands drew together, didn't quite live up to its promise.

*The Wild Road* was compared to *Watership Down*, and I suppose that's obvious, along with all the moles, hares, eagles and whatever that we've seen since. But while *Watership Down* reached people who had never thought twice about rabbits, I'm not sure that *The Golden Cat* will appeal equally to non-cat lovers. To criticise the design rather than the writing, I found it a bit off-putting that photographs of pet cats – who are also characters in the story – appear on the back flap where there's usually a picture of the author; it smacks of a kind of conspiracy to pretend that the book is true. While the characters are not – thank goodness – cute pussies, they don't – with the exception of the wonderful Sealink, the feisty travelling cat – appear as fully rounded personalities either.

There's a lot to be enjoyed in the book about real and well-observed cat behaviour, and about the possibilities of cat belief and customs, but as a cat lover myself I don't know how that will appeal to readers who don't like cats for their own sake. I also wish that I had read the first volume, and I'd recommend anyone who hasn't to start there.

### Mercedes Lackey & Larry Dixon – *Owlflight*

Millennium, 1998, 293pp, £9.99 ISBN 1 85798 543 5

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

*Owlflight* is the most recent addition to the *Heralds of Valdemar* series. The various trilogies etc. that are set in the Valdemar milieu run to 19 volumes, but *Owlflight* is a 'stand-alone' novel – new readers may start here!

The plot concerns young Darian, orphaned, regarded as a nuisance by the folk of his impoverished village who must provide for him and, unwillingly, apprenticed to a Wizard. Even before his parents disappeared on a hunting expedition, Darian was something of an outsider – only he and his family dared to set foot in the Pelagris Forest there, ever since the Mage Storms distorted the magic of the place, fearful monsters have roamed. Now Darian is the only one left who will venture into the woods. He is also keenly aware of the villagers' attitude towards him, for they never cease to lecture him about his lack of gratitude for all they consider they have done for him, which causes him to resent his position even more.

When northern barbarians attack the village, Darian escapes into the forest and is rescued from pursuit by Snowfire, one of a group of

Hawkbrothers, allies of Valdemar who are attempting to repair the damage of the Mage Storms. The Hawkbrothers are magically bonded to birds of prey and have various magical powers, and with their help Darian not only rid his village of its barbarian invaders, but also finds a place for himself and a rôle of which he can be proud.

There is nothing in the blurb to indicate that this book is specifically aimed at a juvenile readership, but with its youthful protagonist, unjustly treated by unreasonable adults, who eventually proves himself better than all of them, it will probably appeal most to young teenagers. What makes the book particularly commendable is the fact that the 'good' characters manage to be noble and wise without becoming insufferable, and when Darian is reconciled with the villagers, it is on his own terms. My only real complaint is with the speech of one of the non-human characters: maybe gryffons do hiss their Ss and roll their Rs, but sentences such as 'Sssilvyrhsss sssay the sssame of theierrr arrrrrrrr' do not make for easy reading.

### Warren Lapine & Stephen Pagel (Eds) – *Absolute Magnitude*

TOR Books, 1998, 320pp, \$16.95 ISBN 0 312 86449 3

Reviewed by Mat Coward

Sixteen short stories reprinted from the American sf magazine *Absolute Magnitude* (previously called *Harsh Mistress*), and a polemical introduction by editor Warren Lapine: 'Hard science fiction with an adventure slant has always been the lifeblood of science fiction,' he says, going on to complain that 'phrases such as "cutting edge" and "pushing the envelope" have begun dominating the short story field, "as if novelty were the only measure of artistic merit... The Golden Age was wonderful, and the sense of wonder is everything. We will not

apologise for publishing traditional science fiction.'

Many readers, bored with the sterile predictability of endless experimentation and baffled by the sheer lack of enthusiasm with which most currently fashionable sf writers seem to approach the genre, will find this manifesto cheering. According to Lapine's account of its rapid growth, *Absolute Magnitude* has proven that a market still exists for 'proper' sf.

The writers featured here are Lapine himself, Allen Steele, F.

Gwynplaine MacIntyre, Denise Lopes Heald, Barry B. Longyear, Terry Bisson, Shariann Lewitt, Chris Bunch, Geoffrey A. Landis, Frank O. Dodge, Hal Clement, Don D'Amassa, Alan Dean Foster, Janet Kagan, Robin Wayne Bailey and Linda Tiernan Kepner. The stories are sufficiently varied to ensure that the collection should hold appeal even for those who don't entirely share the editors' views. What they do have in common hints at one possible reason for the decline over the last twenty or so years of adventure sf's popularity. 'Big space' fiction has generally been, for obvious reasons, broadly collectivist in tone. Perhaps, as the political pendulum once again swings away from individualism, we'll see more extrovert science fiction, concerned with society and technology and large events, and less of the existential

navel-gazing on which of late we have poorly feasted.

In an anthology which is for the most part solidly enjoyable rather than spectacularly exciting (there is a case to be made for the argument that trad sf works best at novel length, while the short form is better suited to the dreaded 'cutting edge'), two stories really stand out.

Don D'Amassa's 'Jack the Martian', an account of the first serial killer on Mars, is sharply told, and has an unforgettably eerie ending; while 'Planting Walnuts' by Linda Tiernan Kepner is a straightforward interplanetary exploration piece, full of incident, character, and invention, and ('cutting edge' authors please note) written with wit and clarity – and without pretension or padding.

### Jack McDavitt – *Moonfall*

Reviewed by Chris Hill

HarperCollins, 1998, 464pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 00 224690 2

Picture the scene: the writer in his study. 'I want novel', he thinks. 'How about the Earth in danger of being hit by a giant comet or asteroid? No, been done a lot recently.' Suddenly he has a brainwave. 'How about the moon being hit by a comet and then bits of it falling to Earth? Yeah, that's cool.'

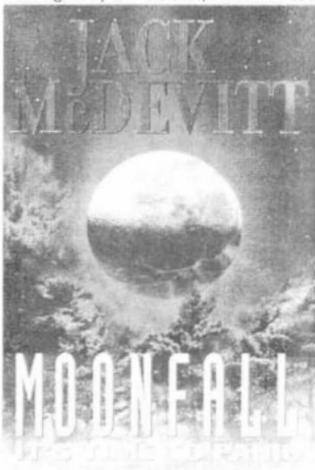
And thus another example of the disaster novel sub-genre is born.

On the day of a total solar eclipse in 2024 the new moonbase is declared operational by vice-president Haskell. In addition a ship, the *Percival Lowell*, is soon to be launched for Mars. However, during the eclipse a comet is spotted near the sun, heading towards the moon at an unprecedented speed. The moon is shattered into a cloud of rubble and some of the debris heads toward Earth.

Will all the moonbase staff, including the vice-president and his party, be rescued in time? Will they be able to stop the mile-long piece of moon rock hitting Kansas, possibly causing worldwide devastation? And why do these things never seem to aim for the sea, which covers a far larger area than the land?

What follows is the usual thriller/soap-opera mix that we expect from a disaster novel. We are introduced to a bewildering array of politicians, scientists and ordinary people and follow their fates during the crisis. A fun game to play with this sort of book (if a little tasteless) is 'spot the Dead Meat' – try to guess which characters are Marked for Death. The size of the cast means that few of the characters are developed in any detail, and even these struggle to escape the clutches of disaster-novel

cliché (the woman who rediscovers her love for her husband during the crisis, the oddball scientist who comes up with the problems and their solutions before any of the hundreds of other scientists and technicians).



This is not to say that *Moonfall* is not enjoyable, even at times quite gripping. From the science-and-realism point of view it is head and shoulders above the recent cinematic rivals like *Armageddon*. I do have some doubts regarding the future space program – in twenty-five years will we really have a whole fleet of space vehicles capable of going from Earth to the moon in a few hours? (The *Percival Lowell* is a remarkable craft, incidentally, being able to get into a stable position above the rotating killer moon-rock, despite being designed to fly to Mars).

The speed of the comet is justified by it being an extra-solar object, possibly expelled from a supernova. However, it is vaporised in the impact so its true nature cannot be determined.

There are times when the whole book seems to be a justification for the future space program, with several references to the cancelled 'Skybolt' project which would have stopped the killer moon-rock from ever being a danger. But overall it is a better example of the sub-genre. Read, inwardly digest, instantly forget.

### Maureen F. McHugh – *Mission Child*

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Avon Books, 1998, 385pp, \$20.00 ISBN 0 380 97456 8

Janna lives with her clan, on an Appropriate Technologies Mission, on an unnamed world, far from Earth. When raiders attack and destroy the Mission, she survives to walk the world in search of peace and rest. A bald description of the start of a large and complex story.

The start is in a cold, inhospitable climate and as Janna walks from there to the city and beyond, we learn about the world, its structure and the varied lives of the inhabitants of this bleak, confused world. Bleak, because the conditions are almost not suitable for human existence, and confused because this was a lost world, a world which has lost its origins as a colony of Earth. Now that the Earth people are reaching to their colonies again to try and regain the things that they have lost, the fragile societies which have developed on these worlds are being fragmented as the traditional ways of life are being undermined by the inappropriate technologies of the off-worlders.

All of this is observed through the eyes of Janna, who survives the rigours of the winter following the destruction of her home, only because she has been bequeathed the necessary off-world technology to do so. But this technology proves to be a burden as well as a blessing to her in the way ahead of her.

McHugh uses this setting to explore many things: Janna's identity,

the effects on traditional cultures of the well-meaning interference of outsiders and the broader issues of social interactions and who we all are. And she does it all well enough. The character of Janna is strong enough to cope with her trials, and to keep the reader involved, but not so strong that she triumphs too easily over her adversaries or that she obscures the background. Her character is also strong enough to sustain the first-person viewpoint that is used throughout this book. This viewpoint doubles as literary sleight-of-hand as we, the readers don't know or see anything that Janna doesn't know or see, but it also involves us, as we can be smug and knowing about the technological marvels that we understand, but our 'eyes' don't. But this is deceptive, because there are things that we, as observers lack the knowledge to understand, making the whole construct – world, narrator, reader – into a many layered unit that gradually reveals only some of its meaning as we progress through the book.

Luckily, McHugh's writing is up to the task. Her narrative style grows along with the narrator, and it is sharp enough to pull us along through the twists and turns of Janna's life and eventual discovery of her place in the complex society that her world has grown into.

**Juliet E. McKenna – *The Thief's Gamble* □**

Orbit, 1999, 437pp, £5.99 ISBN 1 85723 688 2

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

This is Juliet E. McKenna's first novel. On the cover Jenny Jones calls it 'A Wonderful Debut', for once I actually agree. *The Thief's Gamble* presents a beautifully drawn world with a rich history, interesting and realistic characters and a plot that drags you along at breakneck speed.

The main character, Livak, is a thief (part-time gambling cheat, too). One common problem with fantasy which uses thieves for characters is that too many others accept them without making moral judgements. This is partly overcome in this book by having the thief as the main character: she obviously doesn't have any serious moral qualms about her way of life. The characters she falls in with – part of an organisation of wizards, which takes them somewhat out of the normal moral framework as well – are in desperate need of a thief. Besides, she only steals from those who can afford it, mostly. That's my excuse for liking her, anyway.

The main plot follows Livak, a wizard (Shivvalan), one of the archmage's non-wizardly agents (Darni) and an academic historian (Geris) as they investigate an older form of magic than the one current with the archmage and his people (a fairly standard elemental magic) and come up against some interesting opposition. The elemental mages can't use the older form of magic, whose practice was lost in the downfall of an empire some time previously.

This may sound fairly standard, but then there's nothing new under the sun. What's different and interesting about this book is what Ms

McKenna does with it. Since the thief is the focus of the story, she is less interested in what's going on around her than in her own life and her friendship with Geris, which rapidly develops but doesn't descend into adolescent silliness (on her side at least). She is initially blackmailed into the group by the their knowledge of her less than legal activities, later she becomes involved for more personal reasons.

None of the characters are long-lost heirs to anything. While Livak is able to use the old magic (it appears that might be possible for anyone other than an elemental mage) she is not some sudden incredibly powerful wizard whose light has been under a bushel for years. Planir, the archmage, is a subtle politician concerned with the welfare of the mages as well as his own aggrandisement. Even the bad guys, when they finally make an appearance as something other than marauders, are well-drawn and justified (from their own point of view), while remaining the enemy. Even their computer game-like abilities to appear and disappear from the scenes is well explained later on.

The history of the world will move on. We may or may not get more books featuring Livak the Thief, but the series can stand with or without her. She was involved in the events of *The Thief's Gamble* but is not central the way Garion, Frodo or Pug are. Whether Ms McKenna continues the story from Livak's point of view or not, I expect her to continue with this series in a lively and interesting manner. A wonderful debut and a writer to watch in the future.

**George R.R. Martin – *A Clash of Kings***

Voyager, 1998, 741pp, £17.99 ISBN 0 00 224585 X

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

This is a big book. That the last 30 printed pages constitute an appendix giving the names of the various players may tell you all you want to know about what sort of fantasy it is.

It can get incredibly confusing, in fact, if you haven't read the first volume of *A Song of Fire and Ice* (*A Game of Thrones*, reviewed in Vector 192), and recently enough to have it fairly clear in memory, I wouldn't advise starting this. Martin makes few concessions to late arrivals, launching straight into a Prologue that sets up yet another plot thread (which will become crucially important later, but not until over half way through the book), and then snapping immediately across half a continent to pick up the story of Arya, daughter of the executed Lord Eddard Stark where it was left at the end of *A Game of Thrones*.

As in the previous volume, Martin alternates chapters between a half dozen or more viewpoint characters, most of them from the scattered family of House Stark, now in open rebellion against House Lannister and their 13-year-old boy-king Joffrey, with the eldest son, Robb Stark, now as self-proclaimed King in the North. However, House Lannister are also divided by internal rivalries, particularly between Joffrey's mother, Cersei, and her brother, the dwarf Tyrion (another viewpoint character, and matched only in devious politicking by the equally Machiavellian Lannister council member, the eunuch Varys).

If a land under two warring kings is not enough weakened and divided, it becomes positively torn apart as three further claimants to the throne enter the fray. Two of these are the sons of the late king Robert, brothers Renly and Stannis Baratheon, claiming that Joffrey is a

bastard born of incest between Cersei and her, and Tyrion's, brother Jaime.

If the rapid switching of allegiances and armies marching on each other from all directions were not confusing enough (and there were times when I was tempted to set everything up as a large fantasy wargaming map, with counters for the various armies, in order to keep track), Martin has two supernatural elements in the mix, with dragons re-born on a far continent, and the undead walking in the far north beyond the Great Wall.

It is ambitious, but it is precisely the fantasy elements in what is otherwise an epic Wars of the Roses style historical drama with which Martin lets himself down. After a while his half-hearted archaic phrasing – 'of food there was plenty' – becomes irritating, and at other times he is merely clumsy, where he uses the same awkward jokey phrase twice in two pages, or cringe-inducingly patronising – 'but you have courage... a kind of woman's courage'. There really isn't much excuse for this sort of bad writing which surfaces rather too often. Which is a shame, because other parts of the book – the grand battle scenes, the divisive internal politics of the great Houses, and the progress of the war on several fronts and under the country – are quite gripping, and Tyrion, in particular, is a wonderfully complex and enigmatic creation. Even so, at the end of Book Two, there is a daunting sense that nothing has progressed very far since the end of the first volume, and both of the subplots with the Watch in the far north, and with the hatching dragons of Daenerys Stormborn, are biding time until the next volume.

**Haydn Middleton – *The Knight's Vengeance***

Warner Books, 1998, 281pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 7315 2370 4

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

*The Knight's Vengeance* is the third book in the Mordred Cycle. It is recounted from a number of first person viewpoints, including Dyfric, Peredur, Lanslod, Lot and Nabur. However their personalities are important only to the extent they reflect the 'Great Remaking' and it's ultimate failure. The novel starts at a point when the 'Great Remaking' of Albion into Logres is complete. Those who have survived the flood wait on the ships as their memories of the people and places of Albion slip away. Merlin and Guenever have remade the land and people into the idealised Logres, but this is sustained only by the people's collective belief. As the novel progresses this belief is superseded by a different one, subtly propagated by Morgan and thus the Kingdom is subverted from within.

Of the traditional leading characters only Lanslod is given a voice.

He is shown as a soldier, happiest when obeying orders and needing a strong uncomplicated structure to his life. His loyalty and obedience to Arthur are never in question, which given Arthur's behaviour in this novel is remarkable, but he knows it is not his place to question or judge only to obey. Arthur himself is a tortured soul who finds no peace or true place in the realm created for him. He speaks little but his sometimes banal pronouncements are treated as inspirational words of the greatest importance. In truth, however, his actions provide the power his words lack. The other usual leading characters, Merlin and Guenever, are more symbols than people. During their infrequent appearances their rôles appears to be to play the parts destined for them. As people, their motivations are enigmatic or irrelevant.

Haydn Middleton has lectured in British myth and legend and he has used this knowledge to provide a very strong structure of symbols and myths that run throughout the novel. I don't feel I know enough about this area to properly appreciate or evaluate these elements but they undeniably contribute to the feeling of intensity provided by the novel.

### Elizabeth Moon – *Oath of Gold*

Orbit, 1998, 501pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85723 691 2

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

*Oath of Gold* is one-third of the story of Paksenarrion Dorthensdofter, a sheep farmer's daughter who, in two previous novels, has worked her way through the ranks of the military to the point where she has almost made the rank of Paladin (in her world, Paladins are beholden to the god Gird, and they have magic powers such as healing).

Besides Gird and numerous other deities (including a particularly nasty spider-creature), there are elves and orcs, and, at the beginning of the novel, Paksenarrion is in the throes of a slow recovery from treatment she received while a prisoner of the orcs: she is unable to handle a weapon without feeling extreme terror. Her recovery is aided by the Kuakgan, a man steeped in woodcraft and psychological healing. She makes a gradual return to the life of a soldier, but this return is not without its dangers. A dinner with the Duke she once served under, for instance, becomes the scene of an attempted

assassination by two servants of Achyra, the afore-mentioned spider-creature. It is only her determination which helps Paksenarrion to survive.

I have to say, however, that the novel didn't interest me when I first read it as an American import twelve months ago (I'd read the first two books and I wanted to see what happened to her) and it didn't interest me this time around. There are too many battles, too much blood and guts, and above all too many earnest discussions about, for example, what to do when the orcs come up out of a concealed tunnel in the Duke's newly-built wine cellar. Add to this the fact that Paksenarrion endlessly relates her past experiences, which you learn about in segments, and I personally found that I was not in the least bothered whether she achieved her aim.

### Michael H. Payne – *The Blood Jaguar*

TOR Books, 1998, 236pp, \$22.95 ISBN 0 312 86783 2

Reviewed by Andy Mills

*The Blood Jaguar* is what Clute and Grant's *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* would term a beast fable: the protagonists are animals, but their behaviour is not based on real animals. There are indeed no humans on Payne's world-creation, which may be an alternate Earth, or else an artificial creation, a replica of the mother world. (The inevitable map shows an outline of North America, but the distances travelled by our heroes would not allow this to be to scale.)

The novel has an interesting idea at its core: this (largely utopian) world of animals is created and ruled over by twelve Curials, or animal lords; a thirteenth is Death – the Blood Jaguar – herself. Every century or so the Blood Jaguar is allowed by ancient Curial agreement to unleash a devastating plague; she can only be stopped by the successful intervention of a skint (lizard), bobcat (lynx) and fisher (marten). In times past the chosen trio have never succeeded. Can Skint, Bobcat and Fisher prevail with their quest this time around?

Certainly an original, and potentially an enthralling, premise. Yet this novel rarely comes alive and the journey is more a pedestrian trek than an exciting voyage of discovery. For a tale which depends so

intensely on its three lead characters, it is a mistake by the author to fail to draw them fully – there are not even adequate physical descriptions (in the end I relied on the dictionary to find out what a fisher was). Bobcat is engaging enough, though too often resembling a feline Homer Simpson for comfort: despite being well-travelled, for instance, he alone has not heard the story of the Blood Jaguar. The dialogue is repetitious and unconvincing, the post-climactic section way too long.

On the plus side there are a couple of set-pieces which work well, particularly the final encounter with the Blood Jaguar, and Payne does manage to keep the tension going with our seemingly doomed trio until then. But I still cannot understand, other than for novelty value, what Payne gained by having his protagonists be animals, whilst the reason why there has to be one each of a bobcat, skint and fisher to tackle the Blood Jaguar is never made clear.

Postscript: *The Blood Jaguar* is being serialised on the Web (on Tomorrow SF at <http://www.tomorrowstf.com>) so you can sample it there for yourself.

### Ricardo Pinto – *The Chosen* □

Bantam, 1999, 496pp, £16.99 ISBN 0593 04171 2

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

*The Chosen* is the first book of *The Stone Dance of the Chameleon* trilogy. It is an interesting novel and the complex political and social system portrayed provides a fascinating background to the rite of passage style story of Camelian, learning about and taking his place in adult society.

Within the novel there are three kinds of men and the half-men. Camelian, like most of the other main characters, comes from the ruling group, the Masters, who live mainly within Osrakum in a volcanic crater. These people call themselves The Chosen and in addition to the common tongue have their own language, Quva, of silent hand signals and drawn glyphs. The Chosen look different to the other races being tall and very pale. In public they wear masks and paint their skin to protect it from the sun. They believe that these and other differences are due to the ichor of the God which, diluted by mortal blood, flows in their veins. They are ranked by this blood taint into the orders of angels. The lower the taint the higher the rank, thus those of blood-rank three who have zeros in the first three positions are higher than those of blood-rank two who have zeros in the first three positions. This much prized ichor is held at a cost, few children of The Chosen live to come of age and thus high blood rank brides are the rarest and most prized commodity. Their society is complex and their lives proscribed by a complex set of rules and rituals.

The second group of men are the half-caste marumaga. Although

to be one of The Chosen requires both parents to have been of blood rank many of the ruling lords take concubines from the marumaga and it is these half brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles that make up the households of The Chosen. Tain, Camelian's half brother, is of the marumaga as are some other minor characters but in contrast to the long descriptions of the Chosen society, information on that of the marumaga is slight. We are told that the marumaga are tattooed with the emblem of their ruling lord, and the impression is given that in most households they live as property with no rights save those that their lord may choose to give them.

The third group are categorised by the Chosen as barbarians. These run such crude matters as commerce and I suspect later novels may shed more light upon their society. The hard labour of the Commonwealth is carried out by Sartlar, variously described as monsters, half-men, or simply animals. Unlike the other three groups the Sartlar appear to be a different species. They work the fields, row the boats and are treated as mildly clever but untrustworthy and unreliable animals.

I enjoyed this novel, not just for its complex social and political structures, the majority of which I have barely mentioned here, but for the well drawn characters. At times I found myself skimming pages ahead anxiously trying to find out what the fate of a character would be, only to go back for the pleasure of reading the prose more

carefully. The book has its flaws, one major development is telegraphed rather too much and a betrayal by one character is too expected. The closely textured descriptions and evocative metaphors

can jar if not read as part of the flow of the book; but for me none of these detract too much from the novel.

### Rachel Pollack – *Burning Sky*

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

Cambran/BBR, 1998, 412pp, £22.95 ISBN 1 878914 04 9

When I opened the review package I was a little mystified, since inside this edition of Rachel Pollack's book there was hand-printed the legend 'Presentation Copy' and the author's signature! I had no idea such valuable books could be sent out for review. Enough of my incredulity, however. This is a wonderfully presented collection of short stories spanning Rachel Pollack's entire career. I know little of her work, but you have to admire an author whose first line runs: 'Sometimes I think of my clitoris as a magnet, pulling me along to uncover new deposits of ore in the fantasy mines.'

Now that's what I call an opening line. But I'm running ahead of myself. Who is Rachel Pollack? She is an American, an expert on Tarot, including the Tarot of Salvador Dali, visionary writer on issues of sexuality and gender, author of well received non-fiction, and in the field of fiction of the novels *Unquenchable Fire* (Arthur C. Clarke Award-winner) and *Godmother Night* (World Fantasy Award winner).

In his introduction, Samuel R. Delany remarks: 'Pollack's stories occur in a universe of wonders, where Free Woman revenges sexist wrongs... Pollack's form is the contemporary fairy tale.'

The nearest comparison I suppose is Tanith Lee, but where Tanith Lee is demonically weird Rachel Pollack is sensuously weird; Lee writes about devilish possession in an almost medieval style, Pollack writes about angelic ecstasy and cute American women in a lyrical style. (In Pollack's prose there is a lot of the poet, for she has also

published poetry.) The tales – I shall stop calling them stories because that is too pedestrian a word – range from short fables of wonder like 'The Girl Who Went to the Rich Neighbourhood' and 'The Bead Woman', through longer myths such as 'Angel Baby' which first appeared in *Interzone 2*, to oddities like the Tarot inspired 'Knower of Birds'. Regardless of subject and style they all have the aura of mysticism, for their author is a modern mystic, a visionary of devotional, and yet slightly barbarous style.

Do you want to know what happened on Superman and Lois Lane's honeymoon? The tale is here, and it is very funny. Discover what happens after Pandora is charged under Section 18 of the Sexual Response Act; what will happen when she meets Mary and the Early Christians? Nobody who cares about the unknown could refuse the temptations here.

This surreal book is only available in Britain from BBR, PO Box 625, Sheffield S1 3GJ. The price is £22.50 including post and packing; cheques to Chris Reed. You might have to hurry, though, as there are only three hundred first edition copies. In summary, the book is essential to fans of this author, and recommended to others who like their sf gender-themed and written with all the luxury of white Belgian chocolates melted around a steaming pool of Jack Daniels situated within the navel of a naked person (of either gender, take your pick).

### Terry Pratchett – *The Death Trilogy*

Reviewed by Penny Hill

Gollancz, 1998, 753pp, £15.99 ISBN 0 575 06584 2

I have picked up this book and coveted it. I just couldn't quite justify buying it – we do have all three novels already – just not in hardback. But why has this volume been produced? Are there any Pratchett readers out there who don't have these novels already? Surely those who are keen enough to buy this book just because it's in hardback already have them from the first time around? I can only think of two groups of people who would buy this book:

1. obsessive Pratchett fans who have to buy everything, and
2. people buying it for relatives who don't buy books themselves.

I read it straight through to see whether it would work as one volume. It was taxing and yet I am an enthusiastic Pratchett reader. Now I am thinking in mildly amusing footnotes\* and longing to read something a little less clever.

These novels all have the same main plot of "Death in Absentia". Death gets bored/retired/goes on holiday and Mort's replacement/Susan fails to cope. Death comes back and the status quo<sup>3</sup> is restored.

Individually they were enjoyable, contributing new concepts and

jokes to our private vocabulary, yet increasingly the witty ideas are being watered-down and recycled. Now when I read a footnote, I know I will soon read the novel based on it. The Discworld itself has become ordinary – nothing has changed or developed. Perhaps Pratchett should try something radical – like killing the Patrician – just to see if the world is still capable of growth.

Pratchett does not improve on re-reading – you may spot a few more jokes but others lose their edge. Binky is now just the name of a horse, instead of a hilarious incongruity. I will still buy new Pratchett novels – but I will read them after my current book. Time was when I would stop everything to read the latest Pratchett.

\*like this. Which then spawn footnotes of their own †

† like this. And so on ad nauseam.

‡ a small city, overhanging the Rim, famous for its gondolas. Frequently visited by cholera-stricken artists.

§ a Music with Rocks in band. See what I mean about thinking in footnotes!

### Terry Pratchett – *Wyrd Sisters: The Illustrated Screenplay*

Reviewed by Chris Amies

Corgi, 1998, 128pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 552 14575 0

Illustrated adaptations are always tricky, whether it's television versions of radio series (e.g. the TV avatar of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) or cartoons or films of sf and fantasy classics (e.g. the film of *The Lord of the Rings*). Unless the author provides a good enough description for reader or illustrator to follow exactly, the reader makes up his or her own visual images for the characters and situations, and the pictorial adaptation that comes later is likely to provoke mixed reactions, at least.

In the case of Terry Pratchett's novels, they have also become so associated with Josh Kirby's madcap and colourful covers, full of warty crones, knobly trolls and goat-toothed peasants, that anyone else trying to illustrate them has a bit of a tough job in hand.

That said, the version of *Wyrd Sisters* in pictures does come off very well. This is one of the Witches novels, with a plot not unlike that of *Macbeth* (scheming duke is persuaded to commit regicide by his wife, but from then on is haunted by the ghost of his victim) and a Lost King story, as well as the appearance of the Three Witches as

themselves ('When shall we three meet again?' 'Well, I can do next Tuesday.'). and also fictional versions of themselves in the play within a play that later unmasks Duke Felmet's crime.

So, what does this illustrated version look like? The Discworld itself is drawn as a Fantasy Medieval kingdom should look, with its forests and mountains, castles and taverns. We have the three witches: austere and even frightening Granny Weatherwax, the bucolic and red-cheeked Nanny Ogg, and young Magrat Garlick, who will look either silly or shrewd depending on the situation, and as her understanding of the world progresses. Then there's Death, who looks like, well, Death; and the Librarian who is an orang-utan.

On the basis of this illustrated screenplay I would recommend watching the Channel 4 adaptation; but whether it is preferable to the book is another matter, and a very personal preference at that. Books allow the reader to travel at his/her own pace, and besides in the book you get the footnotes and the rest of Terry Pratchett's writing style. No matter, the crossing into other media of the Discworld has been going

for years; *Soul Music* is going onto Channel 4 in late 1998 and two stage versions of *Carpe Jugulum* came out almost simultaneously with

that book. It's all a matter of what you like.

### Julian Rathbone – *Trajectories*

Gollancz, 1998, 288pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 573 06501 X

Reviewed by Chris Hill

It is 2035. Global warming has caused floods and hurricanes, skin cancers are on the increase as are man-made disasters (nuclear meltdowns and oil refinery explosions). The population of the UK is half its current level and social breakdown is just around the corner. In the middle of all this, ageing retired rock-star Richard Somers is living in relative luxury in an enclave. His equanimity is disturbed when his sister directs him to the disks containing his father's last unpublished 'novel' – a multimedia extravaganza based around the early evolution of man. Richard's attempts to put this into publishable shape leads to direct conflict with the authorities.

The blurb insists that this novel is 'Not science fiction or fantasy, but a novel whose every horror is already present or foreshadowed in the world we live in.' I tried not to let this prejudice me against it. There is no doubt of the seriousness of the author's intent but like many mainstream writers dabbling in sf, he assumes he is being new and daring when he is really re-treading old ground.

There are some errors in the 'rock group' background and some of the changes in society seem a little silly. One example: the government has ruled that a simplified creationism should be taught in schools and anyone talking evolutionary theory is viewed with suspicion. How did this (rather unlikely) state of affairs come about? We are not told. Also, aside from Richard's band, there does not seem to have been any media figures worth mentioning since the end of the twentieth



century.

The central concept of the evolutionary biology he uses is the 'Aquatic Ape' theory – human beings actually evolved to be semi-aquatic. This seems fair enough but unfortunately he segues this to the idea of the Mitochondrial Eve which is less easy to accept (perhaps he should have read Greg Egan's story 'Mitochondrial Eve' which examines the subject with a more critical eye). Incidentally, something that is faintly disturbing is Richard's lust for a fifteen-year-old girl, whose bodily perfection is described in nauseous detail a number of times, scantily justified by making her the perfect ideal of womanhood: a modern avatar of the Eve.

In fact, it is not until the final couple of pages that you realise what it is all about. Richard's father, musing on his book, ponders whether things he left out should be included, for example 'Evil technologies like cloning'. This is essentially a 'back to nature' novel, with the prehistoric past being couched as Paradise, and the 'present' as a hell brought on by man's fear and unhappiness. I cannot say I was convinced by the argument.

To be fair, there is much of interest in here. The descriptions of Richard's sister's dance group and the urban decay they encounter make interesting reading. Another re-write to tie the biology in more clearly with the rest of the story would have improved it immensely. As it is, the whole is inferior to the sum of the parts.

### Michael Scott Rohan – *The Castle of the Winds*

Orbit, 1998, 454pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85723 570 3

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Amazingly, it is twelve years since *The Anvil of Ice*, the first volume in Michael Scott Rohan's *Winter of the World* fantasy series was published to much acclaim. The following two volumes, *The Forge in the Forest* and *The Hammer of the Sun* were also very well received, and *The Castle of the Winds* is likely to experience an equally positive reaction.

This latest addition to the series is a self-contained novel set in the same world as its predecessors, but centuries before the events depicted in the earlier books. It is a world threatened by the Powers of the Ice – ancient forces who seek to destroy mankind – although at the time of this novel they are a distant menace. Other Powers exist who are at least indifferent to mankind, but a few are actively benevolent. Of more immediate interest to the inhabitants of this world are the inborn magical powers of the Northland smiths which enable them to imbue the metal artefacts they make with such virtues as charms against rust. And of more immediate concern than the menace of the Ice is the possibility of war between the North and the South and the corsair raids that threaten trade.

In the Northland town of Athalby, the Mastersmith Kunrad strives to fashion the suit of armour that will be his greatest work. When the armour is stolen by Merthian, a lord of the Southlands, Kunrad is compelled to follow after the thief and attempt to retrieve it. As he

travels south, accompanied by his two loyal apprentices, Olvar and Gille, Kunrad discovers that Merthian has stolen weapons and armour in every town through which he has passed – obviously he is arming a large number of troops, although for what purpose is unclear. After a perilous journey, having been captured by and escaped from the corsairs, Kunrad does succeed in catching up with Merthian, but not in circumstances he would have expected or have wished for. Imprisoned in the southerner's dungeons, Kunrad learns that Merthian aims to make himself king over the South, and is raising and provisioning an army to that end. More than that, his machinations involve the Ice itself.

*The Castle of the Winds* is rigorously plotted, with events early in the tale, apparently unimportant, being revealed as intrinsic parts of an overall scheme in which mankind's petty rivalries are ultimately as nothing compared to the brooding menace of the Powers of the Ice. This is fantasy at its best, a real page-turner, yet subtle and original, with Kunrad's smithcraft thwarting Merthian's schemes, and his quest for his armour being resolved in a manner that is both unexpected and yet congruent with what has gone before. This is a novel that makes the suspension of disbelief entirely effortless, and leaves the reader satisfied and yet wanting more.

Alison Sinclair – *Cavalcade*

Reviewed by Janet Barron

Millennium, 1998, 299pp, £16.99 ISBN 1 85798 532 X

Alison Sinclair's first two novels have established her as a writer who handles science with authority and human nature with sensitivity.

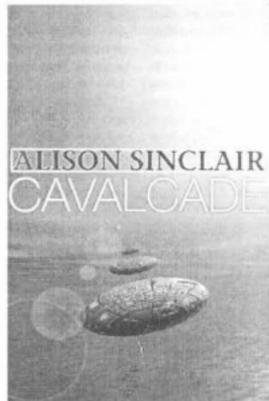
They work on a grand scale where whole societies conflict as well as on the human, personal scale of needs and aspirations. Sinclair's virtuoso worldbuilding brought to life in *Legacies* a people racked with planetary-size guilt and with the emotional pitch set high to match, while in *Blueheart* the political and personal implications of genetic adaptation to a predominantly water world are shown through the eyes of a man with affiliations to both cultures.

*Cavalcade* works on a smaller scale. Lower key and slower moving than her others, its strength is in the individual voices and the detailed evocation of an alien environment. The cast are people we may recognise, the time is a very near future. It opens at the moment when, having placed themselves beside a body of water as requested, the protagonists and others in their thousands find themselves blinking, filling an alien vessel. Their reasons for becoming pioneers are as varied as the people themselves. But from the very start, events do not unfold as expected. There is no visible alien presence, no galactic gurus or benevolent welcome committee. Basic needs are met, 'manna' oozes from feeding points in the semi-living caverns of the ship, but all electronics have turned to dust. The

pioneers are on their own. A failing pacemaker causes the first fatality. Others follow, as a mysterious insect-borne disease begins to reap casualties. Against the background of this threat, various factions jostle, from the military who insist on maintaining strictly earth-oriented perspectives, to the woman separatists who decline to be absorbed into any new nation state, however well meaning.

Sinclair takes a handful of characters who take us through the dislocation of the transition and the strangeness of this new life: Stan Morgan the ghetto-bred scientist in uneasy affiliation with NASA; Stephen Cooper, reformed street punk; neuropathologist Sophie Hemmingway and Stan's niece, the stubborn, shrewd and very pregnant teenager Hathaway Dene. Stan and Sophie discover they can tease the ship into, for instance, manufacturing needed medical supplies. Hathaway and Stephen discover that the touch sensitive surface can create pigments and Hathaway absorbs herself in this new form of art, cave painting cosmos-style. As the deaths continue, violence escalates, organisations threaten to collapse into survivalism or totalitarianism. And then parts of the ship begin to die.

Before time runs out, the humans have to discover what it is the ship needs from them, and perhaps to shape an entirely novel form of human society. Recommended.

Harry Turtledove – *A World of Difference*

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Hodder &amp; Stoughton, 1998, 308pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 340 71270 8

First I have to say that there is some deception here. I do not know whether it is intentional or not, but here we have what seems to be a new novel. 'Copyright 1998' it says; 'First published in Great Britain in 1998 by Hodder & Stoughton' it says; and that is all it says. Which is strange, since *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* refers to a novel by Harry Turtledove called *A World of Difference* published in 1989. Could it be that Turtledove's *Worldwar* quartet was a popular success and the publishers want to cash in on that with an exciting new novel from the same author, even if all they are really doing is picking up an old and distinctly minor work?

At least the discovery that this is nearly ten years old excuses the rather simplistic cold war posturing that mars the book. We are in a slightly different universe: in our Solar System there is no planet Mars, instead, occupying roughly the same position but bigger and possessing an atmosphere and, indeed, life, there is the planet Minerva. Other than that, the history of Earth seems to have gone along pretty much as we know it, until the Viking lander, in the last moments before it inexplicably fails, transmits a picture of a strange creature. We are suddenly not alone in the universe. Immediately, America and the Soviet Union launch manned missions to make contact with these creatures. The American party is very egalitarian, consisting of three married couples; the Russian craft is very militaristic with five men, one woman (who, in a spirit of comradeship, meets the sexual needs of all her fellows), and two KGB agents. The two craft land within minutes of one another on either side of one of Mars's (sorry, Minerva's) immense crevasses. Here, on this icy planet, they meet two very different societies.

The Americans find a nice peaceful society headed by the domain-lead Reatur, and both parties are anxious to make friends and learn from each other. The Russians find a society in transformation from feudal to capitalist, both sides are anxious to exploit the other, and the Minervans trick the Russians into providing a Kalashnikov for their forthcoming invasion of the territories of Reatur. The most interesting thing about the book is the way that Turtledove clearly preceded his quartet about aliens invading Earth in the middle of World War Two with a mirror-image novel about Earthmen invading an alien world in

the middle of their war. But the mirroring doesn't really make it that interesting.

One thing that Turtledove has always done is create interesting aliens; or maybe it's that he is one of the few sf authors still writing who still creates the sort of weird monstrosities that were the stuff of our genre forty years ago. Here they are green, with six legs, six arms and six eyes (on stalks) all arranged radially around the body (which makes for the rather interesting corollary that they have no notion of 'behind'). The cover (uncredited) is actually a faithful representation of a Minervan, making it exactly the sort of sci-fi book we used to be ashamed to be seen reading in public; which isn't actually a bad representation of the book as a whole. This is a blatant, rather slapdash, sf novel with no pretensions to be anything other than a fast and furious adventure. In that it succeeds well enough.

There are hints that Turtledove might have had higher aspirations. One of the central strands of the book concerns the network of infidelities affecting the American crew, which is mirrored by the devotion of Reatur to one of his mates, Lamra. This devotion is strange, to say the least, since Minervan females invariably die in childbirth; culturally, there isn't the possibility of any tradition of such devotion in Minervan society. But the humans then set about finding a way of saving Lamra's life when she does give birth. There is something rather endearingly, naively and cack-handedly proto-feminist in what Turtledove is trying to do here, but in someone usually so sharp in examining the ways societies might change, he seems curiously oblivious to the incredible ramifications that this will bring about across Minerva. He also doesn't once stop to ask why a race as clearly intelligent as the Minervans are shown to be in every other respect, have never themselves considered how they might save the life of a female in childbirth. The reason, I suspect, is that Turtledove himself considered this as no more than a trifle and didn't want to examine the ramifications of his plot any further than was absolutely necessary.

It's a potboiler. A slight, undemanding but reasonably entertaining way of passing time. Don't ask any more of it than that, and you won't be too disappointed.

Gahan Wilson – *The Cleft and Other Tales*

TOR Books, 1998, 333pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0 312 86574 0

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Gahan Wilson is known primarily a cartoonist, and had a regular slot in F & SF during the 1960s and 1970s. But he's also written some short fiction, scattered through various magazines and anthologies over the past twenty-odd years, and this book has collected it – or most of it, or some of it, since in the absence of any editorial matter beyond the obligatory list of original copyright dates there's no means of telling for sure. Thus certainty stops, and it difficulty begins.

This is primarily because the stories – there are twenty-four of them, in a large-ish font, each introduced with a full-page illustration – are fairly short, so making it difficult to say anything detailed about them. The longest, 'The Casino Mirago', clocks in at twenty-eight pages; but the average is between ten and fifteen, and at such a length – barely five thousand words – they seem over almost before they've begun. Nor do many of the stories seem to have much depth: they exist principally to dramatise an image, an idea, or a phrase – or, in one case, an ink blot – and the moment their goal has been fulfilled,

they close. Which may in some cases be an advantage – 'Sea Gulls', about a man who commits suicide because he thinks a malevolent gull has led the police to the wife he drowned, exists solely for its final line – but in others, where at the climax we're intended to smile wryly at the foibles of our fellows (the title story, for example) or experience a frisson of horror (most of the rest), we feel nothing, simply because of the insufficiency of the build-up. Nor does it help that in some cases – 'The Manuscript Of Dr Arness', for example – the tone is too arch, and the language too formal, to ensure the close reader-involvement necessary for the pay-off to work.

But perhaps this is too negative; too much the product of having to read the collection straight through for review rather than, as is perhaps intended, to use the stories as resource to be dipped into as and when – to enjoy as a night-cap after a long day at the office or an evening in front of the computer. If approached from that perspective, then I suspect they will prove admirably engaging.



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.

Tom Arden – *The Harlequin's Dance*

Vista, 1998, 572pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 575 60192 2

The First Book of The Orokon was considered by Andrew Adams in V200: 'Ambiguity, lies, deceit, prejudice, horror and decency all lie within the pages of *The Harlequin's Dance* and on balance I think Arden just about manages to pull off what he's trying to do, which is set the stage for an epic tale.'

Stephen Baxter – *Traces*

Voyager, 1999, 359pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 649814 0

Ranging from 1988 to 1997, this is a collection of 21 short stories that are not part of Baxter's Xeelee Sequence. Writing about it in V201, Andrew M. Butler concluded: 'Taken as a whole, this collection indicates the story-so-far of Baxter's career, and illuminates the obsessions (and weaknesses) of novels such as *Titan*. Perhaps we are just too close to the end of the millennium to be original, but Baxter seems to be looking backwards at the moment. But more often than not, the looking-glass is worth examining.'

Greg Bear – *The Forge of God*

Vista, 1998, 474pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 575 60265 1

Gollancz is continuing the excellent job of bringing Greg Bear's books back into print. First published in 1987, this novel tells the story of two sets of aliens: one wants to destroy the Earth, one to save it. Reviewing the book in V142, Tom Jones liked the way Bear used science, particularly geology, and the crisp, no frills writing, but concluded: 'I could have liked this book if I could have believed the plot but I'm afraid that is asking too much.'

Mark Chadbourne – *Scissorman*

Vista, 1998, 352pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 575 60224 4

Horror novel which tells the story of a city whizzkid on the brink of a nervous breakdown who unwittingly unleashes a childhood nightmare on the world.

Simon Clark – *Vampyrhric*

New English Library, 1998, 441pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 340 69609 5

Bram Stoker set part of *Dracula* in Whitby, so a small village near Whitby seems an appropriate setting for yet another vampire novel.

Richard Wolfrik Galland – *The World of**Warhammer*

Carlon, 1998, 192pp, £14.99 ISBN 1 85868 488 9

For addicts only, this is 'the official illustrated guide to the fantasy world' occupied by the Warhammer role-playing games. Just the thing if you want garish illustrations and brief summaries of Dark Elves, Chaos Dwarves, the Undead and the various other creatures from a ragbag of sources that occupy this fantasy land.

Terry Goodkind – *Wizard's First Rule*

Orion, 1998, 774pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 235 5

Terry Goodkind – *Stone of Tears*

Orion, 1998, 1056pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 305 X

Terry Goodkind – *Blood of the Fold*

Orion, 1998, 618pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 75280 666 1

Terry Goodkind – *Temple of the Winds*

Orion, 1998, 786pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 75281 678 0

The first four massive volumes of Goodkind's ongoing fantasy series. Reviewing the first volume, *Wizard's First Rule*, in V186, K.V. Bailey decided: 'The narrative flows easily but is often repetitive.... Humour is sly though at times twent. Twists and turns of intrigue and deception are well executed.' Lynne Bispham, reviewing the third and fourth volumes in V199 concluded: '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.'

Robert Holdstock – *Gate of Ivory*

Voyager, 1998, 348pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 648002 0

The latest novel about Ryhope Wood, the 'Mythago Wood' that Holdstock has now visited several times, incorporates elements of the Mabinogion in a tale which Cherith Baldry recommended unreservedly in V201 because of the 'greater clarity in the writing. It's also very funny. I have never thought of Holdstock as a humorous writer, but he sees here an absurdity in the posturings of warriors, and in Christian's wry reaction to his situation, which I found very successful.'

## Stephen Jones &amp; David Sutton (Eds)

– *Dark Terrors 3*

Vista, 1998, 381pp, £17.99 ISBN 0 575 60398 4

The third in Gollancz's annual collection of original horror stories features new work from Ray Bradbury, Pat Cadigan, Storm Constantine, Neil Gaiman, Michael Marshall Smith and 15 others.

Robert Jordan – *The Path of Daggers*

Orbit, 1998, 605pp, £17.99 ISBN 1 85723 554 1

John Oram writes of the eighth volume in Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*: 'Coming late to Robert Jordan's series, I had no idea what was happening, why it was happening who was who, or even what sex they were. The plot is more complex than Le Carré's 'Smiley' series, so I had no chance. But having said that, I did find it readable. I didn't understand it, but I did find it readable. Definitely not for the uninitiated. For fans only.'

Stephen Laws – *Chasm*

New English Library, 1998, 546pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 340 66612 9

A small town suddenly finds itself cut off from the rest of the world by a bottomless chasm, and something is coming up out of the depths. Thus the premise for this novel from one of our more highly acclaimed young horror writers.

**R.A. Salvatore – Luthien's Gamble**

Voyager, 1998, 291pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648344 5  
Book Two of *The Crimson Shadow*, a formulaic fantasy adventure in which Luthien and his followers have to overcome the vastly superior forces of the evil wizard Greensparrow. The outcome may not be too surprising.

**Alison Sinclair – Legacies**

Millennium, 1998, 419pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 75281 707 8

**Alison Sinclair – Blueheart**

Millennium, 1998, 348pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 75281 708 6  
Alison Sinclair's first two novels both received good reviews. *Legacies*, the story of two planets, one of which has colonised the other, was described as 'a book of great sensitivity and depth' by Cherith Baldry in **V188**; while *Blueheart*, which also explores the moral implications of the effects a colonial people might have on the world they inhabit, was considered to address issues 'which are both interesting and important' by Andy Mills (**V192**), though in the end he found 'the novel lacks either vitality or colour'.

**S.P. Somtow – Darker Angels**

Vista, 1998, 351pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 575 60060 8

A horror novel which mixes voodoo and the American Civil War. Writing about the book in **V199**, Jon Wallace concluded: '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.'

**K.W. Jeter – Slave Ship**

Bantam, 1998, 324pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 553 50603 X

**Timothy Zahn – Vision of the Future**

Bantam, 1998, 520pp, £12.99 ISBN 0 593 04338 3

Jeter foreshakes cyberpunk for Star Wars in book two of *The Bounty Hunter Wars*, a story which seems to be only incidentally set against the same background as the films. At least Zahn, in the sequel to his own *Specter of the Past*, tells a more central story in the sequence involving Princess Leia, Luke Skywalker and Han Solo.

**Sheri S. Tepper – The Family Tree**

Voyager, 1998, 492pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 651016 7

A weed proves an unusually destructive intrusion into modern-day America, and travellers embark on what seems at first to be a very conventional fantasy quest. These two threads prove to intertwine very successfully in this novel which was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award. In **V198** Steve Jeffery said: 'Like Michael Swenwick, in *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, and her own *A Plague of Angels and Beauty*, there is both a playful and subversive use of fairy tale and fantasy elements to tell another story. This is Tepper back close to the top of her form, with the sheer strength of a master storyteller shining through.'

**Chet Williamson – Clash By Night**

Voyager, 1998, 333pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648366 6

Another novel built around the comics character, *The Crow*, in which violence and revenge again play a central part.

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**REVIEWER KEY:** AA – Andrew Adams, AF – Alan Fraser, AM – Andy Mills, AS – Andrew Seaman, BS – Brian Stableford, CA – Chris Amies, CB1 – Cherith Baldry, CB2 – Colin Bird, CH – Chris Hill, GA – Graham Andrews, GD – Gary Dalkin, GW – Gary Wilkinson, JB – Janet Barron, JDO – John D. Owen, JN – Joseph Nicholas, JW – Jon Wallace, KT – Kathy Taylor, KVB – K.V. Bailey, LB – Lynne Bispham, LH – Lesley Hatch, LJH – L. J. Hurst, MC – Mat Coward, MKS – Maureen Kincaid Speller, P – Particle, PH – Penny Hill, PK – Paul Kincaid, SD – Stephen Deas, SJ – Steve Jeffery, SP – Steve Palmer, ST – Sue Thomason, VL – Vikki Lee.