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VECTICR

208

Ken MacLeod Interview

Action • Eyes Wide Shut • Riddley Walker

**The Critical
Journal of
the BSFA**

Vector

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

Contents

- 3 Editorial: Vector Episode 208: A New Hope
by Gary S. Dalkin
- 3 ΨΦ – Letters to *Vector*
- 4 Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of the Post-human
An interview with Ken MacLeod
by Andrew M. Butler
- 8 Impermanent Revolution:
the Anarchic Utopias of Ken MacLeod
by Farah Mendlesohn
- 13 Taking ACTION – "Comic Strip Hooligans!"
Gary Wilkinson on the death of a comic
- 14 *Eyes Wide Shut* – a Sort of Review
by Ian Watson
- 16 Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*
– how and why it works
by Robert W. Hayler
- 18 SF: Literature of Ideas or Genre of Gimmicks
by Richard Salisbury
- 19 First Impressions
Book Reviews edited by Steve Jeffery

COVER: Ken MacLeod by Kim Sabinan.

VECTOR

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Editorial • Editorial

Vector Episode 208: A New Hope

Looming like a digital iceberg on the event horizon of the 20th century is... the 21st century. By the time I write my next editorial the pseudo-millennial nonsense will be over (the real millennium having passed several years ago), and we can get back to the future. Assuming, that is, we are not plunged by naughty software and recalcitrant embedded chips into *Mad Max* land and have to spend our time fighting barbarians and carrying water from the well.

There are two possibilities. Either writings science-fictional and fantastical will be different, or they won't. Currently SF is struggling, while fantasy is a boomtown. I wonder if underpinning the decline in interest in SF is an unconscious lack of faith in the existence of a future for science-fictional stories to take place in, as if the world is so frightened of the unknown future few are interested in speculation about it. Meanwhile fantasy regularly replays pseudo-Christian allegories of all encompassing battles between good and evil, and sells like hot cakes. It all began 20 years ago with *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Superman (The Movie)* and *The Sword of Shannara*. In my last editorial I did Terry Brooks, the author of this last title, a disservice, being snobbishly disparaging

of his writing. I have since read his latest book, *Angel Fire East*, and found a highly accomplished move into contemporary fantasy. My apologies to Mr Brooks for judging what I hadn't read.

However, if come next year, bar the post-party depression, business resumes as usual and the future is back on the agenda, what will happen? Will fantasy have to find new concerns? Will, come January, a 1990's apocalyptic, millennial fantasy, suddenly seem very dated indeed? What will the best selling fantasy writers write about, and will anyone still be interested? Or will the turn of the year prove totally meaningless, and readers, writers and publishers carry-on regardless? Somehow, I don't think so, but I wonder what the fiction of the next decade is going to address. The change may not come all at once, but by 2002 I would imagine fantasy fiction will have undergone some sort of fairly radical change.

Writing about the end is easy. SF writers having been doing it ever since Mary Shelley invented the genre, and followed *Frankenstein* with *The Last Man*. Apocalyptic destruction is inherently dramatic. Writing about the beginning is much harder. The End has a momentum all its own. The beginning has to be reinvented anew each time, and the forced to get a move on. Seeing how SF and fantasy can meet the challenge may be very interesting indeed.

by Gary S. Dalkin – 18th September, 1999



From Michel Delville, via email

In his review of my book on J.G. Ballard (V205), Andy Sawyer complains that my select bibliography does not include anything from *Science Fiction Studies* and concludes that I seem not to have consulted the magazine. If Mr Sawyer had bothered to read the book carefully he would have realized that the very first item on my list of critical studies is precisely Jean Baudrillard's essay on *Crash*, published in *SFS* in November 1991. Mr Sawyer also writes that I managed "to get wrong both title and publication date of John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*." In reality, the title and date in question refer to my own copy of the book, which carries the variant US title of Wyndham's novel, *Revolt of the Triffids*, and was first published by the Popular Library in 1952. I concur that I should have mentioned the other, more established title and must apologize for being careless about this. Still, I am surprised that someone as fastidious as Mr Sawyer should have gotten *my* name wrong (Michel, not Michael).

Andy Sawyer responds:

I'm grateful to Michel Delville for pointing out the errors in my review. The mis-spelling of his name was a simple typo (which shouldn't have happened: I know how irritating this can be and I apologise.) I'm more shamefaced, however, about the cack-handed sentence concerning *Science Fiction Studies*. By baldly saying "consulted" I clearly stated almost exactly the opposite of what I meant to point out: that the November issue of *SFS* also contained pieces (including the barbed and ambiguous letter from

Ballard himself) which both built upon and took issue with Baudrillard and postmodernism. It would surely have been useful to students to have this pointed out in a note.

All of which is no excuse for careless writing on my part, but I'm glad to have the chance to correct matters. I apologise for getting things wrong, and concede a 2-1 away win for Mr Delville. The manager will be having strong words with the team.

The editors note that we should have caught the misspelling of Mr Delville's name and apologise for the error.

Roy Gray writes in response to Andrew M. Butler's editorial in V207 on Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace, where he noted: "The background of the film is that the Republic is under threat from a federation of traders (which will presumably eventually metamorphose into an upstart Empire), and the planet Naboo is under a blockade (which metamorphoses into an illegal invasion)."

Roy Gray, via email:

Multiseries can start with small, with seeming ordinary events, and build up to the earthshaking. Trade/tax dispute a reasonable idea to start.

All Bond films have the same plot structure and end with the baddie's lair exploding. The first two Alien films did as well. *Star Wars* is, unfortunately perhaps, less cinematically innovative this time round.

Why the snide remark about H. Grant? He's only an actor. Plays roles and lines he's given. OK some trademark roles now but Stallone, Eastwood etc did the same. He can't play against type until he has established it and, anyway, where's the SF genre connection?

Andrew M. Butler replies: My throwaway line about how "I wanted to see the new Star Wars because I try to see everything (with the understandable exception of anything with Hugh Grant in)" was simply to note what it says, that I try and see every film

which is released in my locality, and have travelled elsewhere to catch items of particular interest. Such saturation coverage means that I end up seeing most films of significance, even if I suspect

that I'm not going to like it (say the second Austin Powers film or Wild Wild West, both of which were better than I feared but I wouldn't watch either again). However, there are the odd quality controls coming into play, particularly relating to romantic comedy, where I know I'll hate anything with Hugh Grant, and probably with Tom Hanks. In other words, I didn't even think of seeing the other hit movie of the summer, likely to be one of the top grossing British films, Notting Hill. No sf connection, (Lair of the White Worm?) but then I'm a fan of film first and of sf film, well, a long way down the list of film priorities.

Gary S. Dalkin replies: You might not be surprised that I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of Notting Hill, and there is an sf connection – Anna Scott stars in the Oscar winning! sf blockbuster Helix.

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Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of the Post-human

An interview with Ken MacLeod by Andrew M. Butler

Andrew M. Butler: It used to be that sf writers began as readers, worked a kind of apprenticeship in short stories, and then progressed to novels. Have you written any short stories?

Ken MacLeod: Yes, I wrote a handful of short stories, all of which got rejected. For very good reasons. That, and finding out from a mutual friend that Iain Banks was getting pretty damn pissed off with hearing from me about all the ideas I had for books which I didn't actually write, was what pushed me into writing *The Star Fraction*. I wanted to prove to myself that I could write a book.

AMB: I suspect for many sf readers, their first encounter with your name would have been in the dedication to Iain Banks's *Canal Dreams*. I presume you've had an influence on each other's work: how would you characterise this?

KM: I don't know if Iain's actual writing has influenced mine, or vice versa. We used to read and comment on each other's manuscripts – along with all the other people we roped in as informal critics – which was quite helpful, but that's fallen down a bit recently. We've known each other so long and have talked so much that any mutual influence is hard to characterise.

AMB: Both you and Iain are Scottish, of course, and there's been a great wealth of Scottish writing over the last twenty years or so, Alasdair Gray, Irvine Welsh and so on. I'd like to put an observation to you from nearly seventy years ago: Edwin Muir, writing about Walter Scott, argued that Scottish writers have a divided consciousness, partly from the need to write in English rather than Gaelic. So what's more important to you, being a Scottish writer who has written sf, or an sf writer who is Scottish?

KM: More the latter, I think. Scotland is there, it's something I can draw on, but England and particularly London are very much there as well.

Lewis Grassic Gibbon made the same point about writing in English rather than Scots, which seems more persuasive because Gaelic isn't a real option for most Scottish writers, whereas Scots is – see evryhin fae *A Scots Quair* tae *Trainspotting*. I don't have that myself – I don't speak Gaelic but my parents' first language was Gaelic, and in highlanders' English the Gaelic exists as an undertow in the vocabulary and sentence structure. Later I lived in Greenock and Glasgow and picked up a bit of Scots, but it isn'tae sumhin I lapse intae naturally, ye ken?

AMB: I ken. Thinking about it, I think I've conflated Scots and Gaelic there anyway. Let's move on.

Which authors have influenced you? I felt faint traces of the Foundation psychohistory in the Black Plan of *The Star Fraction*, and in Kohn being zapped an echo of the *Snow Crash* virus.

KM: I read *Snow Crash* between drafts of *The Star Fraction*, when

all that stuff was already in. You can imagine my mental checklist... drugs, viruses, balkanization, anarcho-capitalism... if he'd included Trotskyism as well I'd have quit while he was ahead. Actually I found *Snow Crash* both greatly enjoyable and greatly encouraging, in that it showed you could get away with what I was trying to do. Mike Holmes called *Snow Crash* the first post-libertarian novel, the first in which you didn't get 'the Barratt Homes brochure of libertarianism' – it's not selling real estate, it's showing the *real* estate, complete with the litter and the dogshit and the spindly trees.

As you might guess from this, many of the ideas were taken from non-fiction sources, all the way from heavy works of political philosophy to fleeting Usenet debates.

As to which authors have influenced me: I did what many British SF fans who were in their teens in the '70s seem to have done, which was to work through the public library's stock of yellow-spined Gollancz SF, from Aldiss to Zelazny. The specific influences though were of course Gibson in the first instance; then going back a bit, John Brunner for the balkanization in *The Jagged Orbit*, M. John Harrison for the seductively counter-factual gormlessness of ideology and bits of gurny, grungy style (I can hope), Robert Anton Wilson for the attitude to conspiracy theories. Ballard's short story 'The Killing

Ground', about a British NLF fighting a US occupation, was one of the seeds of the original idea of that imagined Britain, way back when I was at school.

AMB: The chapter headings to *The Cassini Division* are all taken from left-wing dystopias or utopias (although I'm not quite sure Valhalla quite fits the pattern). How far are you following or reacting to a tradition set down by Edward Bellamy and, more important politically, William Morris and Jack London?

KM: The Solar Union is *News From Nowhere* with nanotech and nukes; and Ellen's name must come from there, and her journey into the capitalist wilds of London is partly a wry reversal of the guest's experience in Morris. The True Knowledge, with its derivation from Marx, Darwin, Spencer and Nietzsche, is very much a clenched fist salute to Jack London. *News From Nowhere* and *The Iron Heel* had a big effect on me when I read them. And 'The State of the Art' – well, we know where that comes from. The other chapter headings were trawled from the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, to be honest, with 'Valhalla' being as you say an exception, a quite deliberate one in that Valhalla is a real place on Callisto.

AMB: My reading of Marx and others suggests that socialism is about mass movements, but sf is almost always about the triumph of the individual against the masses or a faceless enemy. How difficult is it to write a left-wing sf?

The True Knowledge...
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Jack London.

KM: I don't know if I do write left-wing SF. A lot of readers have a very different take on them. It's not surprising that libertarians enjoy the first two, but some even see *The Cassini Division* as an anti-socialist satire.

All my books have individuals who have more of an influence on history than, say, Lenin, which is very much in the bourgeois individualist SF tradition you mention. But individuals do have a huge influence, which only the most vulgarised Marxism can ignore. Outside of politics, look at Frank Whittle, who (according to his obituaries, anyway) developed the jet engine against enormous odds. He was like an Ayn Rand hero. Without him, long-range jet travel might have been decades later – and they weren't insignificant decades.

Some of the difficulties of describing mass revolutionary action have fallen away recently because we've all seen it on the telly – in Eastern Europe, South Africa, South Asia, and coming soon to...

Having been involved in very small-scale revolutionary politics it was basically a matter of scaling it up to that level. Getting the revolutionary politics wrong was one of the things that annoyed me in some SF, like *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* or Silverberg's *Hawksbill Station*.

AMB: Didn't John Newsinger describe *The Star Fraction* as the first Trotskyite utopia? Is that a description you recognise?

KM: He described it as a Trotskyist SF novel, which is a fair enough reading. There's not much in it of the Trotskyist utopia, and a lot about the libertarian utopia. Where the Trotskyism comes in is the almost mythical idea of the International, and the grubby reality of little sects, and in ideas like the first Republic being a popular front government, and therefore doomed. Across all four books there's a sort of working out of themes from Trotskyism and Marxism in general, centrally the consequences of the defeat of the socialist revolution in the twentieth century. In a way they're asking – what if the Marxist critique of capitalism and the libertarian critique of socialism are *both* true? What next?

AMB: At the risk of being at a 'Barratt Homes brochure' level, how would you describe libertarianism to someone who only thinks of politics as Labour, Tory and Liberal?

KM: Very carefully, I think! Basically it's what many people in Britain seem to have believed in before the rise of socialism. They believed in free trade and personal and civil liberties; they thought that able-bodied people can and should pay their own way, help those who couldn't through charity or friendly societies or other voluntary means, keep their noses out of their neighbours' private affairs, and be free to do what they like so long as they don't interfere with the same liberty of anyone else. Libertarians believe that most, if not all, of the services currently provided through the

state can be better provided through private enterprise, self-help, or voluntary organisation. A minority, known as anarcho-capitalists, believe that even national defence can be privatised. I think even they were a little amused when I took this as far as privatised nuclear deterrence, in *The Stone Canal*.

Having said that I should add that, while it may seem a bit Thatcherite to a British audience, it has some pretty radical implications which the Tories don't like at all, and which the Left is the poorer for missing out on. One of the things I like about the British libertarians is that they stick their necks out over issues like

legalising heroin, gay rights, the right to keep and bear arms, pornography, and strong encryption.

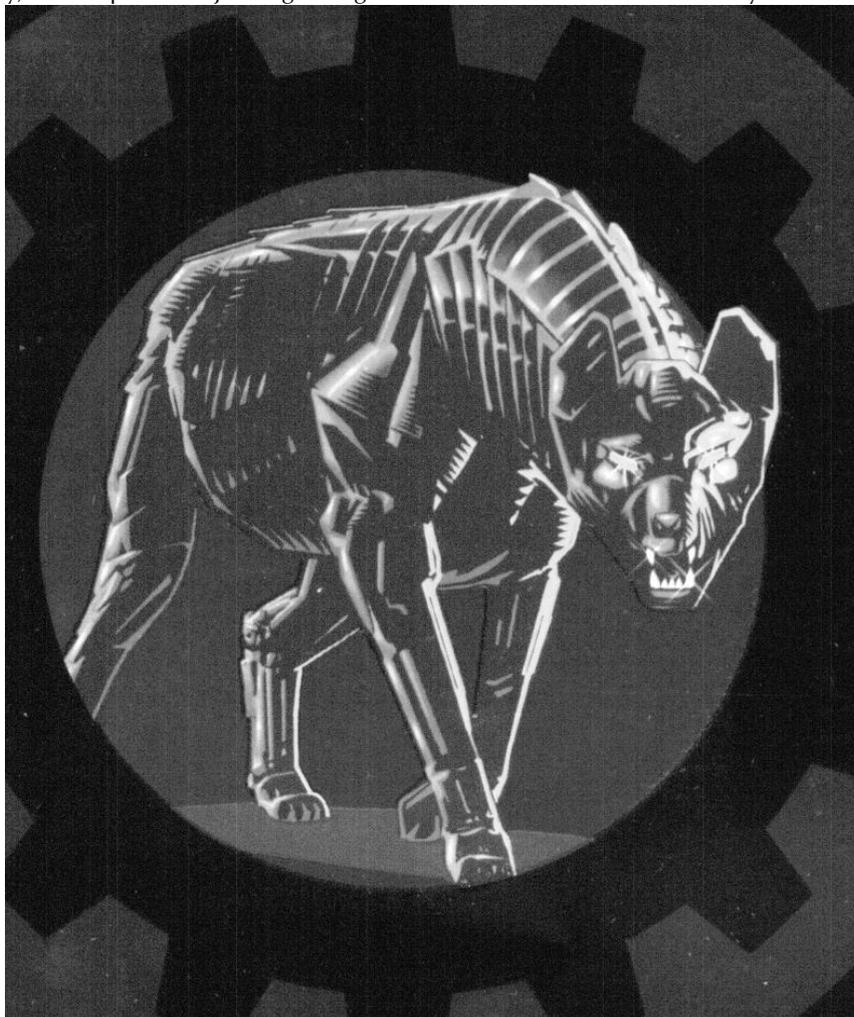
AMB: I wonder if you've come across this guy named Wordsworth Donisthorpe? He was a British libertarian in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and it seems as if he invented a film camera in about 1890 so that he could film socialist protests in Trafalgar Square. About ten frames of the film he took survived and it predates any other moving pictures. He was in dispute with Benjamin Tucker, who gets a few name checks in *The Stone Canal*, over the issue of personal liberty.

KM: I didn't know about the camera, but I think I've come across some articles by him in Tucker's *Instead of a Book*. There was a lot of debate in Tucker's

journal, *Liberty*, between anarchists, nineteenth-century liberals and socialists. There wasn't this frozen ideological talking past each other that you get far too much of now. Tucker called himself a socialist, and he was one in the sense that he believed that the wage-contract was unjust. That's where he differed from the liberals, and from most modern libertarians. It's kind of eerie to think that he wrote an obituary of Marx, and died in 1940 a few months before the assassination of Trotsky – almost as long and strange a life as Jonathan Wilde!

AMB: How do you respond to Heinlein's version of libertarianism that emerges in his writings?

KM: Well, there are several versions of libertarianism in Heinlein. I've read most of his books and short stories, apart from *I Will Fear No Evil*, *The Number of the Beast*, *Time Enough For Love*, and *Friday*. Some of these books have a reputation as solipsistic self-inflicted fanfic, and I don't want to let them contaminate my memory of his best works. The libertarianism of "If This Goes On—" had a big impact on me when I read it; likewise *Starship Troopers* and *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. I think they're very much in the tradition of Western classical liberalism and those like Michael Moorcock who read them as advocating some kind of fascism are quite mistaken. That isn't to say there aren't some very dodgy views scattered through Heinlein's work, or for that



matter through Western classical liberalism. But overall, well let's just say they're books I'd be very happy to see my children reading.

AMB: I noticed you mention *Starship Troopers* a couple of times in *Cydonia*, your children's novel. I want to talk about that later, but first let's look at *The Star Fraction*. It was short-listed for the Arthur C. Clarke Award; how important was this for your career?

KM: I think it helped a lot in raising my profile, and I'm very grateful that my first novel was taken that seriously.

AMB: In it you posit a future Britain which has moved beyond devolution and broken down into small enclaves – a bit like Stephenson's burbclaves in *Snow Crash*. I know some people have had problems believing this Balkanisation, especially at a time that the world seems to be becoming homogenised under News International, McDonalds, Disney and Microsoft, not to mention the united states of Europe.

KM: I wrote a wee article called 'Balkanizing Britain and other bad ideas' for a Croatian fanzine which made the point – stolen from yet another non-fiction source, an SWP article on nationalism – that the nation-state might be fragmenting at the same time as, and for the same reasons as, the actual production process is becoming more internationalised. You look at the TV pictures of the fighters on all sides in these little wars and they're wearing Nike and Adidas or quite good rip-offs and listening to the same pop songs and manipulating the news on CNN. Capitalism fights on all sides, which is one reason why socialist internationalism has a chance.

AMB: You kill off a major character towards the end of *The Star Fraction*, which is unusual to say the least, although they come back as a sort of simulacrum. We also meet, briefly, Jon Wilde, who is to play centre stage in *The Stone Canal*. How far at that point did you know about your next novel, *The Stone Canal*?

KM: Nothing at all! At least, not as a novel connected with *The Star Fraction*. If I'd been thinking in terms of sequels, I'd have kept that character. Unfortunately for him, he came to me with his death already part of his story. It pisses me off as much as it does anybody reading it, but what can I do? Like in *The Producers* – the author can't really pull rank on major characters.

Anyway, all that existed of *The Stone Canal* was New Mars – the idea of a planet that was like what Mars bloody-well should have been – its anarcho-capitalist system, which I imagined long before I'd heard of anarcho-capitalism, and some of the characters and the names: 'Stras Cobol, by The Stone Canal in Madrepore,' was a phrase that came into my head twenty years before the book was written, and I swear it all grew from that.

AMB: I keep coming across references to Jonathan Wild, an eighteenth-century thief, in part inspiration for *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay, and in turn *The Threepenny Opera* by Brecht. Is there any connection to your own character of Wilde?

KM: I recently found an article about him in an old issue of the children's magazine *Look and Learn*, which I had certainly read and long forgotten. He actually set up in business as a sort of anarcho-capitalist protection agency, and got paid for investigating the crimes he'd committed himself, until somebody got suspicious and he ended up on the gallows. So the name seems rather apt.

But the name consciously came about because when the character first appears in *The Star Fraction*, he in some ways – not all – superficially resembles the real-life Libertarian Alliance director Chris Tame. So I chose the name 'Jon Wilde' to make clear that he was Not Chris Tame! Though if Chris Tame lives into the 2040s – which he has every intention of doing – I expect he'll

be at least as influential and famous and mysterious as Wilde.

AMB: *The Stone Canal* has that double path of history and future, centring on the Glasgow Worldcon which saw the launch of *The Star Fraction*. How important was that convention to you?

KM: It was the first SF convention I attended, and I enjoyed it greatly. The launch and the launch party were a big success and I met a lot of people who are still friends. Apart from people in the Edinburgh SF societies I knew hardly anyone in SF or fandom, I had no short stories and this was my first novel, this was the biggest SF convention I could possibly have attended, and there I was on a couple of panels. In at the deep end! But the SF world is endlessly welcoming and I really appreciate that.

I was quite flattered when someone – I think it was Jo Walton – said recently on Usenet that she could almost remember seeing Jon Wilde's Space Merchants stall between the Russian fans' stall and Yvonne Meaney's.

AMB: To be honest I was often more caught up in the historical recreations than the future: have you ever considered writing straightforwardly political novels, say under the pseudonym of Ken M. MacLeod?

KM: Oh yes. (And 'M' really is my middle initial.) I have some ideas for mainstream fiction, and specifically for at least one novel set in the sort of milieu that appears in the early chapters of *The Stone Canal*.

AMB: I've been reading about top-down and bottom-up post-humans, in particular in relation to Greg Egan's *Permutation City*. Post-human identity can be something programmed or derive from a manufactured or cloned bodies. In Jay-Dub and the revived Jonathan Wilde of *The Stone Canal* you've sort of got this same division. I wonder if Egan is also someone you've read?

KM: Yes indeed, I've read the short stories in *Axiomatic* and all the novels except *Distress*. I admire Egan a lot for his ability to write stories around ideas that the rest of us – well, I, anyway – haven't even read about yet. The first of his stories I read, in *Interzone*, was 'Learning to be Me' which I thought made its point very elegantly. It should be in university philosophy texts. In a thread on the Usenet group rasfw with

the rather libellous name 'Did Egan plagiarise Daniel Dennett?' (which he didn't, of course) I got into the first of several heated debates about AI consciousness in which it became clear that I think the philosophy of mind implied in my own books, let alone in Egan's, is complete bollocks.

AMB: As I was reading through *The Cassini Division*, and the more I reread *The Stone Canal*, the less I'm certain how much we're meant to support your chief protagonists. You can see why Wilde gets Dave Reid onto junkmail lists, but he still doesn't come out of it very well. By the end of *The Cassini Division* the chief character has committed genocide. And some of the villains seem to be espousing reasonable view points. Is this to shake us out of simplistic identification of white hats and black hats, or should we be rooting for mass extinction of a given race?

KM: Definitely I would hope that readers question the motives and morality of all the major characters. Somebody said of them that they are virtuous but not necessarily moral, and that sounds about right. But let's get this genocide business into perspective. The Jovians in *The Cassini Division* aren't a race or species, they're what I would call a post-human clade who've already defected from the moral framework. The humans are entirely in a state of nature with respect to them, and in that context, after the first defection it's down to who's faster on the draw.

The only real and tragic AI genocide is that in *The Star Fraction*, and the teller of that tale, the one who says at the end 'I-

**Capitalism fights on
all sides, which is one
reason why socialist
internationalism has a
chance.**

and-I survive', is very much still around in the other books, and my intention is that *its* benevolence to humanity can be seen as both genuine and terrifying.

AMB: Let's talk about your novel for The Web sequence, *Cydonia*. How far were you working with a given, writing in some one else's universe?

KM: Yes and no. There's a series bible, which we all studied, and the six authors of the second series met around a table with the editor, Simon Spanton, and brainstormed a 'six-book story arc' in one afternoon. Pat Cadigan started writing on her laptop right there! I already had the basic idea for the Cydonia Cafe, and it wasn't too much of a problem to slot it in its place and put out tendrils to the other stories people were making up.

Now, every writer involved had very much their own take on the consensus world of 2028, and used it for their own themes. Mine were politics, Scotland, religion, and so on.

What readers have to remember, though, for any book in the series is that it isn't a stand-alone – there are ideas and incidents in it which look as though they should be developed further, which only get developed in the other books. Just as in the first series the overall story was about the sinister woman at the centre of the web, this series is about alien transmissions. It should look different when it's read as part of that series, or when it comes out as part of the omnibus edition, *The Web 2028*.

AMB: How different did you find writing for children than writing for adults?

KM: Apart from leaving out the swear-words, and now and again restraining my tendency to pick the obscure but precise word, not very much.

AMB: The BBC refused to show a *Next Generation* episode which mentioned a republican victory in Northern Ireland. Did you have any problems with your editor over your complex treatment of Irish and Scottish, republican and loyalist politics in the book?

KM: Absolutely no problems at all; Simon was very pleased with it. There's one passage I'd like to change, myself, because a friend in Northern Ireland has persuaded me it's implausible. And once or twice I've been sloppy in distinguishing between Loyalist and Unionist. But that's all.

AMB: Your latest novel is *The Sky Road*, which like *The Stone Canal* is told in two story arcs. Half of it is set some time after the 'historical' story arc of *The Stone Canal* concludes, but the other half doesn't really square with the events of *The Cassini Division*, nor I suspect with the New Mars arc of *The Stone Canal*. What led you to posit what we might call an alternate world version of the sequence?

KM: Originally I intended to write a story around Boris, Ellen's lover in *The Cassini Division*, and his century-long slog with the Sheenisov mobile artillery from Vladivostok to Lisbon. But I couldn't get excited about him, nor about the stacks of research that would be needed. Then it occurred to me to wonder about how Myra would have reacted to the Sheenisov advance, and that she was an interesting character in her own right. And as I

imagined her doom, she refused to take it lying down, and I got this picture of the statues and murals of her as she'd be remembered in the different future that her refusal would bring about. From there it was a short step to imagining someone looking at one of those statues. The characters and general situation, even the names, of Clovis and Merrial had been in my mind for years, and they muscled in to the story too.

AMB: We meet a couple of returning characters here – most prominently Myra Godwin, as you say, from *The Stone Canal*. Is the name a nod to William Godwin? It's a transposition of two letters from Mary Shelley's maiden name.

KM: Ah, I didn't notice the point about her first name, but the surname is a nod to William Godwin, yes.

AMB: There's also Ellen, glimpsed briefly, from *The Cassini Division*, and Jordan, from *The Star Fraction*. Is this the same Jordan as in the *Book of Jordan* which gets mentioned in the intervening novels?

KM: Yes indeed, but one who perhaps made different decisions, and had a different ironic fate. His books don't seem to survive in Clovis's world, but his ideas definitely do. I have to admit that I really enjoyed what I did to him in *The Sky Road*.

AMB: The character who never really comes centre stage, and lurks behind each of the storylines like some kind of Moriarty figure is David Reid. Will he ever get a novel of his own?

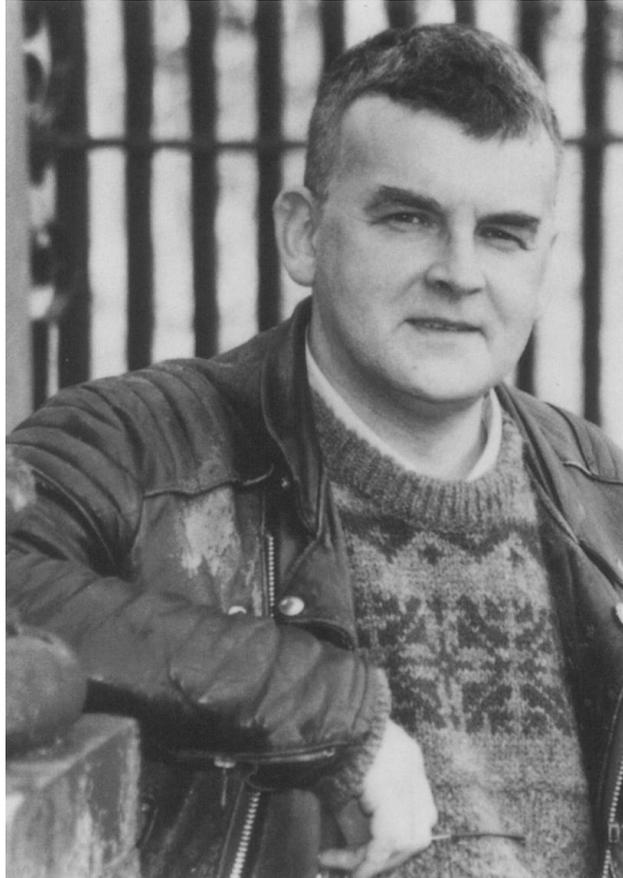
KM: He might, in fact one idea I have is to write a mainstream novel about him and maybe Myra, in the 1970s and 1990s. I like the idea of writing a novel that looks like a self-contained, contemporary novel about somebody's personal

problems, and never mentioning that the character has this long bizarre future ahead. It would reinforce one of the points of *The Stone Canal*, one recently made non-fictionally in Damien Broderick's *The Last Mortal Generation* – that many of us alive today may have a longer and stranger future than we now imagine.

AMB: What are you writing next? I read that you've spotted a possible other novel in the sequence, and alternate histories allow you all sorts of permutations. Are you tempted to go back in time and look at the earlier history of the Internationals, or even the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688? You've already mentioned working around the early chapters of *The Stone Canal*.

KM: Well, that one might be Reid's story, but there's also an idea I have for a novel set in the 70s far left milieu. I don't intend to write anything more in this sequence, at least for now, because I think the four books make a structure on their own. They give different takes on a central sequence of events and themes. And I don't yet know enough history to write alternate history.

So what I'm working on at the moment is a novel that could be the first in a more deliberate series, set in a quite different future, with a narrative starting maybe around fifty years hence. It's going to be focused around different themes, aliens rather than AI, for a start, and no Fourth Internationalists so far, but still structured by wars and revolutions to come.



AMB: I'm looking forward to it already. Ken MacLeod, thanks for your time.

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TO GO ALONGSIDE OUR INTERVIEW WITH KEN MACLEOD, WE OFFER AN EXAMINATION BY FARAH MENDLESOHN OF UTOPIANISM AND ANARCHISM IN HIS WORKS. THE ARTICLE IS PART OF A LONGER PIECE OF WORK WHICH CONSIDERS MACLEOD'S FICTIONAL REVOLUTIONS IN DETAIL, AS WELL AS HIS RESPONSES TO TECHNOLOGY, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF HUMANITY.

Impermanent Revolution: the Anarchic Utopias of Ken MacLeod by Farah Mendlesohn

Whether Ken MacLeod's novels, the Fall Revolution sequence, form a coherent utopian project is open to argument. He himself has denied it (see the interview by Roz Kaveny on Amazon.co.uk), while he clearly pays homage to a number of utopian texts. In *The Cassini Division* (1998), for example, all but one of the chapter headings is the title of a utopian novel. MacLeod is engaged in a process of world-building which hinges on extrapolative, hard-edged political sf. The nature of humanity and the societies we are capable of creating are fundamental to the speculative nature of his novels. However, a number of utopian theorists, most notably Darko Suvin, have asserted that it is no longer possible to write a true utopian text: in our postmodern age the fundamental structures of the utopia – such as the ideology shared by an entire community, the maintenance of an absolute value position and a true belief in the possibility of utopia – are no longer thought to be viable. This late in the day, is it possible for the Fall Revolution sequence to join the utopian canon?

Those who have read Delany's *Triton* (1975) would find the existence of a postmodern utopia plausible. Academic Ruth Levitas has asserted that a postmodernist utopia would need to embrace pluralism, without becoming pathological, and would need to envisage utopia as a process rather than representation. *Triton* clearly meets her definition, but so too do the books which comprise the Fall Revolution sequence. In addition, they also seem to meet many of Suvin's demands for classical utopian literature. Although they present four alternative possibilities, they are all structured around the same idea: the creation of absolute liberty. While MacLeod may be more convinced by some of the programmes he presents than by others, the value position he adopts – the idealisation of liberty – is clear and consistent, and in his interviews and correspondence he has displayed the political engagement with these beliefs that the classic utopia requires. The novels continually test ways of being human while continually asserting that the human state is positive. They are part of, and extend, the utopian tradition.

One major flaw of much sf has been its authors' inability to extrapolate social change with the same credibility as technological change. Too many writers have assumed that the future is an unending journey into American liberal-capitalism and have been unable make the leap to encompass intellectual change. In MacLeod's novels technological change drives widespread social dislocation and intellectual reconfiguration. Such new patterns should be, but rarely are, crucial to the sf project. It should be in alien world sf, as in the fiction of, say, David Brin or Mary Doria Russell. It is relatively rare to look for it, never mind to find it, in near future humano-centric sf.

MacLeod's novels work at a number of levels: they explore revolutions, posit societies, challenge the meaning of human agency and freedom and continually question how our choice of societal structure affects the technology we choose to employ.

However, in this article I intend to concentrate very narrowly on the ideological underpinnings of MacLeod's utopias in the Fall Revolution sequence. This currently consists of four texts – *The Star Fraction* (1995), *The Stone Canal* (1996), *The Cassini Division* (1998) and *The Sky Road* (1999) – or five if you count *Cydonia* (1998), part of the sequence of "The Web" novels for young adults and which I will return to in the longer version of this article.

In *The Star Fraction*, Britain is divided into semi-autonomous city states, each suspicious of the other and ruled over by the Hanoverian regime. The US/UN controls technological research and the political behaviour of other governments and a revolution, planned for over twenty years, is reaching maturity.

In *The Stone Canal*, we learn more about the world revolution, but the main plot hinges on the rôle of Jon Wilde, once a revolutionary in London, now a catalyst for social change on the colony world of New Mars. Artificial intelligence, just one small thread of *The Star Fraction*, here comes to the fore as the gynoid Dee fights for recognition of her sapience. Meanwhile the colonists wonder if they can risk reviving the uploaded personalities of "the fast folk".

In *The Cassini Division*, these fast folk form the centre of the plot. The viral attacks of the Jovians, beings evolved from uploaded humans, form the core of what threatens at times to become a James Bond pastiche, complete with a countdown to armageddon courtesy of a deflected asteroid.

Finally, in *The Sky Road*, the protagonist seeks to write a history of the final revolution and finds himself caught up in a plot to install an artificial intelligence in a prototype rocket, the same artificial intelligence which may have brought down the previous world order.

In far too many fictional utopias, the political intentions usurp the story-telling: description of utopia overtakes plot. In MacLeod's novels, the plot illuminates the brickwork of the utopia, from casual references to a Summerhill style "school" on the beach (*The Cassini Division*, p. 14),

to the shock-horror reactions of building workers to the threat of 2% inflation (*The Sky Road*, p. 44). Too many utopian novels also avoid conflict and methodologies of conflict resolution, whereas MacLeod explores this. His avoidance of these two flaws can be traced directly to the ideological paradigms which are embedded in the novels.

Each of MacLeod's utopias is built upon a different anarchist theory. He asserts that the political ideology behind these revolutions is "[...] just boringly orthodox Marxism – capitalism [...] doomed to collapse into socialism or barbarism – combined with a boringly orthodox bourgeois scepticism about socialism" (MacLeod, email 19 July 1999). However, the outcome of these revolutions – the failure of the revolutionary élite to secure power in the face of a wider social upheaval – seems more consistent with the Russian anarchists Bakunin and Kropotkin's assertions that political revolution, led by an élite, can succeed only in turning itself into a state. The successful revolutions in these

One major flaw of much sf has been its authors' inability to extrapolate social change with the same credibility as technological change.

novels are the social upheavals which derail the revolutions, and which the state (whether capitalist or not) cannot suppress through political means. Such revolutions, perhaps inevitably, are conducted with violence, and result in armed societies. If utopia is synonymous with peace then MacLeod's texts are not utopian; but if utopia means liberty, then violence may be part of the package.

The Fall Revolution sequence tries to show how a viable anarchy might function. Unlike many utopian authors MacLeod provides a choice of models, a multiplicity in itself crucial to any anarchist project. To insist on only one model or truth for utopia would be to revert to ideological authoritarianism. MacLeod outlines for us four potential or actual utopias: a Trotskyite utopia (which never comes to pass) in *The Star Fraction*, a libertarian, anarcho-capitalist society in both isolated and universalist form in *The Stone Canal*, a socialist Stirnerite anarchy in *The Cassini Division*, and, most recently in *The Sky Road*, an ecotopia which may or may not be anarchic or libertarian, depending on one's definition. The common threads between the three established utopias are the rejection of the state as the primary means of organisation, and the assertion of utopia as a necessarily civilised and technological project, rather than as a retreat to primitivism. It is these latter three novels which I will focus on in this article.

In principle each utopia provides unlimited freedom, but in reality each asserts a paradigm which limits the range of acceptable and *functional* behaviour. What distinguishes two of the three utopias is that they construct social space for deviance. This is most obvious in *The Cassini Division*, in which (with a nod towards William Morris), the capitalist non-co-operators live across the river in the villages and hamlets of London. It is intrinsic in the balkanised structure of *The Sky Road*.

The most impressive of these three utopias is the anarcho-capitalist one, and it is impressive because, in the literary context, it is the most unusual. Fictional co-operative societies are usually based on the assumption that all human beings are warm and generous, rather than on self-interest and contractarianism. This empowers individuals (and sometimes groups) to negotiate agreements over services; such services extend from education and street cleaning to law enforcement. There are three versions of this co-operative society: the proto-anarchy of Norlonto in *The Star Fraction*, restricted to one "country" located in central London and reliant on the good will of its neighbours for its existence (although supported by its nuclear deterrent, bought on the free market); the universalist and therefore unavoidably coercive anarchy of New Mars (in *The Stone Canal*); and the micro-anarchy of the non-co-operator London villages in *The Cassini Division* which functions as a cross between an open prison (for ideas rather than people) and a reservation.

Anarcho-capitalism is a morality-free paradigm, in itself a departure from the assumptions which usually construct utopias: human beings are neither good or bad, but are individuals and therefore have a capacity to make decisions and agreements in their own best interest. This may contradict an outsider's assessment of what is best interest (Dworkin, 1983). Models for

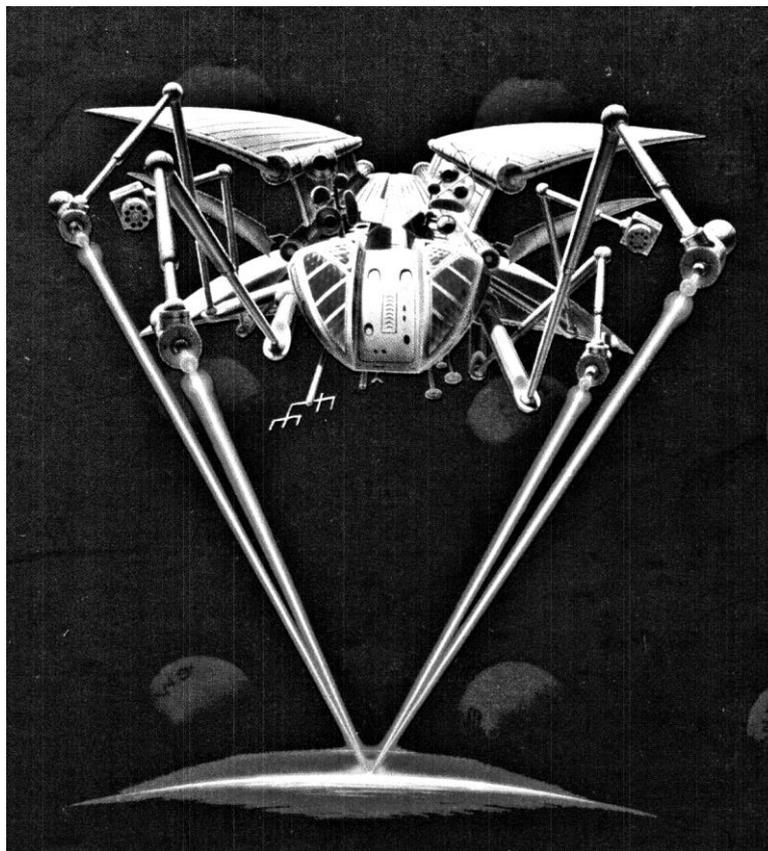
formalising the operation of this "best interest" have varied but the apparently dominant one, and the form used here, is contractarianism. This assumes two things: that enforcement of contracts emerges from the need to negotiate future contracts in good faith, and that every individual is in a position to negotiate as an equal. The fallacy of the latter point is obvious but is acknowledged and *accepted* in these texts. Paradoxically, inequality, even slavery, may well be intrinsic to utopia: Moh Kohn argues gloomily. "It comes with the property" (*The Star Fraction*, pp. 176-177), and on New Mars no-one prevents another from selling themselves.

There appears to be no provision for the education and health of the poor (although Norlonto has a number of charities which offer military defence to those without militia contracts, and free access to the cable networks), but the crucial factor is that in the absence of the state, there is no facility for the rich (in power and/or capital) to enforce their will.

On New Mars, the isolated colony world at the end of the Malley Mile, if a group can hold together long enough, and the employer can find no other source of labour, there is no state to

intervene on their behalf. If one side resorts to violence, this will not be prevented, but neither will a violent response; there are no policemen to rule striking a "breach of the peace" or strike breaking a "restoration of law and order". In the absence of state intervention, it is in the interests of both sides to negotiate: there are no false supports for the non-co-operator. It is also not safe to be an exploiter: while no-one is prevented from selling themselves, and there are no protective labour laws, neither is there anyone to prevent the exploited taking revenge, as Ax points out when he acts against his clients (*The Stone Canal*, p. 96).

Contractarianism is extended to the operation of the law, as Jon Wilde is pleased to discover. Going to court can lead to a reputation for civilised



negotiation: thus Wilde's victory over his old comrade and enemy, Dave Reid, is in part one of public relations. Reid fails to play the game within the rules of the contract and attempts to open fire in the court room, an action which costs him future contracts. The impartiality of the law in a contractarian society is ensured by long-term planning and good business practices. If both sides must agree to a choice of judge and pay a publicly negotiated rate, there is little incentive for a judge to develop a long-term and sustained prejudice on an issue. Litigants would simply go elsewhere. The judge, Eon Talgarth, cannot incorporate either his prejudice for machines or his hostility to Jon Wilde into his judgement without jeopardising the standing of his court. Impartiality is ensured by long range self-interest. Yet, hidden beneath the language of contractarianism and self-interest is the fact that the peaceful resolution of conflict creates bonds within society. The citizens of New Mars, while ostensibly individuals, are actually enmeshed in a network of contracts and relationships.

The underlying paradigm therefore is a combination of free consent and free action underpinned by the belief that impartiality, freedom and justice can be *bought by the individual*

and that the individual is sovereign if all other restraints are removed. The system shapes behaviour, not the other way around: the 'invisible hand' of the market structures the behaviour of individuals. The false logic of statist capitalism which asserts innate human nature as the driving force of the market system is missing and with it the "moral" assertion that some kinds of intervention (usually on behalf of the state or its allies) can be justified.

Back in London, in New Mars' distant past, freedom to purchase fundamental needs allows Norlonto's survival in the face of ideological opposition. Norlonto 'sells' free speech to its more repressive neighbours, along with the products of free speech (science and technology). Even the competitor utopia of fundamentalist Beulah City needs Norlonto to survive. That Norlonto's freedom is bought through its usefulness, rather than through military strength, is underlined when Norlonto loses its nuclear deterrent as the price of survival. What is useful cannot easily be repressed and this extends beyond basic needs to luxuries; if a market can be found for a product it will be produced.

In the socialist world of *The Cassini Division* anarcho-capitalism itself is the niche product: it exists in London at the heart of the Solar Union in much the same way as Norlonto was needed as an ideological escape route. Although the need is less recognised – any luxury is rarely acknowledged as a necessity – those who can supply it (Jewish peddlers, Asian shop-keepers in Kenya, tinkers in *The Sky Road*) are often resented. It is never clear whether the safety valve of the non-co villages in *The Cassini Division* is a greater threat to the Solar Union or vice versa.

The world of *The Cassini Division* is deeply deceptive on two levels. Our first acquaintance with it leads us to believe we are in a classic utopia of collective harmony in which the individual is subsumed into the collective, aided by the novel's opening pastiche of Morris's *News From Nowhere*. Parties are open to all, schooling takes place on a beach in which children choose their own education, and adults are clearly willing to give up their time to teach. There is a co-operative approach to the provision of airport refreshments, politesse includes judging precisely how much reading to take from a communal library before going on a journey, and the political system appears to rest on self-selective participation. The political organisation appears superficially to be that of a liberal democracy but with all permitted to take part. Involvement is clearly voluntary but almost all seem willing to volunteer. There is a suggestion that no-one represents anyone else, but that anyone may elect themselves to any rôle. That some of the apparent collectivity is a response to an on-going cold war is mildly disturbing but its ramifications take a while to emerge.

Behind all this apparent collectivity, however, is an extreme individualism. The world of *The Cassini Division* rests on an ideology which claims not to be an ideology: the True Knowledge. In one sense its claim is justified in that the True Knowledge focuses not on what to think, but how to think. It offers a structured paradigm for decision-making rather than an economic or political programme for material construction or the shaping of ideology. Built on an eclectic selection of texts (available to imprisoned revolutionaries, *The Sky Road*, p. 22) in which Darwin is prominent, the True Knowledge has little in common with classic socialism and the apparent collectivity does not supersede individual sovereignty. The True Knowledge asserts that, first, there is no such abstraction as "man" and that, second, one can only act in one's own interests. All choices can be made only in terms of whether others are acting in their own interest, but this does not necessarily create atomisation. Instead, it is possible to exist in a community of flowing and fluid egoist associations (Stirner, 1847) in which individuals choose to associate with others. Thus, it is in one's own interest to ensure an educated populace and what one loans today will be available to

one later. Contractarian purchases are not necessary because people are linked instead by long-term notions of self-interest and a practical mode of exchange (rather than trade) which seems to operate as material karma. One co-operates not because this is intrinsically good – this is a value free system – but because it is in one's own interests.

However, as Ellen May Ngwethu (the principal protagonist of *The Cassini Division*) discovers, to stray from others' interpretation of the True Knowledge is to leave the body politic. In this way it is just as rigid and controlling as were the assumptions of American liberalism in the Cold War of the 1950s – it imposes a disturbing

sense of compulsory conformity not evident on New Mars.

Unlike socialism, which has traditionally attempted to undermine the binary division of 'Us' and 'Them', the Stirnerite socialism of this world reinforces the division. In contrast to the majority of utopias, the Stirnerite utopia of *The Cassini Division* assumes fundamental conflict is built in to the successful and generally peaceful functioning of society. Conflicts of interest are

crucial to this utopia. In this society, 'Us' is whoever supports my interest, and 'Them' are those who do not.

The cold war status of the Earth serves to reinforce this division, creating a cosy communality of mankind which obscures the more subtle divisions which are played out within the 'rules' of the True Knowledge. The True Knowledge, while emphasising individual sovereignty, asserts that benefit is to be gained from identification with the whole. Ellen falls outside her colleagues' understanding of the True Knowledge because her changing definition of 'us and them' removes their incentive to freely associate with her. In addition, humans have no incentive to associate with non-humans. But equally, in the absence of the false ideology of Party which asserts (irrational) loyalty now and forever, Ellen's rejection only lasts as long as the crisis. In a Stirnerite utopia, "The party is only ever [...] a part. He is a party and he partakes" (Stirner, 1843). The association cannot formally exclude people: only individuals can refuse to associate with other individuals. Without the ability to coerce others into maintaining this exclusion, long term exclusion is impossible to maintain. Further, in a world structured around incentive, once an event has passed, it is irrational to exclude potentially beneficial future associations: when Ellen's arguments are proved correct she is welcomed back into the fold. This is a profoundly individualist paradigm but one which sees the individual acting in her own interest in bipolar terms, as threat or ally.

In contrast, the paradigm of anarcho-capitalism maintains a much more neutral understanding of the individual. At the same time, the utopian paradigm of the Solar Union removes some of the tensions and structures which force the creation of community. In the Solar Union, associations are made in the context of 'now' whereas on New Mars an individual's contractarian 'history' forms the premise of all future bargains.

The fourth of the utopias, the semi-pastoral utopian Scotland of *The Sky Road*, is the most assertively communal, and it is also the most regional. Both New Mars and the Earth of *The Cassini Division*, for all their anti-statist stance, have the whiff of world government about them. The ecotopia of *The Sky Road* consists of a series of cantons, inter-locking guild systems and the occasional congress. Sarcastic comments (pp. 44, 76) confirm the generally anti-EU/super-state tenor of *The Star Fraction*. Currencies are small-scale and local and succeed in keeping inflation below 2%. Like colonial America, it rests its system on the existence of a Jeffersonian independent yeoman and artisan culture and the involvement of every independent man in the local political system – and in this book, MacLeod seems to mean 'man'.

The political paradigm of the novel sits on the importance of individual honour reinforced by community loyalty to the honour

MacLeod's depiction of the world in *The Cassini Division* is deeply deceptive (the world ... seems all too plausible).

code: murder is visited with vengeance. Pastoralism is not here associated with pacifism as it so often has been. Individual honour also involves individual agency, and the conspiracy of the plot hinges around the attempt of two of the characters to abolish the collective decision-making process, in much the same way that Ellen does. The difference is that while Ellen is acting within the paradigm of her world – do what you can get away with – Fergal and Merial are not. Merial indeed continues to pursue the statist-revolutionary policies of her Trotskyist youth, convinced, many years after their failure and the success of a mass revolution, that the revolutionary élite does know best.

The Sky Road's society is the most difficult to define as utopian as there exists a community control of morals and behaviour which is not found on New Mars or in *The Cassini Division*. In addition, it is rather difficult, after the hard-edged realities of the first three books, to believe that MacLeod is actually convinced by the society he creates for *The Sky Road*. There is a cosiness to this world rooted in the doctrines of Winstanley, Morris, Godwin, Proudhon and Tolstoy which, while superficially attractive, alert us to the possibility of future repression by friends and neighbours, caste-systems and witchhunts. This utopia may (or may not) harbour a snake in the apple tree.

The Sky Road is also MacLeod's only primitivist utopia. Primitivism has held enormous attractions for some utopian thinkers: the conviction that the past was better than the present is a fallacy shared by Morrisian socialists and Jeffersonians, writers of Arthurian romance and eco-feminists – who always seem to overlook the sexism of agrarian and countercultural communities. (This is why I have no complaints with the portrayal of women in *The Sky Road*; rather, MacLeod's depiction of women at the margins of political society, in which Merial's position within the conspiracy is dependent on her relationship to Fergal seems all too plausible). Much of the blame for this woolly thinking can be laid at the door of the French Enlightenment philosopher Rousseau who secularised the Christian mythos of Eden and the Fall into the 'state of nature' in which we were without laws and needed none. Even the cold water of Darwinian theory has not been able to root out this particular meme, but from at least the nineteenth century utopian and socialist thought began to argue that the way to the more just society might lie in the embracing of technology rather than in its rejection, that the capacity for utopia is linked to civilisation not primitivism, and that technology can shape the nature of the utopia as it evolves (see Walford).

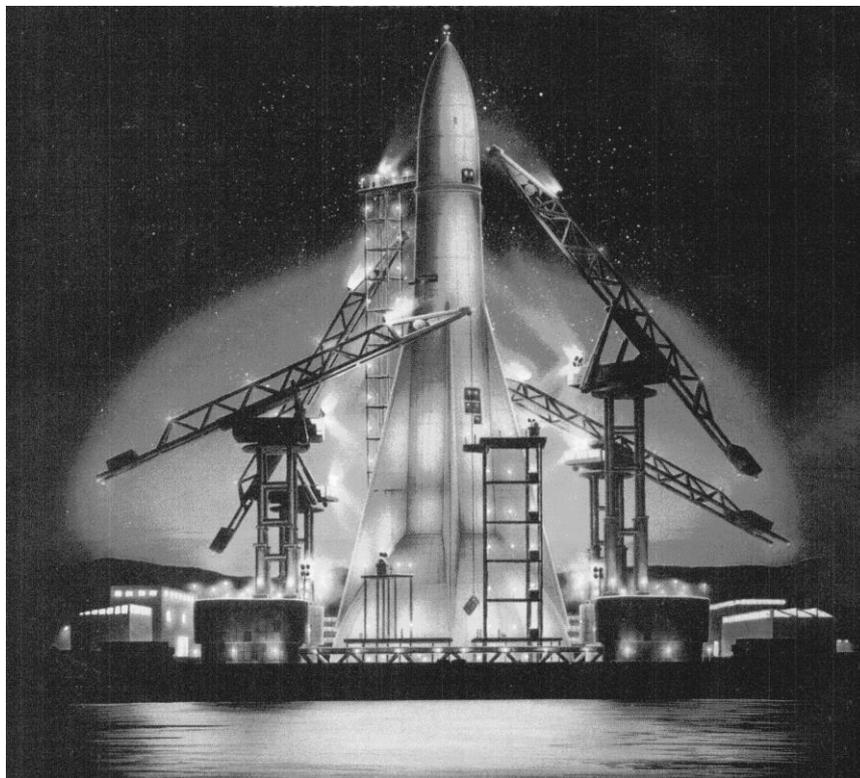
In the first three books of the sequence it is absolutely clear that MacLeod embraces this belief. For Moh Kohn, the principal protagonist, the Green vision is unholy: "Give me deep technology any day. They don't scare me. I'm damned if I'll crawl, my children's children crawl on the earth in some kind a fuckin' harmony with the environment. Yeah, till the next ice age or the next asteroid impact [...]" (*The Star Fraction*, p. 90). The Greens, withdrawing from the cities and from the benefits of

technology to live closer to nature are antithetical to civilised society: their culture denies free speech and free activity and their idea of the future is one which restricts humanity to the rôle of symbiont on the planetary surface. They are, quite literally, the barbarians at the gate (MacLeod, 2000). Nothing which we see in the first three books suggests that MacLeod finds the idea of an ecotopia attractive.

The principal assertion of the first three books clearly supports the idea that utopia *needs* deep technology. With sufficiently high levels of technology one can circumvent the endless debates about who deals with the trash in utopia. *The Cassini Division's* pastoralism is supported by nano-tech, while its steam-engine computers (with their need for large supplies of water) reinforce a thoroughly deceptive agrarian image. The New Mars colony of *The Stone Canal* rests absolutely on the harnessing of technology both to permit colonisation and to take on the work no individual wants to do. However, one consequence is a settlement in which four-fifths of the built-up area is mechanical, whose sole purpose is to support the other fifth. If the machines are recognised as autonomous, a distinct possibility by the end of the novel, the utopian status of the society is brought into question unless, to return to my earliest assertion, the novel can be framed within Ruth Levitas's conceptualisation of the postmodernist utopia as process. The next stage of New Mars is clearly the incorporation or rejection of machine intelligence into the anarcho-capitalist utopia, reinforcing the connection between utopia and technology. Ironically, its internal chaos with the ability to embrace and absorb the agitator may prove more resilient than the more apparently stable systems depicted in *The Cassini Division* and *The Sky Road*.

The primitivism of *The Sky Road* seems at first an attempt to test the proposition that certain levels of technology are necessary to achieve utopia, but it seems more likely that it is the proof, a denial of the Green project. For all the initial pre-Raphaelitism of the opening scene – the fairground comes straight from endless and indistinguishable genre fantasies – we are rapidly exposed to the dissonance of electric trains to Glasgow, efficiently lit streets and a rocket ship waiting to take off from the ship-yard. However,

like the Eloi, the mainstream inhabitants of *The Sky Road* are reliant on the scientific knowledge of 'tinkers', outcast others, for their standard of living: they are content to set themselves up as arbiters of acceptable versus sinful logic while keeping their own hands clean. They engage in what George McKay has termed the "punk-DIY" of the Green movement which validates computers and faxes while rejecting the banks and multinational corporations which make them possible. Like the Morlocks, the tinkers operate the technology but have lost much of the scientific theory which would permit creativity and



growth.

This is not the eco-topia that the Reverend Jordan, one Beulah City apostate last seen in *The Star Fraction*, the later creator of spiritual rationalism (a version of Winstanleyism that would pass unnoticed in any Quaker Meeting) envisaged, for it is too

industrial, but neither is it a particularly dynamic world in its own terms. It is oddly insular, lacking the biting curiosity of the other utopias, and fundamentally conformist. In *The Sky Road* MacLeod seems to have abandoned faith in individual risk and agency in favour of the demanding protection of a mutualist society.

The tinkers alert us to the perils of this society. They exist courtesy of a religious injunction to tolerance; for all their technological superiority they are curiously vulnerable. Their protection relies on the assumption both of usefulness and, crucially, the interpretation of religious texts. It resonates with the racism of philo-semitism which advocated protecting the Jews so that their conversion might bring the messiah. Not far down the *Sky Road*, one suspects, might lie pogrom and the cleansing of 'tinkerish' technologies: the 'Us' versus 'Them' rhetoric which justifies the Green attack on the train in chapter twelve has permeated a whole society. To be 'Them' may not carry the danger that it does in *The Cassini Division* but protection, of a sort, can be obtained from reservations and concentration camps after all. The closer one reads *The Sky Road*, the less bucolic and the more sinister this utopia begins to appear.

The three utopias which MacLeod has constructed can be summarised in terms of the way in which they cope with the absence of morality: *The Stone Canal* posits a society in which contracts structure relationships and those who impose unfair contracts on the vulnerable must be prepared to deal with the vengeance of the exploited. *The Cassini Division* suggests you exert your ego, but be prepared to deal with others exerting theirs. Finally, *The Sky Road* provides a communitarian network which will protect you if you are prepared to protect it, but only if you are willing to accept its rules. The three structures have consequences in terms of the value they place on the human life. *The Sky Road*, for all its apparent cosiness, diminishes the value of the individual to protect the collectivity. *The Cassini Division* constructs a hierarchy which begins and ends with the self. *The Stone Canal*, the least cosy of the utopias, puts a very literal price on your head which, in its more dystopian ramifications, opens possibilities for the commodification and exploitation of the self.

MacLeod's utopias are technophile without subscribing to technological determinism (and they retain the belief that technophilia can be discriminating). They embrace the construction of liberty and are societies without morality if not without consequences. This is *not* Eden. The playing out of consequences within the paradigms offered form the core of the plots and reinforce the utopian message rather than undermining it.

Ken MacLeod clearly succeeds in constructing utopias. The texts are driven by political engagement in addition to imaginative estrangement. He is concerned to provide alternative possibilities

and open endedness: these are all precarious utopias in the midst of change (MacLeod, email June 26 1999). He offers the plurality which postmodernism demands, while avoiding the pathologisation of plurality which demands we accept *anything*, and provides a common, totalising idea: liberty, which drives the novels. That it is not peace, happiness or security serves to illuminate the extent to which we have confused utopia with safety.

...it is rather difficult ...to believe that MacLeod is actually convinced by the society he creates for *The Sky Road*.

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SCIENCE FICTION STRETCHES BEYOND BOOKS, TELEVISION PROGRAMMES AND FILM INTO OTHER MEDIA, WHICH PERHAPS WE'RE GUILTY OF NEGLECTING. GARY WILKINSON, WHO PREVIOUSLY WROTE FOR US ON THE ALIEN COMICS, NOW EXAMINES THE HISTORY OF A COMIC FROM THE 1970S

Taking ACTION – "Comic Strip Hooligans!"
 by Gary Wilkinson

Action was a short-lived comic that was first published on 14th February 1976 and was 'killed' towards the end of that year.

Its content was unique, not so much for the subject of its stories but for their tone, which showed a maturity not seen before in this field. It was, on the one hand, massively popular with its loyal army of fans whilst, on the other, nationally infamous and

reviled by its critics. The following is a brief history of the comic, and of some of its more controversial and interesting stories.

During the 1950s and 1960s the sales of comics boomed. The two main publishers, IPC (later Fleetway) and D.C. Thompson published comics for boys to a formula long established by *Eagle*. Comics were middle class, written by middle-aged men and

aimed to instil a high moral tone in Britain's youth. Clean cut heroes had simple adventures against unproblematic baddies, and it was always obvious who was going to win. This formula had worked successfully for twenty years, but by the late 1960s things were changing. Sales were sliding, comics had folded and many titles that were left were at close to break-even point. The *Eagle* itself went in 1969. Both companies decided to act. D. C. Thompson brought-out the gritty *Warlord* in 1974 with all its stories based in the Second World War. It was much more aggressive than previous titles, with greater realism and heroes who found life that bit tougher than before. It sold well, so IPC had to respond. The problem was that virtually all of IPC staff were firmly rooted in the traditions and values of the *Eagle*. In secret the Editorial Director, John Sanders, hired in two freelancers Pat Mills and John Wager to produce *Battle*. The in-house staff naturally did not like this, but *Battle* was a hit. Wager was given *Valiant* to revive whilst Mills was asked to work on something new and without precedent – *Action*.

John Sanders wanted a comic to reflect the 1970s and appeal to group who up to that point had not been regular comic buyers, working-class streetwise kids. Mills worked with Geoff Kemp, a long serving IPC editor who was desperate to do something fresh. The two quantities that Mills wanted the comic to have were "difference" and "realism". It was quickly decided instead of having stories of one theme, like *Warlord*, *Action* would be a "sampler" with a wide variety of stories including war, football, spy, crime and futuristic stories. As they were only given a very short run-in time they decided to do a number of "cribs" of what was currently popular (a formula which would be continued in *2000AD*) but add what was to become a distinctive *Action* spin, showing a different, interesting and equally valid response to the subject.

In its short life, *Action* had a number of interesting stories, including some with an sf slant. Although in retrospect these can seem somewhat crude, in comparison to what else was being produced in the comic field at the time they had a new depth and maturity and dealt with ambiguous adult issues. There were also significant quantities of violence, at times very graphic.

One of the more violent stories was *Hookjaw*. The eponymous hero is a great white shark which has the hooked end of a gaff stuck in its lower jaw, giving its name and also distinguishing it visually from other sharks in the strip. Whilst it was obviously cribbed from *Jaws* it had significant differences. The shark was not an anonymous threat as in the film. From the start Miles instructed the writers that the shark would be the 'hero' of the story and we would follow and sympathise with his actions and desires. Although there was at the beginning a nominal human hero, he was eaten halfway through the second story, and most of the humans featured were thoroughly nasty villains who are set-up as deserving to be eaten. An oil-man sacrifices his workers to the sharks in order to keep the oil pumping and a land developer is prepared to lie and commit assault rather than risk the profits of his island paradise. Right from the start Hookjaw was given a reason to hate humans. He is hunted and maimed by shark fisherman, his mate and offspring killed (coincidentally as in the truly awful killer-whale film *Orca*). As in the later *Alien* film sequence the humans are generally more vicious than the monster. *Hookjaw* was very popular and ran throughout the whole of the life of the comic. It was helped by occupying the full-colour centre pages so that the artists were able to use copious blood red ink. Although *Hookjaw* was very violent this was very much "comic book" violence taken tongue-in-cheek, both by its creators and readers. There was even a competition for readers to suggest who they wanted to be gobbled-up by Hookjaw.

Another significant story was the delightfully named *Death Game 1999*. This was yet another 'rip-off', this time the cult SF film *Rollerball*, with a smattering of its near namesake *Death Race 2000*. The title is one of many in a tradition of millennial or near millennial dated sf film, book and story titles. Well-known examples include *Space 1999*, the robot film *Class of 1999*, the comic and sequel to *Action*, *2000AD*, and of course *2001: A*

Space Odyssey among many other similar examples in sf; as we are now living through these dates they unfortunately seem very "dated". *Death Game* was based around the violent game of spinball (rarely a game would go by without several fatalities) on a gigantic ice-floored pinball table featuring players on skates or spiked wheeled motorbikes. They always had plenty of willing players as they were drawn from convicts wanting to avoid execution. The story is set in a future world which would become a template for many popular *2000AD* stories such as *Harlem Heroes*, the population governed by brutal authority, living in gang-ridden concrete jungles. But that *Death Game* had none of the parody, absurdity and satire of, for instance, the *Judge Dredd* stories. This setting would of course become a staple in cyberpunk fiction and *Death Game* featured other proto-cyberpunk ideas such as cyborgs. The plot was a fast moving 'football' type of story with desperate players trying to win promotion, but here the men are also fighting for their lives and eventual freedom in a parody of the gladiatorial battles of ancient Rome. In this story, as in many other *Action* stories, the villains are authority figures, a fact which would become a significant factor in the comic's downfall.

According to the critics, *Kids Rule OK* was the worst villain. A 'plague' (whose origins are ambiguous but are initially blamed on pollution) wipes out nearly everyone over the age of nineteen. Here the influence was clearly *Lord of the Flies* meets Terry Nation's *Survivors*, a post apocalyptic series which had just started on BBC1. Set in contemporary London, the action follows a gang of school kids who fight for survival against other kids (including members of their own gang), bikers and towards the end, a vicious gang of police cadets. Some, but not all of the villains are authority figures. Unlike the *Lord of the Flies* where an authority figure appears at the end to rescue the children from their savagery, in *Kids Rule OK* the authority figures turn out to be vicious fascists even worse than the 'savage' kids. The action of *Kids Rule OK* is fast, furious and extremely violent, and unlike *Hookjaw* and *Death Game 1999* is realistically set against a contemporary background. After the prologue, frame one of page one proper features a surviving 'crumbly' getting booted in the head, and the first page ends with the start of a knife fight. The story also featured, justifiably in context, such lawless behaviour as stealing a bus, pointless vandalism and the burning down of a school as the consequence of a violent siege.

As it started towards the end of the comic's life *Kids Rule OK* was short-lived, so we are unfortunately unable to see how the story might have developed beyond its action-packed but downbeat start. Ideas for the future of the strip did include the introduction of a hippy contingent, the rebuilding of civilisation and the kids getting hold of the crown jewels.

Other significant stories included the *Dirty Harry/Ipccress Files* imitation *Dredger*, the football story *Look out for Lefty* and *Hellmann's Heroes*, the first UK comic-strip story to show World War Two from a German point of view.

Action was a success throughout its all too brief history. It had high sales and, unusually for the time, received many letters from highly enthusiastic loyal readers.

Attacks from the critics started almost immediately. *The London Evening Standard* published an article when the comic was only two issues old ("ARRGH lives – but the blood is printed red", February 23 1976). *The Sun* ran a double page spread ('The Sevenpenny Nightmare,' April 30 1976). It was however somewhat tongue-in-cheek and included a sizeable defence of the comic by a child psychologist. Throughout the criticism *Action* was always defended by John Sanders, even when comparison was made to the American horror comics of the 1950s which had been banned by parliament.

However in September two developments provided considerable ammunition to *Action's* enemies. The highly controversial *Kids Rule OK* started and there was an incident of terrace violence, including 'bottling' of fans and players, in the football story *Look Out For Lefty*. This was against a recent rise of football hooliganism in the real world culminating in a riot between Aston Villa fans and Glasgow Rangers. The critics went

for the throat. The *Daily Mail* launched a major attack ('Comic Strip Hooligans!' September 17 1976) instigating a letter-writing campaign by parents. There were attacks by Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers and Listeners Association, and by the Responsible Society (which was especially ironic as one of *Look Out For Lefty's* writers was a member of the Society at the time). Sanders was ambushed on *Nationwide* when Frank Bough deviated from the questions he said he would ask to launch a full-scale vitriolic attack. This all occurred against a background of the 'new morality' that coincided with the rise of Margaret Thatcher and concern for the protection of the children. These sorts of attacks would be repeated many times as 'video nasty' scares in the early 1980s.

Not only was the comic being lambasted from without, it was also being attacked from within. Some members of the boys' comic department, annoyed at being circumvented, had wanted *Action* to fail from the start. There were also rumours that certain right-wing evangelists on the board were applying pressure, arguing that the title was unsuitable for the image of the company.

However *Action* might have survived except for one thing. Although Menzies were happy with the comic, W. H. Smiths were disturbed by the adverse publicity and threatened to withdraw sale-and-return-privileges, so that it would only supply direct orders unless the comic was 'cleaned-up' to appease the critics. It was rumoured that all IPC publications were being similarly threatened.

While Sanders was defending the comic in public, behind the scenes he put on the brakes, toning down excessive violence and taking overall charge of production. Even so, IPC decided to withdraw its best-selling comic while Sanders was on holiday. Writers were told to "take out all the adult political stuff out of it

and turn it back into a boys' comic" Under a new editor, the most controversial stories were finished or removed and it returned to limp on in a safe, emasculated form.

As can be seen *Action* was always unconventional. It had strong streak of anti-authoritarianism and its stories were more mature and adult, both in theme and content, than the comic market could then comfortably stand. Although *Action* was short-lived it proved it was possible to successfully introduce more serious 'adult' themes into what was thought of as purely a 'kids' market, and without *Action* there would be no *2000AD* (which was also highly controversial in its early years). Indeed, many of the writers and artists who cut their teeth on *Action* followed Pat Mills to *2000AD*.

In many ways the criticism which killed *Action* was political in origin. Though the comic was, in parts, grim and violent, to many of its readers it reflected the world they lived in. Its attitude fitted the burgeoning punk ethic of the time. It was rough and ready, streetwise and working class in the tradition of James Herbert and Richard Allen. *Action* – the comic so good it had to die.

Note

For those who interested in more information about *Action* try and seek out *Action – The Story of a Violent Comic* (1990) by Martin Barker, the inspiration for this article. This gives more details of the history of *Action* and reprints some of its more notorious strips.

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Gary Wilkinson wrote in Vector 202 on the Alien comics and in 203 on Iain M. Banks's Consider Phlebas — Eds.

IAN WATSON WORKED WITH THE LATE GREAT STANLEY KUBRICK. HERE HE GIVES HIS REACTION TO KUBRICK'S LAST, POSTHUMOUS, PRODUCTION.

Eyes Wide Shut – a Sort of Review

by Ian Watson

Sun glaring through pollution-haze, 80 degree heat on an early September evening, and throngs of people on every street and alley. At Leicester Square crowd-control barriers were going up along the various approaches to the Warner Village cinema complex, seeming of themselves to generate a host of spectators, with nothing as yet to spectate except police and barriers and crowd and photographers elevated by stands and ladders. Part of the sea of people filling Charing Cross Road had diverted itself to become so many voluntary extras at this spectacle, the making, almost, of a movie entitled *The U.K. Premiere of Eyes Wide Shut*.

Even the invited audience would have to wait quite a while, although in rather more comfort. The film was premiering in three separate auditoria. All seated by 7.30, the audience in dark suits and dresses soon resorted to the bags of popcorn and bottles of cooled Buxton Spring Water supplied with each seat, as time passed and passed: half an hour, then an hour. Excerpts from the sound-track played occasionally, puzzling out of context. *Strangers in the Night*, plangent piano chords.

After about an hour and a half of waiting a spotlight came on, and at last Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman whistle-stopped down to the front. Four cities in four days for four premieres, with more upcoming – and three appearances this evening in London itself on account of the three auditoria. Christiane Kubrick and others arrived at the top of the auditorium. Tom Cruise managed to say some nice things coherently about England. Nicole Kidman looked much thinner and whiter than with her clothes off in the movie itself. Her sentences deconstructed, perhaps not surprisingly.

The film was deeply peculiar. Script writer Frederic Raphael complained how Stanley seemed intent on removing any idiosyncratic flavour from the dialogue. The resulting simplicities,

and repetitions of simplicities, are positively surrealistic: "Did you say... a man and and woman?" Pause. "A man... and a woman." Pause, cocking head to one side. "A man... and a woman?" Long motionless stare in close-up. "A man... and a woman." Well, not these words exactly, but similar.

Surrealistic, and funny too: several times, ripples of laughter came from the audience.

Surrealistic, too, was the knowledge that a lot of the New York I was seeing on screen was actually London dressed up. Quite peculiar was the amount of cash the naïve doctor carried around on street routinely, so that he was able to fork out hundreds of dollars from a seemingly bottomless wallet. Apparently a few people mentioned this oddity to Stanley, who replied, "I'm not making that sort of movie." Quite. He was filming a dream-story, one where reality becomes seriously undermined for the characters, and also for the viewers. In a dream, if you need a walletful of money, you have it.

Was the woman who overdosed at the party really the same as the woman dead in the morgue later on? Their faces looked different to me. The orgy-scene (not principally an orgy but more like an arcane mystic ritual) was incredibly powerful and sustained, and deeply weird was the length of time devoted to dialogue by persons wearing full-face masks – oh such masks! – so that although actors were speaking their faces were utterly motionless. Who the male celebrants were – "some of the most powerful people in America" – remained, of course, a complete mystery, and on balance their wives were unlikely to be the many nude, tall, slim priestesses. All hookers? Hardly. This was a frequent rite, evidently often enacted in different vast mansions. Apparently Hindus are enraged at the accompanying music being a hymn from the sacred *Bhagavad Gita*. So what cabal rules

America? Or were we in dreamland?

The pace of the movie is considerable. Despite the strange slow crypto-conversations, how fast it all flowed. Running time, two and a quarter hours or so? It seemed to be over in an hour and a half.

To an amazing extent, in this movie nothing momentous actually happens. Nicole Kidman relates a fantasy. Tom Cruise has weird encounters, but after he ignores the first threat from the powerful secret orgiasts he merely receives a slip of paper repeating the warning. The pianist may indeed merely have been sent back to Seattle with a bruise on his cheek. The woman in the morgue may not be the same woman who redeemed Tom Cruise after he was unmasked. Maybe this is why some young drunks bump Tom Cruise into a parked car and then shout, quite unaccountably in the circumstances, "Faggot! Get back to San Francisco!" At least here is one moment of on-screen violence, though it seems to have no rhyme or reason – quite as in a dream. A jump-cut from a quiet passage to a taxi driving through the city, with road noise, seems shockingly dramatic, but hell, it's only a trip in a car.

The movie finished at eleven. Four hours on, crowds were still packing the barriers outside. Were these the same crowds or new crowds? The temperature was still 80 degrees. The *Blade Runner* (minus the drizzle) streets were packed. Transvestites wandered about. Hardly any taxis existed. My companion and I headed through the surge to Tottenham Court Road tube station, watched families of mice scampering about under the subterranean rails, and disembarked at Lancaster Gate, due north from the Serpentine Gallery in Kensington Gardens where the post-premiere party was happening. A glance at the black darkness of the empty park deterred anyone in their right mind from strolling due south (though I wasn't sure if I was quite in my right mind after the

movie), but empty taxis were plentiful – as were police and security and people wired up with microphones outside the hundred-yard footpath leading, lit with flaring mini-flambeaux, to the rather neo-Classical Serpentine Gallery which had undergone a vast marquee extension. The white minimalism of the domed rooms of the Gallery, inside, was the more so with precisely one painting on view, Stanley depicted by Christiane, plus some vases of abstract arrangements evocative of lilies and tilted lumps of white glass, along with a grand piano where a pianist (not blindfolded as in the movie) played until 2 in the morning mainly to nobody, which was also fairly surreal – the hundreds of guests had fairly soon filtered through the garden to the giant marquee. Endless supply of chilled Veuve Clicquot. Help-yourself booth of caviar and smoked salmon and scrambled egg to heap on to bits of muffin or dark bread. Two Tapas booths where whole cured hams were being constantly shaved, bracketing a booth of cheeses. A constant patrol of caterers carrying inventive and ever-varying canapes: Thai chicken curry on a stick in miniature galvanised buckets, hot mini-doughnuts filled with green pesto. What next, what next? After an hour or two the enormous marquee had its own micro-climate of cigarette smoke drifting into the garden. There were armchairs for the exhausted. The Veuve Clicquot flowed forever. Finally we wandered outside. The taxi we had booked pulled up. Polite police questioned the driver then escorted us to it. "That was the best pick-up I've had all night," the driver commented. We felt tempted to reply, "Did you say the best pick-up?" Next morning we found ourselves still engaging in the same bizarre dialogue as in the movie, staring at each other slowly with heads cocked.

"That was... a strange movie." "Did you say... a strange movie?" "Yes... it was strange." *Eyes Wide Shut* stays in our heads.

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NEARLY TWENTY YEARS AGO RIDDLEY WALKER APPEARED: A BORDERLINE SF NOVEL THAT WAS WRITTEN IN A LANGUAGE ALL OF ITS OWN, AND YET A RECOGNISABLE LANGUAGE, IN A RECOGNISABLE LANDSCAPE. ROBERT W. HAYLER TAKES THE OPPORTUNITY OF A NEW EDITION TO RE-EXAMINE THIS CLASSIC TEXT.

Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* – how and why it works by Robert W. Hayler

In September 1998 the Indiana University Press published an expanded new edition of Russell Hoban's post-apocalyptic masterpiece *Riddley Walker* (originally published in 1980). This handsome reprint is augmented with some interesting new material including an afterword by the author, selections from his working notes and a short glossary of 'Riddleyspeak'. Pouncing on this welcome excuse to reread the book I was struck at how frighteningly relevant its meaning still is, in fact I suspect that it will never date. In this piece I wish to examine the core concerns of the book and explain how Hoban constructs such a unique and unforgettable way of presenting them to us.

Riddley, the eponymous hero, is writing the story in order to discover "what the idear of us myt be", the nature of the human spirit. Hoban's project is didactic: he presents to us a moral fable concerning the danger to this spirit of valuing science over art. What enables Hoban to reach his conclusion so successfully is, as I shall argue, the subtle and philosophically interesting tussle between identification and alienation that he constructs.

I shall begin by listing some of the identifying tactics that Hoban uses near the beginning of the novel. The book opens with a map of the South-Eastern corner of Kent and the narrative proper begins with an official rite of passage, Riddley kills a wild pig. The fact that he believes it to be the last pig in his area hints that a way of life is ending, a suspicion confirmed later in the book when the increasing dominance of farms over the hunting groups is made clear. Thus the critical reader has a set of reference points: where the book is set (Kent), when it is set (a period equivalent to the one historians call the Neolithic revolution), and what literary

theme is being pursued (the rite of passage).

However, our reactions to the opening of the book are not allowed to be as straightforward as this. Each identificatory tactic has alienating tactics working against it. The most obvious of these being the language. *Riddley Walker* is written in a dizzying corruption of English containing clipped words and brute phonetic spellings, all filtered through a mixture of accents and dialects. One is alienated from the novel by the very words on the page. The reader is immediately confused but it takes a little work to figure out why and to what extent.

For example, proper names often say something about the purpose or traits of their object. The name of 'Mr Clevvers Roaling Place' commemorates an event that may or may not have happened. *Riddley Walker* is so called because he thinks and walks. Although these namings allow us to understand this primitive society, the coarseness of some of the names giving a clue as to how it thinks, they also alienate us from the present we find ourselves living in. This renaming strategy takes us away from the seemingly meaningless names we have now and makes them have meaning again. Here begins a pervasive didactic theme: the forced reassessment of something that seems clear, intuitive, harmless or even meaningless.

Thus the fact that the book is set in Kent is now unnerving as is the fact that, far from living in the cosily distant Neolithic revolution the reader has assumed to be the setting, they are in fact struggling in the mud two and a half thousand years after a nuclear holocaust that happened in 1997. And the rite of passage? Riddley says "The woal thing fealt jus that littl bit stupid".

This unusual reaction is one of the many events that differentiate Riddley from the others in his group and set him up as a heroic protagonist. Describing "Fools Circel 9wys", a rhyming game which involves one child, the "Ardship", breaking out of a circle of other children Riddley confides in us tellingly "I all ways rathert be the Ardship nor 1 of the circel I liket the busting out part" (p. 5).

The events of his actual "busting out" relay to us his strange relationship with nature; he is fetched and guarded by a feral dog pack whose old leader had offered himself to Riddley as a kind of sacrifice. In turn the respect he commands from the dog pack illustrates his ability to attain or tap into "supernatural powers". He goes into a trance at one point and he "feels" the power contained in the ruins of Canterbury. It is ironic that we class Riddley's abilities as "supernatural" when they are constituted by the skill to commune directly with nature. Again Hoban is reminding us to watch our interpretations. Thus Hoban separates Riddley from his suspicious colleagues in order to allow us to identify Riddley as the heroic protagonist of a fantasy.

A more subtle identifying/alienating tactic Hoban uses to allow the reader to empathise with Riddley is his studied childishness. Riddley's language is intensely phonetic and his vocabulary is drastically reduced, hence the words look childish on the page. On our first reading we have to say the words out loud "in our heads" and this takes us back to the last time we had to sub-vocalize: when we were children. Also the way words are played with, the use of rhymes and the inseting of "just so" type stories remind us of narratives we experienced as children.

Thus we identify with the twelve-year-old Riddley by being alienated from our present situation. Childlike reflexes are called up which help us deal with our linguistic ignorance (we sub-vocalize) or hinder us in finding out what is going on (frustration, stubbornness). Again I would argue that this is not just an exercise in postmodern cleverness, but a deliberate tool Hoban uses to advance his project. He is asking us: "Whose eyes are we looking through when we interpret the world?" He is not allowing us any "given" by clouding everything that appeared to be transparent.

All the themes and tactics I have stressed so far coincide in the idea of the Eusa Show. Riddley's society is governed by the "Mincery" using two techniques: the first is force, the second is by using the Eusa Show as a method of persuasion. These little narratives follow the same format as a Punch and Judy show (booth, hand-puppets and so on) and are put on by traveling "politicians" in order to illustrate the value of obeying Mincery policy. Each group has their own "connexion" man who provides an interpretation of the show meaningful to the group. Before his death this was the job of Brooder Walker, Riddley's father, who was renowned for the connections he made against Mincery intentions.

The Punch and Judy show is another way of aligning us with the child we once were. Their vocabulary of politics, a corruption of our own, also seems playful: "the Pry mincer and the Wes mincer" and so on. Rather than just being a satirical dig at modern politics and media, however, this is an attack on our complacency. For these people the Eusa Show is the official "news". What is being represented is the views of the dominant ideology, of those in power. Hoban is calling on all of us to be our own connexion men, to reassess not only what we are told but our method of interpreting what we are told.

It is worth pausing to consider the etymology of the word "Eusa". Eusa's name is a garbled refraction of 'St. Eustace'. It was Hoban's viewing of a painting depicting Eustace's legend in Canterbury Cathedral that formed the initial inspiration for this book. In the painting Eustace is pictured standing in a river praying, his wife has been abducted by pirates and his two sons are also being taken: one by a lion on the right bank and one by a wolf on the left bank. As Hoban notes in the new afterword: "Eustace is all alone in the middle of the river, hoping for better times." The Eusa story, passed on orally from one generation of Riddley's people to the next, is a kind of reduced gospel taking in elements from the legend of St. Eustace and the events in history

that led to Eusa causing the nuclear apocalypse, the 1 Big 1.

"Eusa" is pronounced "user", as in "computer user". From what we can tell from the traditional Eusa story Eusa was also a manipulator of people and things. Finally, if we knock off the "E" we are left with "USA" which reverses the cold war belief that Russia would be the aggressor in any nuclear conflict. Eusa symbolizes lost knowledge and the power that manipulating that knowledge provides. In the Eusa story, however, there is little hope or optimism. One character who refuses to accept this conclusion is the Pry Mincer, Abel Goodparley.

Abel's project is progress: "I'm looking frontways and going to get every body moving that way form and fents boath" he says. As well as hunting and gathering, Riddley's group work for the Mincery by digging up machines from the past. Abel wants these machines dug up not just for their metal, but also for the knowledge they might somehow provide. In particular he is after what is contained in "Eusas head" which appears, from clues we are given, to be a computer. He knows little about this knowledge but has realised that knowledge and power equate. Thus the lost knowledge is conceived in a scientific way: in terms of technology and human power over the environment. This conception, systematized and championed by Francis Bacon in *Novum Organum* (1620) and *New Atlantis* (1670), has underlied most scientific endeavour ever since. That most scientists, following Bacon, are solely interested in the study of natural phenomenon to the exclusion of anything perceived as 'supernatural' is satirised by the arcane and mysterious scientific vocabulary of the novel, for example the word 'blipful', but there is a more serious point that Hoban wants to pursue.

The first obvious link between this renewed quest for scientific knowledge and impending disaster is the death of Brooder Walker. He is crushed under a lump of machinery which they are attempting to raise intact because they believe it may be Eusa's head. This search also leads to Abel's death. It is deeply ironic that despite Abel's good intentions for his society he focuses on the production of the "1 Littl 1", gunpowder, an instrument of war and death. He is killed when his desire to create it is fulfilled.

It is now obvious that in terms of its scientific and technological dimension the book is a fable concerning the pursuit of knowledge and its dangers. There is a further implication of these deaths, Hoban seems to be suggesting a cycle at work: once on a Baconian path we will eventually be overcome by our own knowledge. We build ourselves up only to be cast down. One receives a very strong impression that the project set in motion ages ago and adopted by Abel will be continued. Towards the end of the Eusa story, Eusa is told by The Littl Shynin Man "Yu let the Chaynjis owt & now yuv got to go on thru them" the reason for this is that "...wear 2 1/2s uv 1 thing yu & me. I cant leav yu aloan no moren yu cud leav me aloan." As well as being the original and innocent "Addom" (Atom/Adam), The Littl Shynin Man also symbolizes scientific knowledge and its perils.

The book suggests that the problem with scientific knowledge is that it corrupts by being alienative. It splits the "idear of us": the human spirit. In the Eusa story, Mr Clevver sucks the knowledge from Eusa's head, and once it is externalized it becomes outside of human control. The littl Shynin Man is literally split in two whilst Eusa is torturing him to get the knowledge of the 1 Big 1. This split is also illustrated at an etymological level. Although the reduced vocabulary of Riddley's society contains much compression, all words suggesting unity are split into their components: "all ways", "in tack", "to gether" and so on. Science is associated with alienation, splitting, torture and death. The inset stories tell us of how because of this knowledge humans have lost the "Ist knowing" of the animals, a kind of intuitive, unverbalisable, access to unmediated reality.

At the end of the book Riddley turns his back on Abel's dream for society and becomes an artist. He is going to put on his own shows, tell his own stories, make his living by representation. Hoban is strongly implying that a life of aesthetic value is better than the life spent pursuing scientific knowledge.

This split in human sensibility between science and art has

produced an argument as ancient as our culture: theoretical knowledge versus "phronetic" knowledge, or practical wisdom. Hoban replays these historical arguments by remobilising the antique myths and fables by which our society understands itself. The tactics of alienation, identification and reassessment step up a level from textually explicit to thematic. Hoban picks up on the fact that during The Fall what was lost was not only moral innocence but the "1st knowing", Adam's direct control over nature. Also, Riddley's society looks to us in the same way we look to Eden, a reminder that this "paradise" we live in contains fruit capable of destroying it. This theme is enlarged upon by the recycling of the Prometheus legend; the danger of the inventor being overcome by his invention.

Thus Hoban aligns us with the traditional illustrations of these antique arguments but forces us to reassess their relevance by alienating us from the cosy trust we afford science. Hoban draws on all this layered knowledge and quarrel and uses it to vindicate the imaginative capacity of the human spirit. This book is a deeply anti-Baconian fable which valorizes the metaphysical, the intuitive and the mystical.

Finally, we can ask (as the book is replaying the romantic versus rationalist argument) does *Riddley Walker* have any more relevance to our present situation than Blake or Coleridge? I would answer with a firm yes. Living in the scientific explosion following the Second World War, I think this theme needs reiterating desperately and constantly. It is not only the case that we need to be reminded (post Cold War) of the power of nuclear weaponry, but increasingly we need to be reminded of what is

human. When I first taught this book as part of a course on the philosophy of literature the colour supplements were arguing about whether it is "natural" for fifty-nine year old women to be implanted with eggs from the wombs of aborted fetuses. GM food is the current 'Frankenstein' scare at the time of writing. Should the right we most vehemently defend be the right to have our identity as humans consumed by science? Is it reactionary to be worried about such things? Cyberpunk, which followed swiftly after *Riddley Walker*, seemed to portray this consumption as the next evolutionary step. Hoban's conclusion is unshakable; this way of thinking cannot be reformed from within, we must reject it or we are doomed to replay our mistakes. Whether you agree with his conclusion, it is undeniable that Hoban's didactic dialectic between alienation and identification is a powerful, unique and unforgettable method of forcing a reassessment of our attitudes and situation.

The new edition is currently unavailable in this country but the Net based bookstores can get it for you. Why not order it via the BSFA home page at <http://members.aol.com/tamaranth> ? The details are: Hoban, Russell: *Riddley Walker* (Indiana University Press, 1998). Published: September, 1998; 256 pp. Price: hardcover (no dustjacket) US\$25 (ISBN: 0-253-33448-9); trade paperback US\$12.95 (ISBN: 0-253-21234-0).

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IS THERE REALLY NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN, AND IF SO WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CURRENT AND FUTURE STATE OF SF? RICHARD SALSBURY HAS SOME IDEAS.

SF: Literature of Ideas or Genre of Gimmicks?

by Richard Salsbury

People often say that science fiction is the literature of ideas. It's a fair comment. Although sf is a notoriously difficult genre to define (as the "Definitions of Sf" entry in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* makes clear), one thing is sure: somewhere, in each piece of sf, there is an idea – something that is outside the reader's normal world-view and which might even be completely new to them.

If the idea were always new to the reader then everything in the garden would be rosy, but any writer embarking on a story runs the risk of treading old ground. As sf becomes an older genre, and the amount of published work becomes greater, the chances of using an idea that has already been used elsewhere increase.

For some people, the idea content of a story is the most important – maybe the only important – thing. They're interested in finding that good old 'ideas buzz'.

They read a new story and say gleefully, "Aha, this idea was used by Ada Kibbutz in her 1942 novel *Conquerors of the Doomthrone*," or whatever. Finding an idea that has been used before is sometimes used as grounds for rejecting a whole story, which implies that the idea is the only thing that matters. It's a little like condemning a whodunnit if you figure out whodunnit before you get to the end.

But is the originality of the idea really that important? Is, for example, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* less worthy because Katharine Burdekin explored the 'Nazi victory' theme first in *Swastika Night*? Should Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* remain unread because the structure has been pinched from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*? Surely not.

Things get subjective here, because everyone has a different feeling as to what is hackneyed – everyone draws the line in a different place, depending on their tastes and reading experiences. But if readers set their sights too high and expect radical new

concepts in every novel or story they read, then not only will they be increasingly disappointed, but they will also be persuading sf writers to head down the road of increasing obscurity in order to come up with something fresh. Some areas of the arts have followed this path already, a prime showcase being the annual Turner Prize ceremony. Here, it seems the only requirement for a winning entry is that the work has some whiff of originality. The judges are unfamiliar with policemen standing still for an hour, or pieces of elephant dung attached to a painting, so they decide they *must* be good. The Turner Prize can be very amusing, but it's also quite sad: the most famous art prize in Britain is awarded to the work with the wackiest gimmick, resulting in art which is incomprehensible to most people (and I suspect the same of the critics – none of them seem able to give a reason *why* the stuff on display is worthy of a £20 000 award).

If originality is of paramount importance to readers of science fiction, then we may eventually find ourselves wading through similar dross. (I can see it now: Jeremiah Grimshanks wins the 2009 BSFA award with his stream of mucusness debut, written entirely in his own snot. Controversy follows as two of the other nominees claim to have sneezed on their early manuscripts. But I digress.)

As the name implies, science fiction is, first and foremost, fiction. The staple elements of fiction – plot and character – should be present, even if they have been stretched to their limits (and it's refreshing to see it done once in a while). An sf story that relies solely on its idea for impact is one-dimensional, and inherently limited.

The most vulnerable story of this type is the one that relies on the idea to provide a twist or punchline at the end. At their best, these punchline stories can work marvellously, as in, for example, Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Star' (1955). But if the reader guesses the

punchline, and there is no more substance to the story than its idea, then it will inevitably fail.

Up until about the 1950s, there was enough new territory for idea stories to work without much in the way of plot or characterisation; they provided the kind of intellectual kick that sf has become famous for, and often that was enough. But things have changed, the genre has grown and matured enormously, while the majority of natty ideas have been used up, so that it's now virtually impossible to come up with something completely original. Instead of trying to find new ideas in the hope that they haven't been done before, sf writers generally try to improve their fiction in other ways, with the best fiction showing increased sophistication in all areas. Although it isn't widely acknowledged by non-sf readers (or reflected in sales), I think it's fair to say that today's top sf novels can compete in equal terms with the best the literary or popular thriller markets have to offer.

And yet some readers seem oblivious to these improvements and yearn for those old stories where the idea was king. I think this is what people are generally referring to when they say, "They don't write them like they used to." Well, for the most part, they don't, and a good thing too, because most of the good 'pure idea' stories seem to have been written already, and in many cases they were done very well. Attempts to come up with genuinely new

ideas will result in 'Turner Prize' fiction, and it's surely better to read about an old idea which has been put to good use, than a novelty idea with no drama or meaning.

Those pedlars of doom and gloom who announce the death of sf are probably the same people who are hunting for the radical new ideas. Unless each story is different, they argue, the genre will stagnate. But each story *is* different. The fundamental concepts may be similar, but each writer can bring their own unique vision to a piece of fiction. Literary fiction remains in a healthy state using material from our present and past, so how much more potential is there in sf, with the whole of space and time as source material?

I'm not disparaging the role of ideas in sf – they are still essential if we're going to call it sf at all. And I'm not saying that absolutely all of the new ideas have gone. New ones will arise as a natural consequence of our moving from the present into the future. But originality is not the only reason for the existence of our genre – there are other elements of the story to consider, and different ways to engage the hearts and minds of readers.

Science fiction at the turn of the 21st century is not the literature of *ideas*, but the *literature* of ideas.

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First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Steve Jeffery

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.

Piers Anthony – *Muse of Art*

TOR Books, 1999, 445pp, \$26.95 ISBN 0 312 86896 0

Reviewed by John D. Owen

I will readily admit to not understanding what makes Piers Anthony tick. Here is an author who started out well, with some excellent early work (like *Macroscope* and *Cthon*), who then fell into a rut with the Xanth books (all terrible puns and schoolboy sniggering) which unfortunately sold by the truckload, encouraging him to write even more in that vein. Yet, with his *Geoddysey* series, of which *Muse of Art* is the fourth volume, he seems to have decided to tackle the broad sweep of human history, and does manage to score some points along the way.

Muse of Art is a strangely constructed work. Consisting of a series of tales set in different eras of human history, each is nominally about a different 'art'. (Anthony's definition of 'art' seems to be fairly elastic, encompassing everything from simple communication to storytelling to drama and on into seduction, healing, politics, war and science). The connecting threads are the same characters who appear in each piece, and whose personal stories are advanced frame by frame with each tale. This leads to a peculiar soap opera that begins with *homo erectus* in the Rift Valley of Africa, and ends in the twenty-first century on the Russian/Chinese

border, taking in sightseeing trips to Ancient Egypt, Rome, Constantinople, Angkor, Mexico, London and Stalingrad along the way. It's a curious device, this ongoing saga told across the ages, but does end up being quite effective. It certainly saves Anthony the bother of inventing new characters for every story.

Not having read any of the previous *Geoddysey* volumes, I've no idea of how *Muse of Art* fits into the series. As a stand-alone, it works rather spasmodically, depending on the strengths and weaknesses of the individual stories. The longer passages certainly manage to become engrossing reads in themselves, so to an extent Anthony has hit the mark well. On other occasions, the common faults that mar his Xanth work (particularly that obsession with sex) make their re-appearance, and you start to wonder whether Piers Anthony isn't really a pseudonym of John Norman. I guess old and bad habits die hard, even when Anthony is trying something more ambitious. *Muse of Art* is an interesting but flawed work.



James Barclay – *Dawnthief* 

Gollancz, 1999, 416pp, £9.99 ISBN 1 85798 594 X

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Dawnthief by James Barclay is another first novel, and first in a new series entitled *Chronicles of the Raven*.

The Raven is an elite band of mercenary warriors who have been together for some ten years or so. Led by the mysterious 'Unknown Warrior', the Raven finds itself embroiled in a commission before even being aware that said commission was in the offing – a result of getting involved with the Xeteskian mage, Denser. Mistrusted from the off, Denser tells only parts of his mission as he deems necessary, and unfortunately for the Raven those parts are usually forthcoming following some desperate fight for survival.

It is when members of the Raven start to die that Denser finally reveals the true extent of his mission, and were it not for these deaths, notwithstanding Denser's background as a mage of the dastardly Dark College of Magic, his story would be simply unbelievable. An old enemy is rising, and the only way to defeat it once and for all is the employment of *Dawnthief* – the magical spell to end all magical spells, and possibly the entire world.

Herein lies the quest: In order to activate *Dawnthief* and save the world, four magical artefacts have to be brought together, and it is for this purpose that the Raven are considered the only people capable of enabling Denser to save the world. Against impossible odds, the Raven are faced with extinction whether they aid Denser or not.

This is one of those books you either love or you hate. There simply doesn't appear to be any middle ground. Action aplenty, and uncompromising at that, as the author disposes of main character after main character with apparent abandon. This reader found the book more than a little difficult to get into at first, but having stuck with it, it is a rewarding romp of almost non-stop action. One gets to care about the characters, if only briefly in many cases, and a twist at the end ensures that those who like this one will almost certainly eagerly await the next.

I would rate this as one of the more interesting debuts on the current fantasy scene, and look forward to seeing if Barclay can maintain my interest over the book(s) to come.

Stephen Baxter – *Moonseed*

Voyager, 1999, 534pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 649813 2

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Early next century a NASA geologist, Henry Meacher, leaving his failed marriage behind him, goes to Edinburgh to investigate a rock brought back from an earlier moon shot. When his lab assistant smuggles a vial of rock dust out of the laboratory and accidentally drops it on Arthur's Seat, it starts dissolving the rock. Soon the Moonseed is eating the through the Earth's mantle and causing long extinct volcanoes (including those around Edinburgh) to erupt. As the crisis worsens, Henry, and his ex-wife Geena, must make an desperate trip to the Moon to find out why it has not been destroyed and possibly find a way of saving at least some of the Earth's population.

After travelling to Mars and Titan in previous books, Baxter now finds an excuse to return to the Moon.

Being a disaster novel, *Moonseed* has the usual large cast of characters although unusually for a disaster novel the main narrative is carried by just three or four.

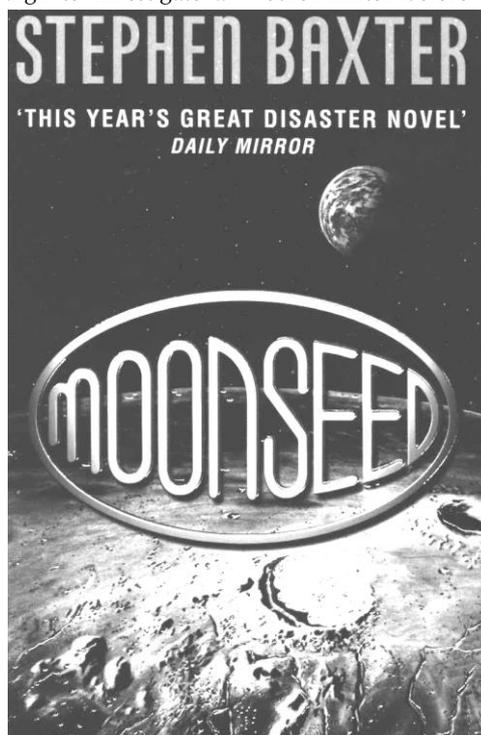
The first half of the novel is the part that works best, with people gradually realising the scope of the disaster. In the later parts of *Moonseed* the disaster on Earth takes back seat to the Moon flight and thus loses some of its impact and

urgency. Still, as with the earlier 'NASA' novels Baxter, like no other writer before him, manages to convey space flight in a starkly realistic fashion.

The *Moonseed* itself is essentially a McGuffin, there to generate the plot (and provide part of the solution). By the end the reader is little closer to knowing what the *Moonseed* is and, above all, how it works, than we were at the beginning. I am not sure I am entirely convinced by the ending, it seems a little over-optimistic under the circumstances, but I will admit it has a certain mythic grandeur.

With *Moonseed* Baxter's grasp of character continues to mature. Unlike the rather sparse characterisation of his earlier 'Xeelee' novels I feel that Baxter is more *involved* with his people now. Not to say they are a particularly *likeable* bunch. On the contrary they are stubborn, bad-tempered and self-absorbed. Still, this is in common with much recent sf. Perhaps writers find it difficult to conceive of characters that can be nice without being weak?

Ultimately *Moonseed* is not a standard disaster novel, but is a first-rate piece of old-fashioned hard sf.

**Stephen Baxter – *Time*** 

Voyager, 1999, 456pp, £17.99 ISBN 0 00 225768 8

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Nobody can criticise Baxter for a lack of ambition. He has reimagined the space programme in exhaustive detail in *Voyage* and *Titan* and written a sequel to a genre classic: *The Time Ships*. After a brief sideways step into the disaster genre with *Moonseed* he gives us a new novel which tackles just about every thorny issue currently furrowing the brows of physicists and cosmologists.

Time begins in the year 2010. Reid Malenfant is guiding his company, Bootstrap, into becoming the first private enterprise to undertake space exploration. Malenfant sees mankind's future in the mineral rich asteroid belt and sees no reason why he can't make a few bucks from his visionary zeal. Cornelius Taine is a brilliant mathematician who has determined that mankind must

come to an end in two hundred years (the probabilistic basis for which is explained in John Leslie's *The End Of The World* which Baxter name-checks in his afterword). Taine convinces Malenfant that, if the human race is to survive such a doomsday event, downstreamers (our far future offspring) must be sending warnings back through time with vital advice. That's one of Baxter's borrowed ideas – I won't insult you by naming the source.

Meanwhile, strange children with alien intelligence are being born around the globe (borrowed idea number two). Taine recognises the hand of the downstreamers in the children's timely appearance. The downstreamers' message is finally decoded and causes Malenfant to alter the destination of Bootstrap's first

mission. They send their ship, complete with its genetically uplifted squid crew, towards the asteroid Cruithne to discover what awaits mankind in the future.

I won't give away any more of the plot because Baxter's narrative takes several surprising leaps forward along the way. Indeed, the scope of the book is awesome. Baxter, quite literally, tackles just about every implication of his title and in the process takes the reader through some dazzling speculation based upon current cosmological theory concluding with a theory for the existence of mankind.

Mind numbing ideas abound, although some of Baxter's speculation feels intuitively wrong – the genetic manipulation of cephalopod intelligence is surely decades away?



And Baxter is aware of some of the difficulties with Carter's knotty mathematical theory which predicts mankind's downfall in a couple of centuries, because he grudgingly recites them in a throwaway paragraph.

It's hard to criticise a book as bold as this one but Baxter's magpie tendencies are, perhaps, too evident in some passages: a scene where a time-spanning journey ends with an astronaut in a perfectly simulated hotel room is surely a joke? And a race of super-intelligent squid disappear for half the book. Otherwise I can only applaud the author's nerve. He expertly captures the giddy rush of future shock giving *Time* an eerie end-of-the-millennium feel. A difficult book but a profoundly rewarding one.

Greg Bear – *Foundation and Chaos*

David Brin – *Foundation's Triumph* 

Orbit, 1999, 438pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85723 736 6

Orbit, 1999, 328pp, £16.99 ISBN 1 85723 753 6

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

"The dead belong dead." So says the monster at the end of one of the Frankenstein movies before throwing the switch that brings the castle down on top of everybody. There are times when I wholeheartedly agree with him, because in recent times there has been a worrying trend in author resurrection, the works of many authors being continued after their deaths by the hands of lesser authors. In the science fiction and fantasy field alone this has included Hubbard, Dick, Tolkien, and there is even soon to be a prequel to *Dune* written by Herbert's son and the ubiquitous Kevin J Anderson. So it was only a matter of time before someone continued the name of one of sf's founding fathers. In a recent interview Davin Brin says that he thought long and hard after receiving the request from Asimov's widow. So in this case I think we can give him, Greg Bear and Gregory Benford – the author of the first volume, *Foundation's Fear*, in this new Second Foundation series – the benefit of the doubt. This seems to be a labour of love rather than a labour of profit for the three 'Killer Bs'.

Towards the end of his career, Asimov attempted to merge two seemingly incompatible future histories, the robot stories and the Foundation series. It seems that this trilogy attempts to stitch up the remaining gaps. This is largely achieved by the introduction of concepts such as Chaos which merges nineties scientific

sensibilities into the fifties original. The novels are written in Asimov's style with a large number of very short chapters of only a few pages each. This allows the authors to cover a large number of characters. Although in Bear's case his prose is less straightforward than Asimov's would have been.

The events of *Foundation and Chaos* take place prior to Hari Seldon's trial when he is coming to an end to his role in the Foundation Project. There are many camps manoeuvring for power here, with conspiracies within conspiracies with different factions of disguised robots and the mentalics on Trantor, and to the uninitiated it all gets a bit too much.

Foundation's Triumph opens in the period just before Hari Seldon's death. He has finished making the recordings for the time vault of Terminus and has begun to feel as if he has passed his prime. So by escaping exile he begins his last adventure to find the answers to the last mysteries of the universe (i.e. Brin tries to fill all the remaining gaps in Asimov's output whilst, as he admits in his Afterword, putting in a few more get-out clauses for possible sequel.)

I have not read the original Foundation novels so obviously I am unfortunately missing out somewhat on a lot that is going on here. Readable, but more for Asimov fans than the casual reader.

Alexander Beshar – *Chi*

Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

Orbit, 1999, 305pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85723 1

In the fifteen years since *Neuromancer* was first published many authors have tried, with varying degrees of success, to recapture the magic of Gibson's influential foray into cyberculture. Alexander Beshar's efforts in *Chi* are certainly more inventive than those of most current writers in the sub-genre. His mid-21st century future, set in and around an Asian-dominated Pacific Rim, marries a familiar cocktail of computer and bio-technologies with a heady brew of eastern philosophy and western fringe science. Beshar's characters operate in a strange and dangerous world where high technology and supernatural powers are indistinguishably combined.

The novel's convoluted plot involves: a doomed affair between two human lovers who were once orang-utans; the machinations of Wing Fat, a decadent drugs lord who masterminds a lucrative illegal trade in vital chi energy stolen from human slaves; the transsexual prostitute Butterfly and the elusive figure of techno-shaman Terry Jordan and his mysterious

'children of Chi'. How these various strands fit together is slowly (arguably *too* slowly) revealed by the investigations of British journalist Paul Sykes and the family detective team of Frank, Tara and Trevor Gobi.

Beshar works hard to make the reader believe in his garishly surreal future, and the novel displays imagination, a cast of colourful characters and well-drawn exotic locations. However, the plot occasionally lacks focus and, at times, it's difficult to decide exactly how seriously he is taking his own creations. With obvious attempts at humour or satire sitting uneasily alongside moments of tenderness or drama this uncertainty of tone ultimately tends to undermine *Chi's* credibility as a wholly convincing work of fiction. That said, there's no denying the energy or richness of invention that's brought to the task, making this an interesting, if not entirely successful, addition to the ranks of identikit cybernovels crowding the shelves.

**Alfred Bester – *The Demolished Man*
Cordwainer Smith – *The Rediscovery of Man***

Millennium, 1999, 250pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 822 1

Millennium, 1999, 377pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 819 1

Reviewed by Stephen Deas

Two very different novels in the excellent Millennium SF Masterworks series, and one little gripe before we get started. The Cordwainer Smith collection has a very nice biography at the front. Short and interesting, and quite enough to make me look forward to the stories themselves. The Bester book has nothing. Why?

The Rediscovery of Man is a collection of a dozen of Smith's short stories set throughout his future timeline. As a collection, it's pleasantly coherent; the stories are ordered to the timeline, while the selection gives a variety of moods and styles without losing touch with the evolution of the future history.

Anyone familiar with Smith's work won't need to be told what to expect. At his best, the visions he conjures are lush, uniquely exotic – almost hallucinatory – yet passionate and exuberant. The feeling of weirdness is consistent throughout – always something different, though there's no shortage of cross-referencing between the stories. He skips through a dozen different themes many writers would have found sufficient for a whole novel. In places he achieves a sense of scale to put even the Culture to shame; elsewhere, almost the ultimate conspiracy. I can't remember ever reading something with as many fascinating and different concepts packed together like this.

Having said that, he's not the easiest writer to read. The ideas tend to take precedence over everything else, and they don't always quite work. The style varies; sometimes slow, sometimes

fast, but there's always a slight stiffness which gets in the way of the flow. While the ideas feel fresh – and the overall theme, the *Rediscovery of Man*, seems strangely relevant to the millennium – the stories were mostly written in the forties and fifties, so I wonder – could it be showing its age?

Over to Alfred Bester. Also written in the fifties, utterly different in style, *The Demolished Man* is a pacey sf murder mystery. In a society where telepathy is common, the question isn't so much how do you get away with murder, as how do you even get to commit it in the first place? The strength of *The Demolished Man*, for me, is the set-up, the deed itself – it's really quite clever. After that, the 'chase' is a bit of a let-down. The pursuing telepathic detective never manages to be quite as interesting as the 'normal' villain; what was looking to be a promising background receives little further development, and frankly, there are times when the discussions on telepathy, clever though they may be, are in danger of disappearing up their own rear end.

All this is about to get irritating and spoil what began as a riveting read, when Bester suddenly turns everything on its head. Well, everything was already on its head, you just don't realise it unless you've been reading very carefully. I don't want to say too much, because I suspect if you spot there relevant fact (and it is blatantly there to spot), it rather spoils things. Suffice to say that if you don't, there's a hefty kick in the pants waiting for you.

Ben Bova – *Return To Mars*

Hodder & Stoughton, 1999, 548pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 340 70795 X

Reviewed by John Newsinger

Some years ago I read one of Ben Bova's *Orion* novels and on the strength of that experience decided he was a writer not worth bothering with. On the evidence of *Return to Mars*, this was a serious mistake.

Bova's work is obviously wildly uneven, because while certainly not a great novel, his latest hardback offering was entertaining enough to persuade me to buy a copy of *Mars*, the earlier novel to which *Return* is a sequel.

What are *Return's* strengths? First of all, while no literary genius, Bova is an accomplished craftsman. The novel is put together in a way that sustains interest and commitment, with a number of parallel plotlines running alongside each other extremely well. There is enough incident, excitement and suspense to keep the reader interested in what is supposed to be a realistic depiction of an expedition to Mars. The fact that the dominant viewpoint is that of a Navaho American gives the novel an off-centre appeal, although it is resolutely masculine throughout.

His characters are adequately drawn. There is no pretence at plumbing the depths of the human psyche, but all of the expedition members are given their own quirks and idiosyncrasies and are shown having to confront testing circumstances. While it could certainly be argued that they are too predictable (a criticism I would be inclined to accept), nevertheless they serve their purpose in moving the narrative forward and exploring the

dilemmas that will confront human traveller to Mars. A certain amount of suspense is added to the mix by the knowledge that one of the team (we don't find out who until the end) is mentally unstable, and prepared to sabotage the expedition in order to force a return home.

The novel's hard science is suitable convincing. I especially liked the way that people back on Earth are able to experience Mars through virtual reality. This is, of course, a subscription service. The return to Mars is privately funded and the likelihood is that future expeditions will be dependant of this one's profitability. Judging by this novel, Bova rejects excessive commercialisation. The recurring nightmare of the expedition's Navaho leader, Jamie Waterson, is that Mars will be turned into a tourist attraction, that the Martian wilderness will be despoiled and defiled just as the American West was. This is one of the main themes of the novel.

Another cleverly developed theme is Waterson's discovery of the remains of sentient life on the planet, long dead, but beyond any doubt. The extinct Martians may have actually left a message, but the way it tails off is a bit overdone. The full significance of this discovery is certainly dramatic enough to justify a further volume, and one suspects it is already on the way.

Return to Mars is an entertaining read, a good example of the bread and butter of the genre.

Joel Champetier – *Dragon's Eye*

TOR Books, 1999, 296pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0 312 86882 0

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

It has been said that the most important character in a work of science fictions is the setting. It is so with *Dragon's Eye*. It's location is the planet New China, orbiting an orange sun in the binary system Epsilon Bootis. The green companion star, Eye of the Dragon, pours out uv radiation from which the eyes and skin must be protected; so when it is above the horizon people mostly stay indoors. Congenial living is only possible at night or when the orange light prevails, but there are various permutations, and

nights are made spectacular by magnificent auroras. Additionally, changes in the orbital position of the Dragon's Eye produce climactic catastrophes, making people passive victims of the stellar demon.

New China is the fifth extrasolar planet colonised. Colonists are the Chinese poor, happy to put up with restrictive meteorological conditions in order to obtain freedom from bureaucratic restrictions of their homeland. On Ferret Island,

offshore from the planet-spanning continent, is the Earth's Free Trade Area, a hive of feuding, corruption, espionage and incompetence. To it comes Earth agent Tanner, intended to take over and reform it, but more immediately charged with contacting a mole, highly placed in New China's hierarchy. He, however, has disappeared, so, cosmetically and surgically orientated, Tanner goes in search of him. His Bond-like adventures through partly terraformed landscapes (well described) fill the bulk of the book – a mixture of the picaresque and the picturesque. The mix is particularly effective in the central episode where Tanner and his small entourage are adventuring further into the continent through the strange stylised versions of the Yangtze's lakes and gorges – two men in a boat, to say nothing of the girl (in the role of ill-starred heroine). Not all travel is by water; there is much careering around by train, taxi and bus, complex schedules determining dangerous escapades. This is the routine stuff of undercover work, and would be repetitive were it not for other

dimensions and diversions, such as a cosmological info dump and an exposition of Chinese poetry when their literate and reclusive quarry is finally run to earth. But violence, political and elemental, dominates the closing chapters, leading to an ambiguous, and in detail rather unsettling, ending – the ambiguity resting on how, and by whom, Tanner's ultimate success or failure is estimated.

An exploitative Earth shows up poorly; an aspiring New China comparatively well. In these respects there is some situational similarity to the relationship between parent and colonised planet in Kim Stanley Robinson's Martian trilogy. Although New China characters and politics are more stereotypical and the plot emphasis is more exclusively on devious manoeuvring, problems of rebellion and autonomy are common to both. The author, it is worth noting, hails from Quebec. *La Taupe et le dragon* was first published in Montreal (1991). The Tor translation aims at American and wider readerships, and certainly deserves success.

Suzy McKee Charnas – *The Conqueror's Child*
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

TOR Books, 1999, 428pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0 312 85719 5

This novel is the fourth of the 'Holdfast Chronicles', following on from *Walk To The End Of The World*, *Motherlines*, and *The Furies*. It is quite accessible as a stand-alone read, but as the series is concerned to explore change and development in the societies portrayed, the consequences of choices and actions, and the impact of individuals on societies and vice versa, much will be lost on those readers who don't know the previous three books.

The original Holdfast society was an extreme feminist post-Catastrophe dystopia featuring wildly exaggerated sex-role stereotyping: Men without exception were brutal, aggressive, power-mad, dominant, etc. etc. and women without exception were brutally oppressed and downtrodden – their major career choice being between Slut and Drudge. However, since the days of *Walk To The End Of The World*, the evil patriarchal society of the Holdfast has collapsed (with a little help from some brave, resourceful, virtuous, etc. women) and been replaced with a (comparatively) enlightened and compassionate women's society. One major problem exercising these women is What To Do With The Left-Over Men. They are currently kept as slaves, but some women would like to get rid of them entirely – others wonder if there is any possibility that men might become ever human enough to take some sort of responsible place in society...

The contrasting society featured in the series is that of the Riding Women; a nomadic people dependent on their horses for food, transport, and the stimulus for parthenogenetic reproduction. The 'lines' of this all-woman society are clones, and

the novels give a thoughtful picture of what such a clone-based society might be like: the personalities and habits of each 'line' are well-known and predictable; the society is basically static and closed, no new personalities ever emerge, so there can be no change – not until close contact with another society becomes a necessity.

The problem that *The Conqueror's Child* is basically examining is the feminist 'Man Question'. Are men irredeemably evil? Or is there any possibility that a boy child raised away from patriarchal contamination could develop into a reasonable human being? Much of the 'action' of *The Conqueror's Child* revolves around such a boy-child. There are plenty of alarms and excursions to hang the social speculation off, including the return of a marauding band of Evil Patriarchal Bastards who fail to destroy the women's societies (I don't think I'm giving away too much to reveal that) – even women who are damaged, contaminated by many years of contact with patriarchy, and hence often at cross purposes and distrustful of each other, can successfully unite in the face of the

Ultimate Threat.

I found this book both a lively story, and a thoughtful and thought-provoking examination of some issues that are "a long way from home" for me (though not for many feminists). Your own reaction will probably depend on whether you're a committed feminist (you'll regard it as a Serious and Important book), a committed un-feminist (you'll hate it), or someone who is able to entertain feminist ideas as speculative fiction without judgement (you may well enjoy it, but maybe not...)



THE CONQUEROR'S CHILD

Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford – *The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story*

Liverpool University Press, 1999, 164pp, £14.95 ISBN 0 85323 560 0

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Not to be confused with William Golding's novel about Neanderthals of the same title, this was the first of three novels on which Ford and Conrad collaborated at the beginning of this century, and the only one with an sf premise. However, although

both men were friends of H.G. Wells, and Wells's work had already established scientific speculation as acceptable material for literary fiction, the role of the "fourth dimension" is small here. "Let no one imagine that this is a story of the 'time and space' or

pseudo-scientific variety", as a 1901 review in *The Athenaeum* noted (this and other contemporary reviews are given in the Appendices). The girl from the fourth dimension who enraptures Arthur Granger might just as well keep her social background secret (like Jay "Great" Gatsby) as claim to come from the future.

Granger is a small-time journalist who is given the opportunity to mingle with the great political and business leaders when he is successful in writing pen-portraits of those men. They (loosely based on Balfour and Joseph Chamberlain) need his "spin" because they are each advancing their own positions, and need support in the country. In turn, the Duc de Mersch is building a company to industrialise Greenland (based on King Leopold's exploitation of the Congo), and needs to raise more and more capital. And Granger becomes more and more involved, as the girl manages to pass herself off as Miss Etchingham Granger, his sister, using her own magnetism to achieve the ends of herself and

the future. Granger, unaware of her motives as she intrigues with these men, tries to warn them off, but cannot. She is engaged to Gunard (the Chamberlain figure) when the true situation in Greenland is revealed, leading to the collapse of a bill in the House of Commons – and Prime Minister Churchill's fall – and the collapse of the Greenland company and a run on the stock exchange – Black Monday.

In this world moral collapse and financial collapse are correlatives. It was not just Conrad and Ford who saw this, though Conrad was writing *Heart Of Darkness* at the same time. This is the same vision that Wells had when he wrote *Tono-Bungay* (1909). Sometimes called "the condition of England fiction", Wells (an Englishman), Conrad (Polish born who became a naturalised Briton), and Ford (British born of German stock) saw that there was a wider "condition of Europe" to be considered.

Storm Constantine – *Sea Dragon Heir*

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

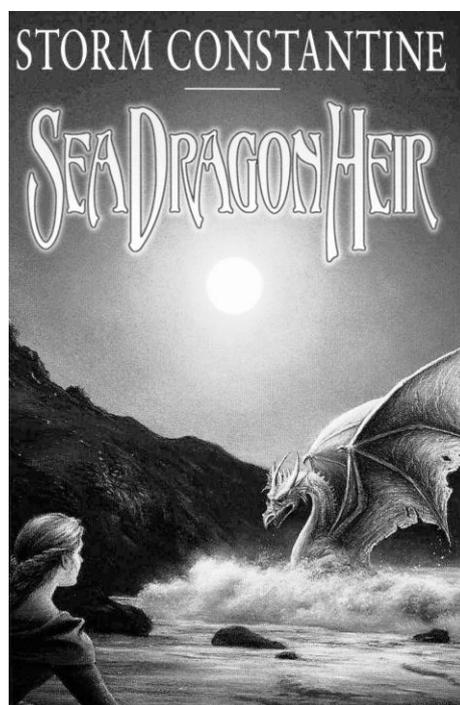
Gollancz, 1999, 343pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 575 06780 2

Here is set up, for the run of the trilogy, what on the face of it is a traditional fantasy world of opposed kingdoms and dynasties; but Storm Constantine endows this world with a symbolism identifying its divisions and peoples with great elemental energies. Magravandias, the current imperial hegemonic power, has a mythology of fire-drakes. It has subjugated the sea-bordering kingdom of Caradore, whose tutelary beings are the Sea Dragon queen, Foy, and her daughters. Madragore now requires military service of the sons of Caradore's nobility, and this includes Valraven Palindrake, scion of Caradore's dispossessed ruling house, whose duty is to serve Foy in maintaining her domain's identity. The indoctrination of Valraven's war service estranges him from this devotion, and even from his twin sister Pharinet, to whom Foy has revealed herself. When, in an imposed union, Valraven marries the Magravandian princess, Varencienne, and she comes to dwell in Caradore, the stage is set for a wealth of cross-dynastic, cross-thopoeic intercourse – and tension.

Presentation of such a plot-frame in a brief review necessarily tends to abstraction. The story is, in fact, full of wonderful set-pieces: the rites of the dragon-invoking Caradorean women; visionary vigils

on remote megalithic sites; out-of-the-body undersea encounters among the Ustredi mer-folk; possession by the shape-shifting dragon daughters; the beauties and mysteries of the long-abandoned castle of Old Caradore. Such Caradorean wonders are tapestried into a compelling narrative, where elemental magic mixes with feuds and amities of the most human kind. This is no simplistic sword-and-sorcery, but a sophisticated symbolic fantasy. Its action in one aspect is centred on a mythicisation of psychic/psychological energies, not the less impressive when viewed in the light of Pharinet's part-rationalisation: "I think the dragons, and other beasts like them, are symbols of the life of the world. I think humans have become estranged from that power to their detriment."

The action's other, and parallel aspect, is that of a family generation saga. In fact the story moves through 'magical' crises towards an emphasis on human endeavour, with a 'taming' of intrusively deterministic magic. An Epilogue pointing to the projected second volume, *Crown of Silence*, suggests a future of mystery and intrigue. One can only speculate as to how, in the fates of Caradore and Magravandias, the magical, the human and the dynastic will intertwine.



Dennis Danvers – *End of Days*

Reviewed by Paul Billinger

Avon Books, 1999, 372pp, \$16 ISBN 0 380 97448 7

This is Danvers' second novel centred around "the Bin" – a computer generated Eden into which most of Earth's population has been uploaded. This book picks up the tale 70 years after the end of the first.

On Earth the strongest faction is that of Gabriel's Army of the Lord, a militant Christian fundamentalist group intent on wiping out all remaining unbelievers. There are other small communities, of rebels and of Constructs, genetically engineered beings created as slaves. It is the clash between the fundamentalists and the Bin which drives the novel.

This book follows a small cast of characters. Some, such as Donovan Carroll and Stephanie Sanders, are in the Bin; others, like Sam, a young Christian Soldier, and Laura, a third generation Construct, are on Earth. Between these groups is Walter Tillman, whose uploaded personality has been trapped, alone, in a prototype version of the Bin for more than a century. It is Sam's discovery of Tillman that starts him questioning his own, already

weak, faith and leads him into a conflict that will determine the very existence of the Bin.

This should have been a strong premise for a tale that questions what it is to be human, but it has a number of serious flaws that, for me, resulted in a disappointing read.

The first problem is that the Bin is just not convincing. Why the majority of the World's population should choose to be irreversibly uploaded into a very conservative copy of Earth is never explained. It is implied that an immortal, virtual existence is sufficient to convince a wide range of people (we are only ever shown the middle classes) but the absence of crime, given that the personality is supposed to be unchanged, is baffling.

The second problem is that the story is unexciting. Although the characters are well-drawn, there is little conflict, and life seems far too easy, even for those left on Earth. Danvers himself sums this up early in the book; "Donovan found the whole business [the first book] saccharine and tedious. The heroes

always a bit too pure and the villains – the scenery-devouring fundies – a bit too thick.” Extreme coincidence plays a large part in forwarding the plot, which is justified as being “due to the will of God”.

Which brings me on to what I found the most difficult aspect. The book relies heavily on the reader’s belief in Christianity, for example in the sin of suicide, without which the whole premise of

the story collapses. The religious symbolism becomes heavy-handed (a pregnant character refused entry to a house but allowed to stay in a barn, complete with donkey, to give birth) although some of this may have been intended as satire.

Ultimately a well written book on an interesting theme let down by unconvincing, slow plotting and the reader’s need to believe in the book’s fixed religious framework.

Phyllis Gotlieb – *Violent Stars*

TOR Books, 1999, 284pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0 312 86953 3

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

James Tiptree Jr. would drop her readers directly into the heart of the story with no clue as to what was going on; you inhabited the story and had to make your own way through its nuances and complexities. Samuel R. Delany would use words like building blocks, piling them one upon the other into images so vast it was at times impossible to take them all in at once. Jack Vance was in love with the exotic, spinning romances from an incredible melange of colours and scents and shapes.

Phyllis Gotlieb shares characteristics with all three. She is a poet, and like Delany enjoys the language of science fiction, using her words richly and subtly. Like Vance she enjoys the sheer sense of wonder she can evoke through an endless procession of the strange and marvellous. Like Tiptree, she makes no concession to her readers: in any given scene the viewpoint character, chosen from a pretty large cast list, will almost invariably be the one participant in the action who knows least about what is going on. All of which makes this a very difficult book to get on terms with at the start. All you can do is take it on trust and let the currents sweep you as they will until you begin to get an inkling of the shape of the story.

Violent Stars is a sequel to Gotlieb’s earlier novel, *Flesh and Gold*, but it is not necessary to have read the earlier book before

this one, mostly because Gotlieb’s indirect storytelling technique means you will probably be none the wiser.

Once you learn the story, this is an action-packed novel. It opens with a kidnapping, and follows that with a breathless succession of killings, attacks, daring escapes, fights, explosions, double-dealing and sacrifice; though at times it is only in retrospect that you realise you’ve just witnessed something rather nasty. The slow, ponderous wheels of justice of a slow, ponderous alien race are about to grind, the first stage in a process designed to rid interstellar space of a slave-dealing multi-planetary corporation. But one of the galaxy’s nastier races is intent on throwing a spoke into the wheel. A bizarre array of characters find themselves caught in the resultant conflict, from a human adventurer to a robot, from blue women to a race without individuality who clothe themselves in gold, from a young girl who may be the descendant of a family founded on interplanetary slavery to a bunch of macaque monkeys.

There’s probably more going on than the novel can comfortably accommodate, and the discovery of an ancient intergalactic Ark at the end presages yet more to come, yet this is a rich and daring novel and it is well worth giving in to its incomprehensible complexities.

Richard Grant – *Kaspian Lost*

Avon Spike, 1999, 313pp, \$24 ISBN 0 380 97672 2

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

15-year old rebel Kaspian Aaby has a dispute with his youth counsellor at a summer camp and storms off. The leads him to an encounter with three leprechaun-like individuals, a young woman – both alluring and threatening – who might be an angel and what seems to be the ghost of his dead father. And then, after falling asleep, he awakes to find that four days seem to have elapsed and he is 60 miles away from the camp with no recollection of how he got there.

Returned to the camp, the staff are inevitably curious about what Kaspian has been up to on his little ‘outing’, as is his traditionalist and evangelical stepmother. But is there any point in trying to explain when Kaspian himself is unsure about what really happened, although the miraculous reappearance of a long-lost and much-loved childhood toy reinforces his own belief that it is more than just a dream?

Refusal to co-operate, though, seems like just another example of teenage rebellion – ‘passive-aggressive behaviour’ as his sexually enticing counsellor puts it to him – and Kaspian is packed off to a ‘progressive’ alternative educational programme in Virginia under the auspices of Jasper C. Winot, who wants to prove the value of his alternative methods to the powers in

Washington.

After the initial fantastic encounter, the novel quickly settles down to the story of a misunderstood teenager. Kaspian’s background is conducive to rebellion in an almost clichéd manner: his father died when he was young, leaving him with a stepmother who zealously crusades against the evils of modern society which seemingly includes Kaspian himself. Almost everybody he encounters wants him to conform, even characters who are themselves unconventional – like ‘Weeb’ Eugley of the Trust for Global Readiness, who wants to mould Kaspian’s experience to fit his conspiracy theorist views.

Of course, there’s nothing especially science fictional about this tale of teenage rebellion; Kaspian’s meeting with leprechauns, an angel and a ghost is over within the first dozen or so pages, although its influence continues to be felt throughout, and what follows is merely a story with which some science fiction fans may be able to identify. But this is an engaging and powerful novel which deserves attention amongst a mainstream and science fictional audience and which may bring Richard Grant’s work to a wider audience.

Julia Gray – *Fire Music*

Orbit, 1999, 538pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85723 735 8

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Some fantasy novels are so good – original, well-rounded characters, vividly depicted background – that there are not enough superlatives in the dictionary to describe them. Others are so bad – derivative, two-dimensional characters, unconvincing background – that they are almost impossible to read. *Fire Music* falls somewhere between the two: it may not win any awards, but it is a competently written fantasy. Not unputdownable, but it is an easy, light read. I did feel that the world of the novel was

lacking in detail, but it is a sequel to *Ice Mage*, which I’ve not read, so this reaction may be unfair, as first volumes tend to set the scene.

As far as the plot is concerned, there is enough information in *Fire Music* for new readers to have a fair grasp of what has gone before – the Firebrands, former rebels, are now the government of the land of Tiguafaya and are finding their new position rather more problematical than they might have supposed. Ico, the

President, is attempting to persuade the acquisitive Empire to the north that the Tiguafayans use of magic is not evil or heretical, but the only means of combating the volcanic disturbances that threaten to destroy Tiguafaya and Empire both. Unfortunately, war between the two seems inevitable, not least due to the political ambitions and machinations of the Emperor's brother and other interested parties, pirates, and various religious cults. Meanwhile, Vargo and Cat, also former Firebrands, are searching Tiguafaya for the fireworms that controlled the volcanoes in earlier times. Another Firebrand, Nino, believes that the answer to Tiguafaya's

problems lies in the 'links', birds that are magically in telepathic contact with certain Tiguafayans.

One of *Fire Music's* strengths is the depiction of likeable, sympathetic characters, although one of its weaknesses is these characters' habit of analysing their situation and what might be the answer to their and Tiguafaya's problems, rather than just getting on with the action. The action itself becomes forced towards the end of the novel with several characters being rather conveniently killed. *Fire Music* is not the greatest fantasy ever written but as an undemanding read it might suffice.

Simon R. Green – *Deathstalker Destiny*

Millennium, 1999, 473pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 877 9

Reviewed by Mat Coward

Having never heard of "Deathstalker" before receiving this book, I can't tell you how *Destiny* compares to its predecessors. I can tell you that it is the sixth and apparently last in the series, and that it's a sufficiently good read to make me sorry I missed the earlier volumes.

I think you'd file this under 'space opera'. Owen Deathstalker (motto: "Give me a big enough lever, and I'll beat the bloody problem into submission") travels to the Obeah Systems to rescue former pirate and revolutionary Hazel d'Ark from the immortal Blood Runners – who aren't nearly so immortal once Owen's got through with them.

Meanwhile, Humanity is facing threats from all manner of aliens and from various secret societies plotting away within, while Jack Random ("I am back, and God help the guilty") finds that the rebellion which he helped to lead against the corrupt empire has only delivered half a revolution, due to compromises made in the interest of peace, so he's gone all hard-core Maoist, convinced the only way you can create true liberty is by

constantly running swords through the flabby bellies of the ruling classes. Good lad, actually, is Jack.

It all reminds me of Dr Who at its peak; lots of running through corridors, a refreshingly straightforward morality, where evil is basically something that gets hacked to bits by good, and an equally refreshing contempt for the belief currently fashionable in some sf quarters, that clear communication is unlitrary.

The humour, the language and to a large extent the mores are resolutely 20th Century British (except for the irritating use of 'ass' to mean 'arse'). Along with the Doctor, there are reminders here of Pratchett, Douglas Adams and even Reggie Perrin. The dialogue is frequently hilarious, there are a few fandom in-jokes, and the semi-parodic superheroes at the centre of the action are lively.

There are some clumsily rushed passages, presumably caused by the need to tie up loose ends, and the extraordinary frequency and sameness of the battle scenes tries the patience a bit. But really, there's so much happening, and so much of it is so good, that few readers will feel they haven't got their money's worth.

Barbara Hambly – *Dragonshadow*

Voyager, 1999, 297pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 648368 2

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

Dragonshadow is a sequel to *Dragonsbane*, which was published in 1986 as a standalone novel. Like *Dragonsbane* it can be read independently, but it also forms the second book of a developing trilogy. Hambly skilfully provides the reader with sufficient information that you are never left feeling 'what's going on here?' and – more remarkably – you are never conscious of information dumping.

Winterlands Thane John Aversin is known as Dragonsbane, the slayer of dragons. Together with his wife, the mage Jenny Waynest, he sets off to kill a dragon that has been reported attacking some herd animals. From this they become involved in a wider struggle against a bandit army, and against evil wizards. While Jenny struggles to help the defenders of a besieged fort, John seeks the help of Morkeleb, the great Black Dragon whose love of Jenny has altered his perception of what he is.

The style of writing is unobtrusive. Places and events are described clearly but it is in the characterisation and plot that the book excels. John Aversin is a delight, a modern hero of courage and integrity who fights with his intelligence and wit, rather than just brawn. His way of coping with his fear is through frivolity, often seen by others as an inappropriate response, which he also uses to hide his competence and to make himself seem harmless. Hambly's most interesting characterisation is that of the dragons. With these she manages to produce that rare sense of otherness, against whose different thought patterns, behaviour and language we can reflect our own.

I can thoroughly recommend *Dragonshadow* as a well written and engaging fantasy. I intend to buy *Dragonsbane*, even though I now know the major plot lines and outcome, which puts Barbara Hambly's work in a rare category indeed.

Thomas Harlan – *The Shadow of Ararat*

Tor, 1999, 510pp, \$26.95 ISBN 0 312 86543 0

Susan Schwartz – *Cross and Crescent*

Tor, 1999, 382pp, \$14.95 ISBN 0 312 86807 3

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Both these books could be labelled 'historical fantasy', and there are similarities in the historical and geographical background, and in structure. They are, however, very different.

Susan Schwartz revisits characters who appeared in her earlier *Shards of Empire*. I haven't read this, and I found *Cross and Crescent* confusing at first, because Schwartz was clearly tapping into emotional reactions and knowledge that readers of the earlier book would bring to bear. I found the book hard to get into, partly because of this and partly because of the – perhaps necessary – infodumping about the historical background.

Cross and Crescent is set in the Eastern Roman Empire at the time of the Crusades. One of the central characters is Anna, daughter of the Emperor, whose obsessive need for power is thwarted because she is his daughter and not his son. Her

attempts to be declared his heir form one strand of the book, principally at the beginning and the end. I found these sections unsatisfactory, perhaps because Anna's attempts to gain power, through sorcery and through alliance with her father's enemy, come to nothing and are not dealt with in any depth.

The central section of the novel is about Theodoulos, foster son of Leo Dukas; these are characters from the earlier *Shards of Empire*, and Theodoulos comes with a history of rejection and tragedy. Embroiled in the Crusade as secretary to one of the leaders, he discovers strengths he never knew he had, and ultimately love, through the suffering of his experience. It's almost a different novel, and one that I found both moving and compelling.

In both sections, the fantasy elements are fairly minor, easing

the plot along but not in my view really vital. I wonder whether the book needs them at all. As a historical novel with Theodoulos as its protagonist, it could have been stunning.

We're in the Roman Empire again in *Shadow of Ararat*, but with a difference. This novel is set in an alternate universe, where the Western Empire never fell, and both the Western and Eastern halves of Roman power come together to counter a threat from the Persians.

Again the narrative has different threads. The three principal characters are Dwyryn Macdonald, a young Hibernian mage, Thyatis, a Roman woman trained in guerilla warfare, and Maxian, the youngest brother of the Western Emperor. While Thyatis works undercover for Roman military victory, Dwyryn serves in a Roman legion of magicians – a brilliant idea! – and Maxian attempts to unravel a curse on Rome.

I found a lot to enjoy in this novel, but I found it frustrating. So many of its ideas are not fully realised. For example, Dwyryn is despatched from his training school to the legions before he is ready, and it's foretold that he will be swamped in trying to use his magic arts along with people twenty years his senior. In fact,

when he reports to his unit after a series of hair-raising adventures, he finds himself serving with others of his own age, where he's quickly brought up to speed. It's almost as if Harlan had forgotten his original intention. And although the book ends with various plot threads drawing to a conclusion, others – notably Maxian's curse – aren't resolved at all. There's evidently more to come.

This is a big, sprawly novel, and I think it shows that it's Harlan's first. Lots of invention, not much discipline. Although the background and the parameters of the world come over vividly, after a while I felt there was too much concentration on descriptive detail while the pace of the story lagged. The style is uneven; some sentences are clumsy and repetitive, with occasional errors or inappropriate bits of US slang. However, mine is an advance copy, and perhaps a final edit or proof-read will remove these.

Cross and Crescent, in contrast, is much more tightly written, the descriptive passages revealing more than just outward appearances. To be expected, of course, of such an experienced writer as Shwartz. Neither book is negligible, but I felt both of them were slightly disappointing.

Mike Jeffries – *The Ghosts of Candleford*

Voyager, 1999, 249pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648208 2

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

The Ghosts Of Candleford is a modern twist on the story of *The Hound Of The Baskervilles*, by a British author unknown to me. The style of the book and the relative absence of gore leads me to conclude the book is aimed at teenagers rather than adults.

Merris Calvin is a US airman stationed during WW2 at a remote airfield in the Fens, who disappears one day and is never seen again. The story proper is set in the present-day, when young Hollis Calvin is going through his recently-deceased father's papers. He finds letters from his grandfather telling of unfriendly natives and mysterious goings-on in the nearby village whose name is censored. Also among the letters is the last photograph of his grandfather and friends found in his camera after his disappearance. To his great surprise, Hollis sees the that two of the people in the photograph are his dead father and himself! Interpreting this as a plea from his dead grandfather, first to his father, and now to him, Hollis embarks on a quest to England to

find the unnamed village and the truth. Once in England he is plagued by dreams and by the apparitions of three decaying weed-covered corpses, which together lead him to the isolated village of Candleford. Hollis discovers that two Englishmen also disappeared at the same time as his grandfather, and realises that these three ghosts of Candleford want him to stay and solve the mystery.

Casting a shadow over the whole story is the legendary devil-dog of the Fens, Black Shuck, blamed for many a death or disappearance for centuries. Will Hollis find out what happened to his grandfather, or will those who *know* call on Black Shuck to keep their secrets?

The Ghosts Of Candleford is an easy read, with a few frightening moments. Good for holiday reading perhaps, but not a book that will stay in the memory.

Dick Jude – *Fantasy Art of the New Millennium*

Voyager, 1999, 144pp (285 x 250 mm), £16.99 ISBN 0 00 413374 9

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

It is difficult to get something like this wrong. You take a selection of talented artists, with excellent colour reproductions of their work, perhaps with a few intermediate sketches showing works in progress, and a framing text that introduces the artists and lets them talk about their inspirations, approach, working methods and techniques. The trick, which Dick Jude manages here in exemplary fashion, is to choose a range of artists of contrasting styles and approaches and who are as good with words as they are with pigments and pixels.

In a three part progression, from 'Hairy Sticks and Pigments', through 'Paintbrush to Pixel' to 'The Digital Realm', Dick Jude maps the progression of science fiction and fantasy art illustration from the subtle watercolour and inks of Adam Lee and John Howe and the vibrant oils and acrylics of Don Maitz and Brom through artists like Jim Burns, Rick Berry and Chris Moore, who combine traditional painterly and computer techniques, to those, like Steve Stone, Fred Gambino and Dave McKean, who have moved almost entirely to computer created works. It's also nice to see artists like Berry and Stone, who probably don't normally get as much exposure as people like Lee, Burns, Maitz and McKean, strongly featured in a book of this sort.

The pictures are, of course, wonderful; Adam Lee's pencil drawing of a shamanistic Merlin is absolutely stunning, though I can't help thinking there is something not quite right with Jim Burns's first wholly computer rendered book cover for Silverberg's *Lord Prestimion*. Something about the surface and reflections in

the water, which are not scattered and fractured enough, even for such a seemingly calm surface.

Letting the artists talk, both about their individual approaches and about the creation of particular pictures, highlights another serendipitous thread that runs through several of the chapters, as in Rick Berry's view of art as an extended ongoing act of communal creation, almost phrased in terms of jazz soloists "sitting in" on a collective improvisation. Berry's determinedly experimental approach, creating directly on the drawing surface without preliminary sketches and roughs, can, he admits, "be a test of an art director's character." And there's a delightful aptness in Berry's description of his idiosyncratic use of paint and computer image for the cover of *Neuromancer*, given Gibson's own creation of his cyberspace classic on a manual typewriter.

Steve Stone also talks about the artistic impulse and composition process in terms of music, here the eclectic synthesising approach of rave culture (where he worked for some years as a designer.) Elsewhere, against the detailed realism of figures from Burns and Maitz, McKean eschews a literal realist approach, "Paint should look like paint", celebrating the computer not for its high gloss airbrush finish but for its liberation of exploratory combinatorial and layering approaches to composition.

Buy two copies. Then, if you really must cut out the pictures and stick them up on your walls, you'll have another pristine copy of this fascinating insight into ten highly creative imaginations.

Katherine Kerr – *The Black Raven* 

Voyager, 1999, 323pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 00224644 9

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This is the second in a new cycle of Deverry books which began with *The Red Wyvern*. When I was sent it to review, I hadn't read *The Red Wyvern*, but I made a point of doing so. I'm glad I did. This isn't a series of five separate stories, but one large design which will be spread over five volumes. Each one contains complete episodes, but there's obviously a long way to go.

One of the most distinctive facets of the Deverry books is the way that Kerr presents her characters as dying and being reborn to live many different lives. As individuals they know nothing of this, but certain characters are bound together by fate so that they repeat the same patterns over successive incarnations. There must be a fascination for the writer in creating the patterns, and interest for the reader in following them and working them out, but I also feel that it takes the edge off the reader's response to the fate of individuals. Nothing is final; there's always another cycle to go.

The bulk of *The Red Wyvern* and *The Black Raven* tells two interwoven stories about two separate incarnations of the same individuals. There's a strong contrast in time, place, and atmosphere between the sections. Each story is intriguing in itself, and gains from the comparison with the other. In *The Black Raven* a young woman, Niffa, tries to come to terms with the death of her husband and her own magical talents, while her counterpart,

Lilli, is involved at the centre of the civil wars in Deverry at an earlier period of its history.

The style is readable, and there's a strong sense of place. However, one aspect I found awkward was the naming system; there doesn't seem to be a strong sense of cultural identity among the different groups. I also felt the dialogue was sometimes stilted; occasionally I had to go back and re-read to be sure what the character meant, and this is disturbing for a reader trying to immerse herself in the world.

Around the two main stories, Kerr places the framework of her world, and this makes me wonder how it all appears to a new reader. There are references to events and people from the rest of the cycle, and major characters from earlier volumes appear in minor roles here. In my view Kerr hasn't established these well enough to allow *The Black Raven* to stand on its own. There are too many assumptions made. I know that it's difficult for a writer who is following a plan through a large number of books to keep everything clear, but it's off-putting for someone who is coming fresh to the series. I'd certainly recommend reading *The Red Wyvern* before *The Black Raven*, and possibly something from earlier in the Deverry sequence as well.

Stephen King – *Bag of Bones*

New English Library, 1999, 660pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 340 71820 X

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

As Thomas Hardy and/or the Hardy Boys might have said: "Compared to the dullest human being actually walking on the face of the Earth and casting his shadow there, the most brilliantly drawn character in a novel is but a bag of bones." Stephen King has now taken the quotation unto himself.

No, *Bag of Bones* does not allude to the Cadmus bit in *Jason and the Argonauts*. Unless I've missed an embedded reference, which is entirely possible. King overtly nods at Herman Melville, Daphne du Maurier, Ray Bradbury, W. Somerset Maugham – and that's just for starters! Ralph (*Insomnia*) Roberts and Thad (*The Dark Half*) Beaumont make brief guest appearances.

"Turn the average writer onto the subject of self-pity and you have an immediate autobiography" (Damon Knight). Michael Noonan is a Maine based (where else?) author who has suffered from absolute writer's block ever since the death of his wife, Joanna, four years before page one. *Pace* Knight, Mike retains a nice line in self-deprecating humour: "I was V.C Andrews with a prick for ten years..."

The double-dyed villain, Maxwell Devore, is Howard Hughes, Bill Gates and J. Montgomery Burns all rolled into one sentient pusball. Mad Max is locked in a custody battle for three year old Kyra, the daughter of his dead son, Lance, and Mattie Devore. Mike Noonan meets 'Ki' and Kim Darby-type Mattie just over 100 pages into the book. He takes up the legal cudgels on their behalf – but Max Devore turns out to be the merely mortal least of his worries. Noonan doesn't so much dabble in the occult as the occult dabbles in him:

"What came next was no outer voice but alien thoughts in my own head. They beat against the walls of my skull like moths inside a light fixture... or inside a Japanese lantern.

help I'm drown

help I'm drown

blue-cap man say dassn't let me ramble

help I'm drown"

(p358)

"It is a perilous trade," said William Makepeace Thackeray, "that of a man who has to bring his own tears, his laughter, his private thoughts and feelings to market." King/Noonan would echo those glum auctorial sentiments. Meanwhile, the reader of *Bag of Bones* passes with a pleasant quiver from the known to the unknown and part-way back again.

Mercedes Lackey and Larry Dixon – *Owlsight* 

Gollancz, 1999, 389pp, £9.99 ISBN 1 85798 845 0

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

This is the latest in Lackey's Valdemar series, and in a number of trilogies set before, during and after the Mage Storms, in which a magical backlash caused all kinds of problems for the Heralds of Valdemar and the Hawkbrother Mages. In particular, it's a continuation of the first volume (*Owlflight*) in which orphan Darian Firkin became the reluctant apprentice to Justyn, the Healer of Errold's Grove, a village at the back of beyond. In *Owlflight*, the village was taken over by a barbarian clan, led by a shaman. They were defeated with the aid of Darian, the Hawkbrothers, and the army of Lord Breon, the local 'lord of the manor'. Darian was formally adopted by the Hawkbrothers and got the chance to train properly as a Mage

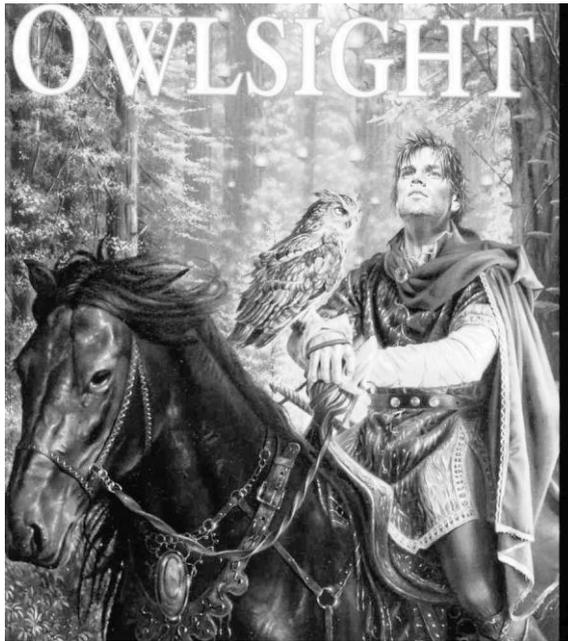
Owlsight opens four years later: Errold's Grove is a thriving community, with a new Healer, Keisha, who has the Healer's Gift, but has had little training in how to use it. Darian, four years older and more responsible young man than spoilt brat, is coming back to the vicinity, having spent his time away locating ley-lines and nodes of magical power.

The main event in the novel is the arrival of a second barbarian clan, which causes a great deal of consternation and debate on what to do, especially in view of the fact that they have brought a fatal illness. Ultimately, Darian and Keisha unite to find a solution to the problem, aided and abetted by Shandi, Keisha's sister, and a newly-chosen Herald. At the same time, Darian and Keisha find they like each other.

The novel ends with a treaty being agreed between barbarians and Valdemarans, the result of which is that the barbarians are allowed to settle, and the way left open for Darian and Keisha to develop their relationship further.

My one reservation is that this novel has too much talk and not enough action, a characteristic of Lackey's work when she has a co-writer. I regret to say this, but I was disappointed, and can't

honestly recommend unless you're a fan.

**Valery Leith – *The Company of Glass*** 

Gollancz, 1999, 379pp, £9.99 ISBN 1 85798 547 8

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

The Company of Glass is the first book of *Everien*, and Valery Leith, according to the blurb on the back of the book, 'is the pseudonym of a critically acclaimed young science fiction writer'.

Everien is a land which at some time in the past was populated by a 'higher' race, but is now peopled by the wolf, bear, snake and deer clans. There is also a race called the Sekk, who prey on the clans by hypnotically enslaving them, and turning those enslaved against their own, and the Pharician Empire – whom the clans are always in fear of being annexed by. Two cities, Jai Khalar and Jai Pendu, the latter having broken away from the peninsula on which still sits the former. Jai Pendu floats around causing every kind of magical mayhem when it returns every nine years. A brief magical connection between the two cities (one day only) enables access to 'the knowledge' – magical artefacts which the clans feel are the only way they can combat the Sekk. But Jai Pendu also holds unknown horrors.

Tarquin the Free, the sole survivor of an elite band of warriors who returned from Jai Pendu 18 years previously, returns to Jai Khalar bringing dire news of a massive Pharician army amassed on the borders of Everien. Although feared and respected, Tarquin is regarded as unreliable because he refuses to speak of what happened all those years ago in Jai Pendu. If the army exists, why can't it be 'seen' through the system of magical scrying glasses set throughout Everien? The king



and a small band of warriors, including Tarquin, set off to gather their scattered armies and see the truth of things.

Meanwhile, Jai Khalar itself is beginning to behave strangely and constantly rearranges itself as the magical effect of Jai Pendu's approach begins to spiral out of control. Despite Tarquin's warnings of doom, a further small band prepare to breach the magical defences of Jai Pendu in search of another magical artefact to help in the war against the Sekk.

This book is a general mish-mash of much of what is to be found in regular fantasy today. Leith uses magical chaos in an attempt to make this book something different, but unfortunately the chaos is far too random, and at times pointless, and does little more than confuse the whole. The book starts with an interesting enough plotline, but as more strands and layers are added, it spirals out of control and borders on farcical. A whole major plotline appears to be lifted straight out role-playing as a group of characters attempt to cross a bunch of floating islands, each one only becoming magically linked/bridged when whatever nasty on each island has

been overcome. It's a shame, because it started with so much promise.

The Company of Glass is not really a bad book, so much as a pointless one. It's well enough written, has *some* interesting scenes and characters, and perhaps even has something to say that this reader missed completely, but I can't in all honesty recommend it.

Jeff Long – *The Descent* 

Gollancz, 1999, 470pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 575 06862 0

Reviewed by Liam Proven

Aptly-named, this strangely self-contradictory book plumbs the uttermost depths of risibly spurious science, but for all that, remains moderately engaging. In places, it grips like a narrow cave-passage far underground. Not that the exploration of such regions is everyone's idea of fun.

The setup is simple: the entire surface of the Earth is riddled with caves for a dozen miles straight down. (But pressures and temperatures stay close to normal all the way.) There is a flourishing ecosystem down there. (Although there's almost no source of energy to sustain it.) It's inhabited by humanoid creatures; because they come from the Underworld, Hades, they are dubbed *Homo hadalensis* – "hadals". They even have horns. (Although they're a separate species, they can, and indeed like to, interbreed with humans.) If a surface human stays deep underground for a while, they turn into a hadal. (Sometimes.) They even grow the horns.

No, wait, there's more. Decomposing bodies give off nitrogen, which stops helicopter engines. People given oxygen after staggering out of the nitrogen cloud instantly die of the bends – on the surface. Radio communications to people underground are slowed by passage through the rock – for up to five months.

Except that sometimes they go forwards in time instead.

Although there are countless millions of hadals, and the war against them goes very badly, most of them suddenly die off. Even so, people constantly bump into certain ones, despite the size of the cave system.

Don't attempt *The Descent* expecting any shred of realism or rationality. However, treat it as a modern tale of Lemuria and it's fun. There are several different plotlines turning on familiar themes of descent into Hell, alienation, redemption and returning to face past fears. There's excitement and adventure, heroism, exploration of lost worlds and the obligatory romance. It all comes together in the end – of course, in an utterly implausible way.

The writing is pacey, but the editing is appalling. A good editor would have ordered a rewrite to remove all the palpably ridiculous elements, which would have made the whole far more palatable. And just like a previous and particularly laughable potboiler which I reviewed for *Vector*, Lincoln Preston's *Relic*, it will very likely be made into a schlocky Hollywood movie. Take it on holiday, read while sunbathing, add alcohol and play spot-the-howler.

J M H Lovegrove – *Berserker* 

Millennium, 1999, 407pp, £5.99 ISBN 1 85798 556 7

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Hands up all those who remember "The Champions" ... good, and John Creasey's Dr. Palfrey? Good, good. Then you'll know what to expect from this book.

But for those who didn't put their hands up, a quick generic synopsis:

+ + EARTH IN PERIL + STOP + + ONLY SMALL GROUP OF MEN (PERSONS) CAN SAVE US + STOP + + FORM SECRET ORGANISATION + STOP + + QUICKLY + STOP + +

This book (and presumably the whole series) is a bit strange. Reminiscent of those British sci-fi thrillers of the sixties and seventies, but larded with internet references and the kind of special effects which you expect to find in the *Power Rangers*.

Now, a quick synopsis of the background:

The Aliens were here. Mankind, thick as bricks, needs their help to get anywhere, so the Aliens help them by founding Atlantis. Mankind, thick as bricks, decides that "We are as Gods..." and uses the power that the Aliens gave them to kick the proverbial out of their fellow Men. Aliens are angered and destroy Atlantis. (Is that how that happened?) Millennia later, Aliens (now showing their true light as petty, bickering beings) have split into two factions. One attempting to slow Mankind's (apparently no longer thick as etc.) progress so that IT won't happen again, the other trying to speed things up a bit so that they (Mankind, apparently still thick as etc.) will just get on and destroy

themselves. But both factions are scared (cowardly petty, bickering beings) of Earthlings, so they need to use souped-up people as their tools...

As words written down and following on one after another to make sentences, this is competent enough. The characters are hewn out of solid cardboard, but the pace is good, and the plot moves swiftly enough to keep the pages turning. But, and this is a big one for me, the premise is just so looney that I had to keep stopping for a laugh. The goodies (and baddies) are too much like the *Power Rangers* or *The Champions* (come on, William Gaunt, Alexandra Bastedo and some American nobody, you remember...) to really take seriously, and those special effects are just too much! A sample: A soldier in the Gulf has just been inhaled a secret biological weapon.

"It is nearly seven feet tall, a mass of sinewy, vein-crazed flesh, its physique a caricature of the human body, every muscle pumped up to absurd proportions, and asymmetrically, so that its posture is distorted. ... Its back is humped by an immense set of laterals and a reptilian ridge of spine ... Shreds of clothing cling to this creature – the remnants of a combat blouse flab around its neck and chest..."

And if that inspires you to get this book, and the rest of the series, then enjoy!

Ken MacLeod – *The Sky Road* 

Orbit, 1999, 291pp, £16.99 ISBN 1 85723 755 2

Reviewed by Andrew A. Adams

The Sky Road is Ken MacLeod's fourth novel. It is set in almost the same future as the first three (*The Star Fraction*, *The Stone Canal* and *The Cassini Division*). In fact, half of the story is how history diverges between *The Cassini Division* and *The Sky Road*. Although MacLeod says that the books can be read in any order, I feel that a review of this one is almost impossible without referring heavily to the first three.

The central character, Myra Godwin, first appeared in *The Stone Canal*, and indeed we see some of the later events from there restated from Myra's viewpoint early on. As with *The Stone Canal*, this book features a story-line alternating between two time periods: in the earlier novel, between the past/near future and the far future; here between a medium-term future and one a hundred

years further on. Despite being the central character of both halves, Myra Godwin does not appear in the further future except as a religious icon. It is her legacy that is being worked out. So, we have Myra Godwin, who appears in both *The Star Fraction* (briefly) and *The Stone Canal* (at more length). She sells independent nuclear deterrence from an ex-soviet installation sitting inside Kazakhstan much as the Vatican sits inside Italy. Her actions and decisions determine whether the future includes the technological communist state of *The Cassini Division* or the reverted, slightly backward state we see here. As the book progresses, we learn more about both the actions leading to this degeneracy and the efforts to bring humankind out of its planetary isolation and into space once more: the Sky Road of the title. The

viewpoint characters of the further future are Clovis, a student of history struggling to fund his thesis work on Myra Godwin's life (a dangerous subject in a semi-barbaric state which reveres her as a messiah), and Merrial, a 'tinker' or engineer working on the project to launch the first satellite in over a century (from the unlikely venue of the north of Scotland). Clovis's work on the project brings him into contact with Merrial, and he spirals ever deeper into a web of intrigue and deception. Like Doc Smith's Lensmen books, each time we think we've worked out who's manipulating things we suddenly find a layer above and beyond that, although MacLeod resists the temptation to overdo it. The last few chapters of Myra's story reveal some frightening truths about what's happening to Clovis and Merrial, while the last part of theirs shows the horrible ramifications of Myra's last acts, and the mitigation of horrors from her last speeches, attributed for over a hundred years as her last words.

Paul McAuley – *Ancient of Days*

Avon Books 1999, 386pp \$16.00 ISBN 0 380 975 16 5
Millennium 1999, 320pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 892 2

Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

Artificial worlds provide endless and arbitrary options for the inventive writer, who must then work out his own consistencies and plausibilities; but it isn't always easy for readers to immediately latch on. In the case of this, the Second Book of Confluence, it helps to have read the First Book, *Child of the River*. Failing that, and lacking any map, new entrants must work the accommodate the bizarrerie of a needle-shaped planet whose dominant feature is a linear but mysteriously recycling Great River, which flows from a world-curbing edge of mountains to plunge at mid-point into emptiness. The fascinating, if bewildering, contours of this 'river world' take shape as you read, and desire for knowledge of its origin, and of the myriad races occupying its banks, becomes compelling. As indeed it is for Yama, who, with his band of devotees and minders, is seeking his own 'blood line'.

Yama's early history conforms to a hero/saviour tradition of the 'floating Moses' type, with subsequent fostering and later adventuring serving to fulfil a destined role, both personal and historic. Through a succession of offensives, setbacks, abductions and alliances, Yama is granted only a few clues: his 'Purana' texts, and an ambiguous vision in female form – a surviving archetypal 'copy' vested with knowledge but no power. Yama has only

imperfect knowledge, but power to control or destroy certain machines operating in the war between orthodoxy and heresy that racks Confluence – hence the efforts of antagonists to gain control of him. As the novel ends, Yama appears to be conscripted into the war by a further, extraneous power.

There are unresolved cosmological and metaphysical complexities. Orthodox 'gods' are the founding Preservers, aeonically distanced and self-quarantined humans, who even now are supposedly sustaining what the planet-creating Builders have brought into being. The Angel of Yama's 'Puranas' reveals what she has learnt of the Preservers' apocalyptic role. How do they relate to the Ancients of the title? – a title derived from Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days before whom stood "ten thousand times ten thousand" while "the judgement was set and the [recording] books were opened." McAuley introduces this motif from his story 'Recording Angel', which he has said derives from Frank Tippler's *The Physics of Immortality*. Certainly, a cloudy eschatology suffuses much of *Ancients of Days*, doubtless awaiting clarification in Book Three. Meanwhile Yama's progress through the exotic realm of the river affords pleasure and speculation enough.

L.E. Modesitt – *Adiamante*

Orbit, 1999, 316pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85723 842 7

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

An enormously powerful fleet of starships arrives above a far-future Earth, an Earth once the home of a near legendary human Empire, which has now, apparently, collapsed into a contrite, pastoral, shadow of its former self. Sound at all familiar? Shame on you if it doesn't, because it's the basis of at least half the stories that A. E. van Vogt ever wrote. Fortunately, *Adiamante* seems to have taken the bare bones of classic van Vogt and reworked it with a '90s dash of ecology and cultural relativism, bringing everything bang up to date, whilst reinforcing the old adage that great sf has nothing to do with the way we will be in the future and everything to do with the way we are now.

The newly arrived fleet is a race of militant cyborgs (not dissimilar to the Borg), descended from the long-exiled survivors of a genocidal war against the "demis" – the van Vogtian superhumans who now live on the remains of the Earth. The cybs, as they are known, are the archetypal Prodigal Son; except for their mission to visit the sins of the fathers upon their distant descendants.

The majority of the novel is a gradual and engrossing introduction to both cultures, depicting the slow ballet of diplomacy as each pretends to believe the lies of the other – or are they lies? It's a subtly played game, smoothly narrated with a deceptive ease, building to a cathartic climax that is pure Tragedy in the air of awful inevitability that permeates events from page one.

Modesitt, like van Vogt, writes easily of technological miracles, but his have conversely more of the technology and less of the miraculous about them. That they are used by humans, not superhumans, and that the wisdom needed to accompany this use has been (or not been, as we see) extremely hard won in human terms, gives *Adiamante* a modern resonance which seems lacking today in van Vogt's work.

I missed my stop on the bus, forgot to phone my mother and stayed up till the wee small hours on a school-night reading *Adiamante*; and it was well worth it.

Kim Newman – *Life's Lottery*

Simon & Schuster, 1999, 488pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 684 84016 2

Reviewed by Paul Billinger

So, are you a Napoleon Solo type of person, or more of an Illya Kuryakin one? This is the first decision that Keith Marion, aged 7,

has to make. It is not, however, only Keith who has to decide – you do too, as this is not a linear novel where the Author makes

all the decisions. Rather it is written in the style of the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks where you “go to 26 if you stand and fight”.

Here it's not a barbarian hero but Keith, born to normal middle class parents, whose life you are guiding through school and the introduction of the comprehensive system and into adulthood. The possible futures of Keith could be ordinary but most are not; they range from murderous revenge during an outward bound course, to the armed attack on a local politicians' headquarters, a very strange relationship with a WPC (which could have come straight out of an Iain Banks novel) to a hermit in a Tibetan cave. As you follow these through and re-read different streams, making alternative decisions, you realise how cleverly it's all put together, with childhood characters reappearing, sometimes as friends other times mortal enemies. Some streams loop back to give you another chance, others lead you careering on to a terminal end no matter what you do.

But do you really have free will or is a higher power directing you? Throughout the streams there are occasions when you step outside time and meet, well, the spider in the shadows, who may

be glimpsed in the corners of the main narrative.

The book makes much of the cultural icons of the period, *Dr Who*, Dinky toys, school custard, *Top Cat* and later Thatcher, and you will probably gain more from this if you grew up through the same period as Kim Newman and Keith (both born in 1959, which makes you curious to know how much of this is autobiography or literary revenge for past childhood slights).

The book is not so much a novel, more a collection of (very) linked (and cross-linked) short stories set in the same world and featuring the same characters. The writing is simple but fluid, which, given the fractured structure, is of particular importance, with an excellent introductory section leading up to that first, fateful decision.

I expect that this book will infuriate some but it's well worth persevering – the more you read and replay decisions the more you get out of it. Definitely one to come back to, as you're never sure you've read all of it.

P.S. – I always preferred Illya.

John Pelan (ed.) – *The Last Continent: New Tales of Zothique*

Shadowlands Press, 1999, 440pp, Limited Edition £60 (500, clothbound, signed) ISBN 0 9665662 4 6
Deluxe Edition \$100 (50, Leatherbound, slipcased, illustrated, signed) ISBN 0 9665662 3 8

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Reviewed here in manuscript copy, plus a proof of the dustjacket cover, *The Last Continent* is an anthology of stories set in Clarke Ashton Smith's creation of the last continent of Zothique, in the dying days of the Earth. Clark Ashton Smith (1893-1961) wrote over 100 stories, mainly between 1930-1936, many set in legendary and invented world such as Hyperborea and Zothique. These were collected in several volumes (*Lost Worlds*) by Arkham House in 1944, and later, in different order, by Lin Carter as *Zothique* (1970) and later again by Steve Behrends and Will Murray as *Tales of Zothique* (1995).

The Last Continent, as its subtitle hints, collects a number of new stories, but by 20 authors – some well-known (Brian Stableford, Gene Wolfe, Lucy Taylor, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, t Winter-Damon) but others largely unknown to me, although perhaps better known to aficionados of the *Weird Tales* school of decadent and gothic horror – who take their inspiration from Smith's Zothique. Since, as Donald Sidney-Fryer notes in his introduction, the aim is not to imitate Smith's ornate style, the results show the unevenness of any original anthology.

Most of the stories fall into what might be termed gothic fable, in which the overriding aura is one of ennui, decadent excess – a waiting for the end of the world in which the rules of restraint, pleasure and morality are suspended. Only one tale here, Lucy Sussex's 'Ashes of Longing, Ashes of Lust', has anything approaching the promise of a transcendental ending, and that comes at the point of its protagonist's death. No such salvation awaits the mercenary in Mark Chadbourne's 'Love and Death at the End of the World', whose change of heart comes too late as he is

tumbled into Hell. Here are tales of weird rites, cannibalism, cruelty, torture and revenge: the thousand castrated monks atop concentric rings of stone pillars, endlessly chanting every possible combination of phonemes in Rhys Hughes's 'The Decibel Circus'; a pervasive black dust that transforms an entire realm into flesh-eating revenants in 'The Benevolent Emperor'; a wife who treats with a necromancer to raise her dead husband so he can fulfil a commission for a sculpture (Geoff Cooper's 'Jolerarymi's Rose').

I have to admit I couldn't get on with t Winter-Damon's 'Blue Roses, Red, Red Wine' for its highly mannered style. And while Winter-Damon is by no means the main culprit, there does seem to be something about the genre that brings out the thesaurus hunter in writers. In the first three pages of the opening story, I was sent to the dictionary for fulgurant, astara, bartizan, chatoyant, catachlothian, eidolon, nunuphar, noctambulous and alcade, and then later for brumal, nugatory, flatigious, fecculence, pleonastic, chatoyant, peccant, several of which (after looking up) I hope I will never have occasion to use in polite conversation.

The highlight story here, for me, was also the longest, Brian Stableford's 'The Light of Achernar'. As this near-fairytales of doom and tragedy unfolds, rumour and misinformation spread like wildfire around the troubled kingdom, while the vizier-astrologer Giraiazal couches his various predictions and assurances with all the economy of a Delphic oracle.

[Available from Bereshith Publishing, PO Box 2366, Centreville, VA 20122, USA. tempus@bereshith.com]

Madeleine E. Robins – *The Stone War*

TOR Books, 1999, 317pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0 312 85486 2

Reviewed by Elizabeth Billinger

I've never visited New York, but I know what it smells and tastes like, how it feels to be there, at least, I know all these things about Madeleine Robins's New York.

The Stone War is a surprisingly old-fashioned, post-holocaust novel set in an alternative or near future New York. Through the eyes of John Tietjen, we are introduced to the pre-holocaust city, a place in which most areas have become gated communities and the middle-class live in fear and isolation. Robins rejects the more expected dichotomy of urban and rural, giving Tietjen a hatred of the city as it has become, but an unshakeable love of the place it used to be when it was full of life, and he was not the only person crazy enough to walk the streets at night.

Whilst Tietjen is out of town, news arrives of a terrible disaster in the city, though the nature of the tragedy is unclear. Some talk

of fires, some of floods, some of earthquakes and many of riots. Tietjen is driven to return, to discover the fate of his ex-wife and children, but mostly because he has a deep-rooted need to be there with his city.

When he gets back, he finds that every conceivable disaster has happened and, after meeting the warm and resourceful Barbara McGrath, starts to build a community of survivors. Things go well until the group discover that they are sharing the city with monsters, and realise that they must literally fight for their lives.

Although the group of survivors is in the dark, the reader knows from soon after Tietjen's return to the city, what has gone wrong. The somewhat sketchy explanation has a degree of internal logic, but is much more fantasy or magic than it is science, and yet the novel feels like science fiction. It has the

comfortable and nostalgic feel of a Wyndham disaster, focussing on the group dynamics of the survivors and the practical measures they take. The urban setting and isolation from the rest of the world threatens a touch of *Escape from New York*, but the horror

and violence are overshadowed by biscuits, stew and learning to love.

A thoroughly enjoyable read. I would certainly look out for more sf by Robins.

Justina Robson – *Silver Screen*

Macmillan, 1999, 374pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 333 75437 9

Reviewed by John D. Owen

It's always refreshing to find a new voice taking on the shibboleths of the genre. Justina Robson certainly qualifies as a new voice, *Silver Screen* being her first novel, and she starts off in the familiar territory of cyberpunk, giving it a fresh spin by using a central character with a peculiarly British flavour. That the book ends up long on originality and short on clichés indicates that Ms Robson has a future ahead of her in the genre.

Robson's heroine, Anjuli O'Connell, has definite problems. She's a food-obsessed woman with a perfect eidetic memory, engaged in research into artificial intelligence (as a psychologist monitoring a self-evolving supercomputer known as 901), with an obnoxious best friend and colleague who wants to download himself into cyberspace. Her only reliable confidante seems to be 901 itself, and the way things are shaping up a third of the way through the book, it seems as though she may end up as the expert witness whose testimony could decide the fate of either the

AI, or the company that built it. And there are lots of people who want to make sure Anjuli either testifies their way or not at all.

Where Robson scores is in her characterisation and her use of British settings. Anjuli isn't your normal street-smart cyberpunk bucking the system for either survival or kicks. She's a neurotic researcher, working mostly on a space station housing the world's most advanced artificial intelligence. She's naive, and looks certain to get caught and crushed in the machinations of the plot. That she convincingly survives, that the plot doesn't end up where you expect it to, and that *Silver Screen* is a cracking good read is testimony to Justina Robson's excellence as a writer. There are some rough edges, some key characters that are not as well-drawn as others, plus some longeurs in the plotting that could have done with tightening up, but overall this is an exceptionally good debut novel.

Michaela Roessner – *The Stars Compel*

TOR Books, 1999, 430pp, \$25.95 ISBN 0 312 85755 1

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

This is a novel imbued with the scents and tastes of its setting – an alternate Renaissance Italy, where the precociously Machiavellian Caterina de'Medici (aged eleven) is threading her way through a maze of political and magical intrigues.

The viewpoint character is not Caterina herself, but Tommaso Arista, her cook. Tommaso isn't a mere kitchen boy, but an artist in his own right: apprenticed to Cellini, he is Michelangelo's lover and Caterina's confidante. His family tree includes not only prestigious cooks, but his grandmother Angelina – whose amazing recovery from a debilitating illness is popularly ascribed to her occult powers – and his dead sister Ginevra, whose spirit apparently lives on in a ruby pendant around Caterina's slender neck.

Tommaso's everyday life is drawn as a fascinating and frustrating melange of famous names, kitchen feuds, mouthwatering recipes and occult visions. His recipes are described in tantalising detail (this is most definitely *not* a book to read while you're dieting) and, while some of the epicurean details may seem anachronistic – were turkey and coffee well-known New World imports as early as 1530? – Roessner's research is sound enough in other areas to give verisimilitude to the more obscure details.

Tommaso understands only a little of the cosmic events unfolding around him – and so, perforce, the reader is similarly confused. It seems that Caterina is just one incarnation of a being who inhabits many planes, and who has chosen to be born into the nobility of 16th-century Florence in order to combat the forces of darkness. Caterina regains awareness of her greater self only in dreams, and during her waking hours has no knowledge of the choice she's made.

There's plenty to distract her, though. Her magical powers are gaining strength as she nears adolescence, and she is uneasily aware that a battle between good and evil is being fought through the streets of Florence and Rome. Caterina herself, Tommaso and her beloved cousin Ippolito are game pieces on the side of Good. Ranged against them are the villains of the piece: Alessandro de'Medici, ostensibly her half-brother but probably the Pope's bastard son; Lorenzaccio de'Medici, another cousin; and an array of necromancers, demons, assassins and politicians.

Those who haven't read the first in the series, *The Stars Dispose*, may find the plot convoluted and obscure. There is no summary of the events recounted in the previous novel: this, perhaps, is why the forces of evil seem no more than mildly unpleasant.

Jane Routley – *Ayamaya*

Avon Eos, 1999, 278pp, \$13.5 ISBN 0 380 79428 4

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

This is the third of Jane Routley's fantasy novels to feature the powerful young mage Dion Holyhands, also known as the Demonslayer of Gallia. By now, Dion is no longer the naive young girl who felt out of her depth in the royal court, and conscious of the disapproval of male mages who feel that women's magic is only fit for healing. She is now more confident, even when moving in royal circles, but still suffers from self-doubt in other areas of her life; she is saddened by her childlessness and believes this is what led her husband, Shad, to divorce her.

Accompanied by her friend, Kitten, who has her own reasons for making the journey, Dion travels to the land of Aramaya to discover the whereabouts of her missing niece, Dally, who also has magic powers. Dion suspects that Dally has dabbled in necromancy, punishable by death, and is determined to find her niece before the Aramayan authorities. This becomes difficult when she meets Prince Nikoli Terzu, of the Third Regiment of

Imperial Demon Hunters, joins forces with him against an Ayamayan necromancer, and becomes his lover. Further complications arise when Shad arrives in Aramaya.

The high standard of fantasy writing – strong characterisation, a background rich in detail, taut plotting, originality and credibility – of Routley's earlier books are found once again in *Ayamaya*. The search for, and rescue of Dally, Dion's problems with the men in her life, her on-going fight against powerful demons – including her old adversary Bedazzer – plus various sub-plots involving supporting characters, and the depiction of Aramaya itself, reminiscent of Imperial Russia, all combine to make a first-rate novel. My only criticism of the book is that the final section, in which Dion travels to the land of Marzorna, is too short compared with what has gone before. Marzorna is a desert land, inhabitable only due to the presence of a river and its attendant marshlands, its people's beliefs being determined by

their surroundings. I felt this scenario deserved as much space as the Aramayan section of the book, and that the various plot-strands need not have been brought together quite so speedily as

in the final pages. I hope that Jane Routley's likeable heroine will return in future volumes.

David Seed – *American Science Fiction and the Cold War*

Edinburgh University Press, 1999, 216 pp, £16.95 (pb) ISBN 1 85331 227 4

Reviewed by Gary S. Dalkin

The introduction made me fear the worst. For example "Derrida installs his discourse of ultimacy ('absolute', 'irreversible', 'total', etc.) through the premise of the 'uniqueness of an ultimate event' whose very uniqueness collapses the distinction between belief and science." I will cheerfully admit that I do not understand this (or much else in the introduction), possibly because I don't care what Derrida has to say. If I did I would read him. I am reading David Seed to discover what he thinks, not so that he can abuse the English language in rote academic self-abasement before the naked French emperor of a hollow philosophy. It was therefore a pleasant surprise to find that the main text written in accessible prose, and that once over grovelling, that David Seed has some interesting observations on offer.

The book is divided into 14 chapters, ranging from Philip Wylie and Robert A. Heinlein to Walter M. Miller and the Regan Administration's 'Star Wars' project, taking in computerisation, Philip K. Dick and *Dr. Strangelove* en route. Other films are covered, but the bulk of the text is centred on written sf. This is a well-researched book, revealing fascinating information about the backgrounds of various writers, their preoccupations, and ideologies. For instance, I didn't know that it was George Orwell who in 1945 coined the term 'Cold War'. Seed goes into the politics and psychology of that state of perpetual potential conflict, exploring how the permanent threat of nuclear destruction affected American science fiction. This is all very insightful, but exposes the very serious limitations and inconsistencies of the book.

Seed falls for America's myth that it is the only place which matters. Yet the Cold War affected the entire world, threatening every nation with the literal fallout of a global conflict. Therefore every nation responded to the Cold War, and other nations wrote science fiction, some of which was influenced by American sf, and which in turn influenced the American form of the genre. John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* can be seen as an early

'50s British responses to the Cold War, and was tremendously successful in America, inevitably influencing American Cold War sf. Seed makes little of the fact that the global threat of the Cold War must inevitably be reflected not just in American, but in the entire planet's sf. (The one mention of Wyndham does not record that he was British, leaving the implication to the uninformed reader that he was American.) Nevertheless, and without justifying the inconsistency, Seed devotes space to some non-American SF too important to leave out without ruining his own argument. Thus *1984*, which by the terms of the book is ineligible, is included.

The second failure is to effectively imply by omission that the holocaust novel emerged as a result of the Cold War. In fact the holocaust and post-apocalyptic novel goes back to the very roots of sf, to Mary Shelley and *The Last Man*, to Wells and *The War of the Worlds*, to Baker and *The Birds*. Mankind has long had an urge to destroy itself fictionally, the Cold War merely realised the potential such that the literature expanded.

There is also an over-concentration on the nuclear threat to the exclusion of other dangers. For instance there is no mention of the biological warfare disasters of *Earth Abides* or *The Stand*, and finally there is no examination of what happened afterwards. If on one level *The Terminator* (1984) was a Cold War allegory, why was the sequel even more successful after the fall of the Soviet Union? The Bomb didn't simply fade away like the failed political institutions.

It is this wide range of issues the book resolutely fails to address which means that it can be far from definitive, and ends up being rather disappointing. Given the scope of the subject a much fuller treatment is required. As it is, David Seed offers some detailed insight but with too narrow a focus. 216 pages simply is not enough. Perhaps a greatly expanded second edition is required.

Roger Sheppard – *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror: A Reader's Guide*

Library Association Career Development Group, 1999, £25, 416pp ISBN 1 901353 01 X

Reviewed by Edward James

This is a reference book, offering summaries of the best books of the best authors in these genres, with details of their publishers and the awards won, if any. It is intended for librarians as well as general readers. A computer data-base must lie behind this book; the data-base would seem to have been printed out, with almost no checking or proofreading. As a consequence, I must urge everyone with £25 to spend to avoid this at all costs. There are a number of alternatives. Amazon.co.uk (and no doubt other people) can supply the paperback of Neil Barron's excellent *Anatomy of Wonder* for under £34: the extra nine pounds makes all the difference.

All one really needs from a reference book is confidence in its accuracy. Sheppard's book, unfortunately, cannot be trusted. The rest of this review will give you a few reasons why.

1. He has not spell-checked. Occasionally the author's name is wrong: thus, we meet Prachett, Cathy Acker, Paul di Fillipo, "Kilgour Trout", and (consistently), Dean Koonz. Along with many other people, he can't spell "millennium". There are misspellings in titles: we have Tepper's Marvin the Manyshaped, Pratt's Compleat Compleat Enchanter; Niven's Worlds of Ptaavs, Moorcock's Elric of Melibone, Bradley's Oath of Runiciates (for Renunciates), and Eddings's Sorceress of Darkshua (for Darshiva)

and The Seekers of Kell for Seeress of Kell. (At the end, in his list of series books, he changes Seekers into Seeress, but keeps the redundant definite article. He refers to the first sequence as "The Belgariard".) He almost invariably leaves out accents (as in Melniboné, or in Delany's Nevèrÿon sequence).

2. He does not know how to use apostrophes (along with many other people). For instance, since he thinks that Card wrote Enders' Game (or, in another place, Enders Game), he talks about the "Enders sequence". He writes about "a girl whose' powers..." Many book titles have missing apostrophes: at random, Spinrad's The Void Captains Tale.

3. He is quite inconsistent. Sometimes he provides titles with a definite or indefinite article; frequently he leaves them off; sometimes he supplies the wrong one. Sometimes he italicises the titles of novels, and sometimes not; sometimes he italicises the titles of short stories, sometimes not; occasionally he italicises and puts inverted commas around the titles of novels. Sometimes he gives full publishing details of books (with UK and US publishers), and sometimes he does not. A few recent books have slipped in with minimum details and with no summaries or explanations of why they are there at all. In his list of "series books" he frequently misses out the latest (1997 or 1998) addition to a series. He also

omits some well-known writers, and includes some rather dubious contenders: but that is probably inevitable in a book of this kind.

4. All the above can be (but shouldn't be!) dismissed as pedantry. Perhaps more serious are simple errors of fact, or misleading statements. Every fan of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, that New Age rewriting of the Arthur/Guinevere story, set in the sixth century, will be intrigued by Sheppard's plot summary: "Lost spaceship stranded on an alien planet." Gibson's *Neuromancer* is "the first real cyberpunk novel of the trilogy" (think about it). Burroughs's *Gods of Mars* is listed with other John Carter novels, but we are told clearly that this one is a "non-Tarzan tale". Philip Pullman is listed as having three books in the His Dark Materials sequence, the first two being *Northern Lights* and *The Golden Compass*, while in fact the second is the US-retitling of the first. He says that the five volumes starting with *Beyond Lies the Wub* are the complete works of Philip K. Dick,

rather than the complete short stories. He lists *Excession* as one of Banks's non-Culture novels. Sometimes he seems simply not to have checked things at all. Why say that *Starship Troopers* was allegedly written as a juvenile? Why say that John Norman allegedly wrote *Imaginative Sex*? Sometimes the summaries are too short and flippant to be of any use (Bujold's *Brothers in Arms* is simply "Hero as doppelganger"). And do we have to have people referred to as "Japs"?

Just occasionally he is spot on. Of Van Vogt's [The] *Pawns of Null-A* he writes "Space opera so confusing a couple of gins might help; makes other space operas seem brilliant." But on the whole, and I am sorry to have to say this, this is a book that should not be purchased. The Library Association should feel ashamed at having put their name to it; a book like this should have been sent out to expert readers before publication.

Brian Stableford – *The Dictionary of Science Fiction Places* Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Simon & Schuster, 1999, 384pp, £12.99 ISBN 0 684 84958 5

Sometimes a book appears which begs the question, Why? Why would anyone write a travel guide to places no one can travel to? To places which exist only in the imagination? In his Preface, Brian Stableford recognises the problem: "If a dictionary of the imaginary places described in science fiction needs an excuse or justification, this is mine. I hope that this book is fascinating and entertaining, in much the same way that any reference book might be..." But if reference books are fascinating and entertaining it is because they tell us things that surprise and teach and enlighten us about the reality we live in, accomplishments beyond any 'fictional' reference. This book is no more than around 600 summary descriptions of, as the title says, places found in science fiction (though that should be qualified, as only stories and novels are included; there are no locations from film, TV or radio). If you have ever read the back cover of a novel and wished you hadn't, because the blurb writer has given away far too much of the plot, then you will have an idea of what to expect. While the cross references at the end of the entries may have some value for researchers and critics, because the entries are classified by place,

rather than novel or story, all but the most famous will be meaningless to any reader who has not read the book the place is found in. If you *have* read the book, this volume might just serve as a reminder.

The black and white line drawings by Jeff White range from the adequate to the appalling. The best would have been unremarkable in a pulp magazine 50 years ago, the worst look like rough sketches and would be rejected by the most desperate fanzine editor. They give the book the appearance of a shoddy vanity publication, and coming from a major publisher are unacceptable.

I wish I didn't need to criticise this book so strongly, because Brian Stableford is such a first class author with such a clear love of the genre, and he has obviously invested a lot of time and effort into this project. But, devoid of any critical comment, recommendations or assessment, it really is a misguided and pointless endeavour, the only real value being to anyone who wishes to save themselves the pleasure of reading many of the most fascinating and entertaining tales in all sf.

Michael A Stackpole – *Star Wars: X-Wing: Isard's Revenge* Reviewed by Mark Plummer

Bantam, 1999, 360pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 553 50688 9

Whilst the rest of the world focuses on what went before the original *Star Wars* trilogy, the authors of the tie-in novels—now over 40 of the things—continue to map out events in the years after *The Return of the Jedi* in that far-away galaxy. After relinquishing the 'X-Wing' sub-series to Aaron Allston for three volumes, Stackpole returns to the world of Wedge Antilles and Rogue Squadron as they and other New Republican forces continue to unearth ever more—and ever more threatening—relics from the days of the Empire. This time it's the Emperor's supposedly-dead right-hand woman, evil Isard, who in the best traditions of villains everywhere keeps coming back to cause trouble, although here she is seemingly making common cause with Wedge and the Rogues. Don't you just know that this is not going to turn out well? The 'X-Wing' novels continue to avoid the big names stars in favour of minor characters from the movies and new creations, although some of the latter are barely disguised copies. There are plenty of references back to movie material and attempts to explain the odd arcane reference but as with earlier volumes the subject matter dictates rather too many thrilling aerial battle which just do not transfer to the printed page.

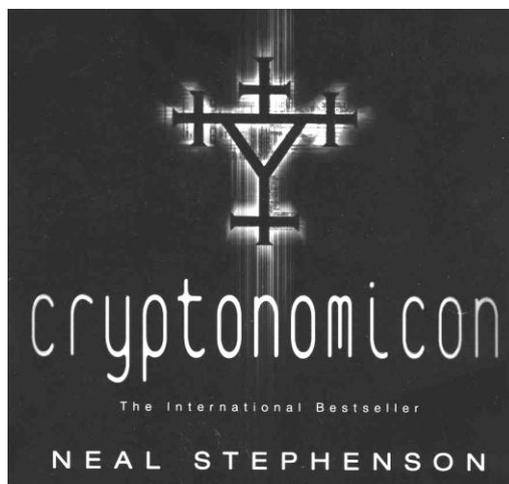
Neal Stephenson – *Cryptonomicon* Avon, 1999, 918 pp, \$27.50 ISBN 0 380 97346 4
Heinemann, 1999, 918pp, £12.99 ISBN 0 434 00883 4

Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

The last fantasy to knock me out – so wild, so all-encompassing – in the way that Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon* has knocked me out, was Tim Powers's *The Anubis Gates*. Somehow another American author has been able to take a piece of British history and make it evolve into a bizarre new dimension before our eyes, without our being able to see how it is being done. *Cryptonomicon* sent me to my reference books looking for the historical figures who appear, only to find that characters I felt were real had been invented, but I was not disappointed. Instead, I felt a sense of satisfaction – Stephenson had been able to suspend my sense of disbelief, the hallmark of success in literary invention. It was no surprise to discover, a few days after collecting this first edition for review, that, in the time this copy had taken to cross the Atlantic, the title had gone through four printings in the USA.

Cryptonomicon, and its black cover, may suggest some reworking of that ancient grimoire of the mad Arab Abdul Al-Hazred, the *Necronomicon*, but the title refers to a manual. That manual is or was a codebook used at Bletchley Park during the Second World War in the 'Huts'. And two thirds of this novel grows out of and around the affairs of Bletchley Park. Lawrence Waterhouse was a pre-war friend of Alan Turing, meeting the genius while he was at Princeton. After the USA joins the war Waterhouse again goes to Bletchley Park on a secret mission. Waterhouse is not to be a codebreaker, but someone who makes sense of the information gained. He is, though, only a cog in a big machine. His information drives a Allied unit, Detachment 2072, including a marine, Bobby Shaftoe, around the world, as they try to find sources to break codes such as 'Ultra' and 'Purple', and simultaneously hide from the Axis the fact that 'Ultra' itself has been partially broken.

Meanwhile, in the far east, Japanese units are digging, though not necessarily digging to the exact plan. And there were German cryptographers at Princeton before the war: they are working for own their government, having some idea of the minds of their peacetime colleagues while they encrypt U-boat messages, and try to identify whether U-boats have been located by the Allied forces through code-breaking or chance.



In the near future, the challenges on the warriors of the past become efforts just as great for the inventors and entrepreneurs of tomorrow. Waterhouse's grandson and Shaftoe's granddaughter, by chance, find themselves back on the Pacific edge, this time cabling the ocean floor and running high-tech communications around the world, coding and de-coding signals now an everyday part of the computer industry, though still industrial secrets; but, just as the marines believed their generals were trying to get them killed, so the new Waterhouse and Shaftoe find their business rivals equally ruthless. Their forebears were cracking codes, now the business partners' task becomes to hide their plans, and to hide their goals.

Neal Stephenson has brought masses of fact into his fantasy. In a sense it is a tapestry that reaches out and includes non-fictional work about the code-breakers, such as F. H. Hinsley's *The Codebreakers* (O.U.P.), or the code-writers, such as Leo Marx's *Between Silk and Cyanide* (HarperCollins) (Marx was the poet who wrote poems to use as one-time encryption codes for the agents of the S.O.E), because to know about them is to see Stephenson's characters walking through a realer world. Sometimes, it seems as if Stephenson has managed to slip in details of fiction, just to add a little cross-bracing. For example, at one point, Shaftoe the marine is a prisoner of the Japanese, and sees a bouncing bomb attack on their fleet. These were never used in the Pacific (although 618 squadron was formed to serve there), nor did 617 Squadron ("The Dam Busters") use bouncing bombs when they sank the Tirpitz. The connection is that on May 17th 1943 both the Dam Busters Raid took place and Britain and the USA agreed to work jointly on cracking the German Ultra and Japanese Purple codes at Bletchley Park. Shaftoe sees an outward sign of an inward grace.

And what have I held back? What I have held back is the main fantasy: that there was a secret even greater than "Ultra". And that it was broken. And that it was not part of the war effort. What else you have not been told remains a secret still.

Big as it is, I could imagine an annotated edition of this book, but a note on the sleeve suggests this is a first volume. The thought of more...

David Stone – *Return to the Fractured Planet* 

Virgin, 1999, 238pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 426 20534 0

Reviewed by Penny Hill

This book is in the post-Doctor spin-off series from the 'New Adventures of Doctor Who', a series which raises deep philosophical questions about the definitions of wookiee books. After all, if there are no characters from the original television series remaining, but you can still draw a continuum through from it, is it still "wookiee" or has it attained independent life?

This does not feel like a 'Doctor Who' book and I would not recommend it to those who enjoy them. Here is an anonymous hero, with no sympathetic handles, who is so violent that he negates any difference between "good guys" and "bad guys". How can we care about the investigation into the death of his friend when anyone who gets in his way meets an equally graphic and nasty death?

Our hero suffers from over-competency. With no indication that he can fail; suspense, tension and sympathy are greatly reduced. This feature enables the author to escape various plot

necessities in a cynically lazy manner which makes "In one bound, Jack was free" seem like a masterpiece of subtlety.

More laziness occurred with the background material. To avoid info-dumping, our first-person narrator spends far too much time saying "I'm not going to explain/describe any of this stuff as we all know about it anyway". Rather than thirsting for knowledge and raking the text for clues, I found myself switching off thinking "If you can't be bothered to tell me, I can't be bothered to suspend my disbelief".

Dave Stone's writing style infuriated me. For an obviously clever person, his prose stinks. Clumsy sentences abound. They might be acceptable in conversation but not as exposition. One final irritation; the novel is full of "basically human monsters" which may as well have been abbreviated to "BHM's" as this phrase was used every time they appear, rendering it meaningless.

I have read the occasional 'New Adventure' and enjoyed some

of them. If this book represents a new sub-genre, then it should be strangled at birth and we can all go back to reading either original

literature or unashamed tie-ins.

Martin Wagner – *Rachel's Machine*

Pinter & Martin, 1999, 296pp, £5-99 ISBN 0 9530964 0 8

Reviewed by Mat Coward

This is an odd book. Set in a small USA town, of the sort familiar from disaster fiction, but written largely in British-English rather than American-English, it's about teenage Rachel – the most fanciable girl in the high school – who becomes besotted with a second-hand Volkswagen.

Her parents can't or won't give her the money to buy it, so Rachel is forced to consider the unthinkable – an after-school job. Her best friend sets her up with a gig at the local button factory, a mysteriously underpopulated workplace, where Rachel soon develops a close relationship with another machine.

Everyone's behaving very oddly – as they must in such fictional burls – and the reader realises rather sooner than Rachel does (and even before her boyfriend gets attacked by a homicidal motor vehicle) that the machines are planning to take over the world, in the interests of evolution, and that Rachel herself is

essential to their plans. Needless to say, the great advantage of being essential to their plans is that she can, if she puts her mind to it, give them a right good shuffling.

In other words, there's nothing very novel here. Having said that, Wagner's writing (though at times somewhat clunky) is often fresh and sparky – he's better at the small town teenager stuff, really, than he is at the tired-old-sf stuff. There's some pleasingly thoughtful characterisation, and some very witty dialogue.

Of course, it's always possible that this is intended as an ironic homage – most things are these days, apparently. If so, it's crap. But judged at face value as a fast-reading, professionally written bit of pulpy fun – well, I've seen much worse. I would certainly be interested to see what this author might do with slightly more adventurous material.

Peter Watts – *Starfish*

TOR Books, 1999, 317pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0 312 86855 3

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

What sort of person would you have to be to survive in a geothermal power station in a rift on the ocean bed? Maybe you should be socially dysfunctional, an outcast from 'normal' human society, abuser and abused; then you can be virtually brainwashed into the technological skills necessary to operate the station, and have your body modified to enable you to work effectively under high pressure and in very deep water. Then again, perhaps you could take someone with the right skills and brainwash them into becoming socially dysfunctional. This novel explores what sort of person you'd have to be to decide it's worthwhile doing any of that to other people, and what sort of person you might become not just to survive but to belong.

Inevitably with this character set, the first half of *Starfish* is concerned with character development. Watts walks a fine line, showing the rifters' problems and interaction so you begin to know them and understand something of how their minds work, but without ever revealing quite enough to let you grasp the characters and actively empathise. For the rifters are Other, and become more so even as they struggle into an unwilling disaffected community. When a starfish is injured, it can

regenerate the lost parts. If you rip it in half, it gradually becomes two starfish. And a starfish walks like a committee: it's a whole dysfunctional society in itself. It's one of the wonders of the deep ocean, one of the things most people don't know or understand about it.

No one should be surprised when the Company on the surface is gradually revealed to be exploiting not just the rifters but everyone—all for the greater good of mankind, of course. In place of the computer which understands more than its builders, we now have smart gels: processors which eventually, acting purely on their original programming, favour the Other to humanity and its forebears. This is evolution with a hard sf foundation. The plot is neatly unwound in the second half of the book, but both the plot and the other characters seem dim viewed through ocean light, without the compulsion of the rifters' life in their enclosed world; like them, you become reluctant to leave the ocean and focus on what's being screwed up on the surface. It's what's in the ocean that's important. It's just unfortunate for humanity that it takes a bunch of psychotics and some smart gel to work that out.

John Whitbourn – *Downs-Lord Dawn*

Earthlight, 1999, 346pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 671 03300 X

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

A Triptych, not a trilogy, but three works which when combined result in something greater than the sum of the parts. It is a near archaic word appropriately redolent of religious works depicting, whether in visual or musical terms, scenes from the life of Christ. How to review this first panel is a difficult question, for one part of a triptych in isolation can not but hint at the totality.

What I can say is that John Whitbourn has written a genuine novel, in that *Downs-Lord Dawn* is unlike anything I have read before. Thomas Blades, disaffected 17th century curate lusts after the wife of the Reverend Speed, escapes from an unsatisfying life in Godalming to the South Downs of, the past, a parallel universe, a brave new Eden? We know a moondial leads to the past, a wardrobe to Narnia, and here the methods are combined, a reality dysfunction in the back of a grandfather clock. Perhaps, given Whitbourn's theological concerns, the allusion to Lewis is counter-clockwise appropriate.

A complex structure cuts back and forth between worlds and time, uses extracts from documents, dazzles, deceives, intrigues, but fails to grip. This Eden is populated by humans down-trodden by the Null, who feast upon their flesh. Perhaps it is Wells' future of the Eloi and the Morlocks revisited, for Wells was an atheist

and there appears to be no God present but the one Blades makes. Blades, like the hero of so many a western, teaches the people to fight, to defeat the serpent of the Null. But he is the man who would become God-King, and the novel becomes the age-old story of the corrupting nature of absolute power. Blades, never a particularly 'good' man, sinks deeper into self-justifying self-indulgence and autocratic dominance, but quite why, when stretched to over 300 admittedly well written and bizarrely imaginative pages, the reader is supposed to care is never made clear.

Robert Charles Wilson – *Darwinia*

Millennium, 1999, 320pp, £5.99 ISBN 1 85798 815 9

Reviewed by Robert W. Hayler

One night in March of 1912 a vast circle of Earth, encompassing the whole of Europe, disappears and is replaced by a geographically identical continent which has a completely different set of flora and fauna. On this continent, unofficially named Darwinia, human kind appears never to have evolved. Some years later Wilson's protagonists arrive and embark on an ill-fated scientific expedition. As the book unfolds the explanation for the appearance of Darwinia, the immortality of some of the main characters and the strange visitations they receive apparently from their own ghosts, is revealed and proves to be on a mind-boggling scale.

Unfortunately, I got the same feeling reading this that I get when I read a lot of potential award winners or highly tipped novels in the field: that I should be enjoying it much more than I was. I didn't feel connected with the protagonists, especially the unengaging but central reluctant-hero Guilford Law, whose fate I stopped caring about well before the end. The most interesting character was the tortured Elias Vale who turns out to be one of the bad guys. I also felt a little cheated when it became clear that

this was a cleverly dressed-up pulp. At its conclusion it boils down to almost nothing: the history of the universe is being saved from the forces of evil by rugged American frontiersmen shooting monsters. At one point there is even the stock western scene of a motley crew of characters defending a isolated cabin from attack. This must be at least partially intentional, that the Law character is a fan of Argosy is clue enough, but I still got the impression that Wilson has more imagination than he knows what to do with.

That said though the novel's remarkable set up, Wyndham-but-larger, is breathtaking. The continent of Darwinia is effectively realised, as are the scenes at the early part of the century. The details we are given are enough to fire the imagination without being too dictatorial. Despite the occasional *longeur*, there is enough action to keep the pages turning and enough clever allusions to the genre, religion and especially the history of science to keep the mind engaged. Finally, and most impressively, the uncovering of the truth behind the cataclysmic event of Darwinia's appearance is a revelation worthy of Phil Dick at his most ontologically demanding.

**Clive Barker – *Galilee***

HarperCollins, 1999, 804pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 617805 7
The first novel in a two part series about the fortunes of ancient Barbarossa family, descendants of Gods, and the Geary family, American aristocrats and survivors of the Civil War, and a relationship that is moving from hostility into open war. Reviewed by Jon Wallace in V204 who found it, although slow moving, with enough depth and enigmatic touches to draw you in to the story and the sequel.

Rebecca Bradley – *Lady Pain*

Millennium, 1999, 336pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 891 4
The third volume in a trilogy that starts with *Lady in Gil* and *Scion's Lady*, this and the previous volume were praised by Cherith Baldry in V203 and V196 respectively, "as well as serious themes there's a gripping storyline that bats along at a tremendous pace. It's also very funny... This isn't basic genre fantasy at all; it's detailed and real, and the story is told with energy and style."

John Brunner – *Stand on Zanzibar*

Millennium, 1999, 650pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 836 1
The fifteenth in the SF Masterworks series, Brunner's classic dystopia of uncontrolled population growth (if the entire population of the world stood shoulder to shoulder, they would just fit on the island of Zanzibar). Both a 1968 Hugo and 1970 BSFA Award winning novel (and later the French Prix Apollo in translation in 1973).

Philip K. Dick – *Beyond Lies the Wub*

Millennium, 1999, 404pp, £7.99 ISBN 1 85798 879 5

Philip K. Dick – *Second Variety*

Millennium, 1999, 395pp, £7.99 ISBN 1 85798 880 9

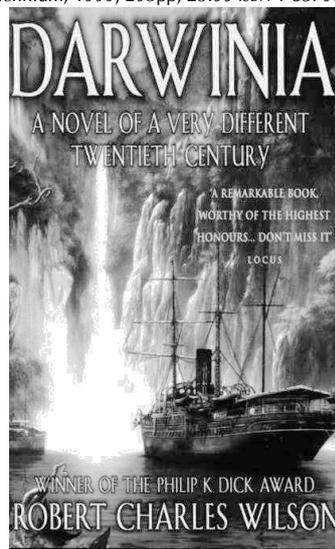
Philip K. Dick – *The Father Thing*

Millennium, 1999, 376pp, £7.99 ISBN 1 85798 881 7
Paperback reissues of the first three volumes of 1987 Collected Short Stories of Philip K Dick, as

a series of five which will include *Minority Report* (originally *The Days of Perky Pat*) and *We Can Remember it for you Wholesale*. Each collection carries a short introduction (by Zelazny, Spinrad and Brunner, respectively) and the short author's notes from the original collections in *The Best of Philip K. Dick*, *The Golden Man* and *The Preserving Machine*. If you need me to tell you these are indispensable to your collection, then you are surely in the wrong organisation.

Greg Egan – *Luminous*

Millennium, 1999, 295pp, £5.99 ISBN 1 85798 573 7



"Never less than brilliant" according to Brian Stableford in V203, who felt that Egan's second short story collection was even better than his first, *Axiomatic*, and the stories here (from *Interzone* and *Asimov's* between 1993 and 1998) rated comparisons with Borges and Levi.

"This is *the* science fiction book of the year, and should be on every sf lovers shelf."

Greg Egan – *Quarantine*

Millennium, 1999, 248pp, £5.99 ISBN 1 85798 590 7
Millennium seem to be on a strong reissue binge at the moment, along with the SF Masterworks and Philip K. Dick Collected Short Story series. This is actually Egan's second novel, though the first, *An Unusual Angle* (Norstrilia Press), has never been released outside Australia. In a 21st century where bioengineering allows you to literally change your mind in any way you wish, a huge enclosing sphere, the Bubble, has cut off Earth and the Sun from the rest of the solar system. "The universe may be stranger than we can imagine, but it's going to have a hard time outdoing Egan."

Robert Jordan – *The Path of Daggers*

Orbit, 1999, 655pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85723 569 X
Briefly reviewed by John Oram in V204, this is the eighth in Jordan's immense *The Wheel of Time* sequence. By this point you will either know what to expect or are going to have considerable difficulty (and a huge amount of time) getting in to this series.

Robert Jordan and Teresa Patterson – *The World of Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time*

Orbit, 1997, 304pp, illus. £12.50 ISBN 1 85723 7
Apparently a repackaging of the original with a new dustwrap and a lower recommended price. A large format "illustrated companion" volume, comprising of maps, place descriptions, legends, peoples, banners and objects of power. The artwork varies from full colour plates to indifferent watercolours. Originally at £25 it was severely overpriced, and even at half that price it is probably only of interest to committed fans of Jordan's *Wheel of Time* books.

Philip Kerr – *The Second Angel*

Orion, 1999, 432pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 75282 686 7
 Future thriller from the author of *A Philosophical Investigation*. With 80% of humanity infected by the virus P2, the First National Blood Bank stores its reserves (at \$1.84 million a litre) in an impregnable stronghold on the moon. And now the vault's designer needs that blood for his stricken daughter.

Graham Joyce – *Dark Sister*

TOR Books, 1999, 300pp, \$22.95 ISBN 0 312 86632 1
 Three time winner of the British Fantasy Award, for this, *Requiem* and *The Tooth Fairy*. Discovering an old diary containing Wiccan herb lore, Maggie is drawn, along with friends Old Liz and Ash, into a world of magic and old secrets, but in the process awakens her malevolent Dark Sister, bent on revenge for an ancient injustice, which threatens to destroy Maggie and those around her.

John Kessel – *Corrupting Dr Nice*

Millennium, 1999, 286pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 893 0
 "Corruscatingly brilliant" wrote Joseph Nicholas in V201, "vote for it in next year's BSFA Award or I'll rip your heads off." A savagely satirical time travel story of tourism back to first century Jerusalem, where Jesus is abducted from the Crucifixion to do dog-food commercials and celebrity chat shows on 21st century TV. Meanwhile, Zealots with smuggled modern weapons revolt against the cynical Disneyfication of the Holy Land guarded by a re-armed Roman militia.

Kessel's *The Pure Product*, a collection of short stories, is available in trade paperback from Tor (Tor, 1999, 381pp, \$14.95 ISBN 0-312-86680-1)

Fritz Leiber – *Lean Times in Lankhmar*

Millennium, 1999, 407pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 816 7
 Second in a reissue of Leiber's stories of the giant barbarian Fafhrd and his ally the Grey Mouser, this combines *Swords in the Mist* and *Swords Against Wizardry*, books 3 and 4 of the Swords series (two further volumes, each of two books, are planned for late 1999/early 2000), some of the most witty and stylish works of the whole 'Sword and Sorcery' genre (a term Leiber is credited with inventing).

George R R Martin – *A Clash of Kings*

Voyager, 1999, 741pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 647989 8
 Second volume of Martin's 'A Song of Fire and Ice' (reviewed by Steve Jeffery in V204) which manages to defuse its own ambition (the cast list covers some 30 pages) with some ill-judged and clumsy writing. Even at the end of this second volume, it feels like the quasi-historical, in a civil war for succession and power, and fantasy elements (dragons and ghouls) are not quite melded together in the same story.

Paul McAuley – *Eternal Light*

Millennium 1999, 463pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 892 2

Paul McAuley – *Pasquale's Angel*

Millennium 1999, 384pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 909 0

Paul McAuley – *Fairyland*

Vista, 1999, 416pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 575 60031 4
 Three very different novels from the same author (*Ancients of Days*, the Second Book of Confluence, is also reviewed elsewhere in this issue), ranging from interstellar war and a rogue sun travelling towards the Solar System to an alternate Renaissance thriller in which the inventions of Da Vinci usher an early Industrial Revolution to a near future Europe ravaged by bio- and nanotech wars, whose genetically modified products, the 'fairies', are establishing a kingdom of their own. *Fairyland* (reviewed by Chris Amies in V186 and Colin Bird in V191) won the 1996 Arthur C. Clarke Award, but Millennium are being slightly disingenuous in blazoning "Winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award" across the front of both *Eternal Light* and *Pasquale's Angel*, albeit under the author's name rather than the title, since the award is for a novel, not the writer.

Elizabeth Moon – *Sporting Chance*

Orbit, 1999, 383pp, £5.99 ISBN 1 85723 882 6

Elizabeth Moon – *Winning Colours*

Orbit, 1999, 409pp, £5.99 ISBN 1 85723 880 X

Two further volumes in ex-US Marine Lieutenant Moon's 'Heris Serrano' series. The first, *Hunting Party*, was enjoyed by Chris Hill in V207, but with reservations about combination of starships with social feudal hierarchy (as well as some rather dubious views on hunting animals for sport). Serrano is captain of the interstellar yacht of a rich old woman, Cecilia de Marktos and in these two volumes finds herself ferrying an heir to the throne back home and facing an invading fleet and an interstellar criminal cartel.

Sion Psygod – *Preseli Bluestones*

John Fish BSc, 1999, 172pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 9533512 0 3
 [John Fish Publishers, Garthowen, Serpentine Road, Tenby, SA70 8DD]

This is a strange little volume, not least because of the various tourist puffs for Pembrokeshire National Parks blazoned on its cover. A young American scientist travels back in time to discover why aliens apparently lifted the Pembrokeshire Bluestones to Stonehenge.

You can also check it out online at <http://homepages.which.net/~j.fish/>

Kim Stanley Robinson – *Antarctica*

Voyager, 1999, 562pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 651264 X
 A-format reissue, previously reviewed by L.J. Hurst in V197 and trade paperback in V202.

Kim Stanley Robinson – *The Martians*

Voyager, 1999, 400, £10.99 ISBN 0 00 225932 X
 Paul Kincaid really didn't get on with this, in

V206, and opinions are strongly divided as to how well this collection works as a coda or appendix to the triumphant sweep of Robinson's Mars trilogy. Such a sharp division of opinion usually means there is something going on that is worth checking out for yourself.

Robert Silverberg – *Lord Valentine's Castle*

Voyager, 1999, 506pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00648377 1

Robert Silverberg – *Lord Prestimion*

Voyager, 1999, 434pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 651103 1

The first and last books in the Majipoor Chronicles. *Lord Prestimion*, reviewed by Stephen Deas in V205, is in fact a prequel novel, set a thousand years before the reign of Lord Valentine, and in the aftermath of a long civil war. The real hero of the books, Stephen Deas observes, is Silverberg's detailed exotic world of Majipoor.

Tricia Sullivan – *Dreaming In Smoke*

Millennium, 1999, 290pp, £5.99 ISBN 1 75281 682 9

The 1999 Arthur C. Clarke Award winner, reviewed by Janet Barron in V202. It starts with one of the weirdest opening sentences I've ever seen, and is at times whimsical, quaintly nostalgic (Kalypto has an odd penchant for '70s pomp rock band Yes) and gut-wrenchingly chilling. Even its author, in her Clarke Award acceptance speech, found it a hard book to like. Controversial, with opinions again sharply divided, that suggests you should read this for yourself and decide.

Stephen Walker – *Danny Yates Must Die*

Voyager, 1999, 322pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648380 1

"Danny Yates is on the run from the Great Osmosis, failed magician now turned rapacious landlord with a bucket stuck to his head. Battered bruised and a bit bemused, Danny desperately needs help." Also featuring "Teena Rampa, a scientist so beautiful she has to sedate people to stop them falling in love with her, a gang of nuns who know wonderful songs about sea-horses and a giant alien ant bent on world domination with his army of one earwig and a cockroach – both dead."

Yevgeny Zamyatin (trans. Mirra Ginsberg) – *We*

Avon Eos, 1999, 232pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0 380 63313 2

The classic sf dystopian novel, written in 1920-1921, the model for Orwell's *1984* a quarter of a century later and still extraordinarily powerful today. Zamyatin was vilified and hounded by the authorities for this savage indictment of a totalitarian dictatorship under the Great Benefactor, published in English in 1924 and Czech in 1927, but not in Russia until 1952, nearly twenty years after Zamyatin had been forced to leave his country to die shortly after in exile.

Vector 208 – Index of Books Reviewed

Piers Anthony – <i>Muse of Art</i> [JDO]	19	
James Barclay – <i>Dawnthief</i> [VL]	20	David Brin – <i>Foundation's Triumph</i> [GW]	21
Clive Barker – <i>Galilee</i> [P]	39	John Brunner – <i>Stand on Zanzibar</i> [P]	39
Stephen Baxter – <i>Moonseed</i> [CH]	20	Joel Champetier – <i>Dragon's Eye</i> [KVB]	23
Stephen Baxter – <i>Time</i> [CB2]	20	Suzy McKee Charnas – <i>The Conqueror's Child</i> [ST]	23
Greg Bear – <i>Foundation and Chaos</i> [GW]	21	Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford	
Alexander Beshler – <i>Chi</i> [AS]	21	– <i>The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story</i> [LJH] ...	24
Alfred Bester – <i>The Demolished Man</i> [SD]	22	Storm Constantine – <i>Sea Dragon Heir</i> [KVB]	24
Ben Bova – <i>Return To Mars</i> [JN]	22	Dennis Danvers – <i>End of Days</i> [PB]	25
Rebecca Bradley – <i>Lady Pain</i> [P]	39	Philip K. Dick – <i>Beyond Lies the Wub</i> [P]	39
		Philip K. Dick – <i>Second Variety</i> [P]	39

Philip K. Dick – <i>The Father Thing</i> [P]	39	L.E. Modesitt – <i>Adiamante</i> [SC]	32
.....		
Larry Dixon & Mercedes Lackey – <i>Owlsight</i> [LH]	29	Elizabeth Moon – <i>Sporting Chance</i> [P]	39
.....		
Greg Egan – <i>Luminous</i> [P]	39	Elizabeth Moon – <i>Winning Colours</i> [P]	39
.....		
Greg Egan – <i>Quarantine</i> [P]	39	Kim Newman – <i>Life's Lottery</i> [PB]	32
.....		
Ford Madox Ford & Joseph Conrad		Teresa Patterson & Robert Jordan	
– <i>The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story</i> [LJH] ...	24	– <i>The World of Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time</i> [P] ...	39
Phyllis Gotlieb – <i>Violent Stars</i> [MP]	25	John Pelan (ed.) – <i>The Last Continent: New Tales of Zothique</i> [SJ]	32
.....		
Richard Grant – <i>Kaspian Lost</i> [MP]	25	Sion Psygod – <i>Preseli Bluestones</i> [P]	39
.....		
Julia Gray – <i>Fire Music</i> [LB]	26	Madeleine E. Robins – <i>The Stone War</i> [EB]	33
.....		
Simon R. Green – <i>Deathstalker Destiny</i> [MC]	26	Kim Stanley Robinson – <i>Antarctica</i> [P]	39
.....		
Barbara Hambly – <i>Dragonshadow</i> [KT]	26	Kim Stanley Robinson – <i>The Martians</i> [P]	40
.....		
Thomas Harlan – <i>The Shadow of Ararat</i> [CB1]	27	Justina Robson – <i>Silver Screen</i> [JDO]	33
.....		
Mike Jeffries – <i>The Ghosts of Candleford</i> [AF]	27	Michaela Roessner – <i>The Stars Compel</i> [TB]	34
.....		
Robert Jordan – <i>The Path of Daggers</i> [P]	39	Jane Routley – <i>Ayamaya</i> [LB]	34
.....		
Robert Jordan & Teresa Patterson		David Seed – <i>American Science Fiction and the Cold War</i> [GD]	34
– <i>The World of Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time</i> [P] ...	39	
Graham Joyce – <i>Dark Sister</i> [P]	39	Roger Sheppard	
.....		– <i>Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror: A Reader's Guide</i> [E] ...	35
Dick Jude – <i>Fantasy Art of the New Millennium</i> [S]	28	Susan Schwartz – <i>Cross and Crescent</i> [CB1]	27
.....		
Katherine Kerr – <i>The Black Raven</i> [CB1]	28	Robert Silverberg – <i>Lord Prestimion</i> [P]	40
.....		
Philip Kerr – <i>The Second Angel</i> [P]	39	Robert Silverberg – <i>Lord Valentine's Castle</i> [P]	40
.....		
John Kessel – <i>Corrupting Dr Nice</i> [P]	39	Cordwainer Smith – <i>The Rediscovery of Man</i> [SD]	22
.....		
Stephen King – <i>Bag of Bones</i> [GA]	29	Brian Stableford – <i>The Dictionary of Science Fiction Places</i> [GD]	36
.....		
Mercedes Lackey & Larry Dixon – <i>Owlsight</i> [LH]	29	Michael A Stackpole – <i>Star Wars: X-Wing: Isard's Revenge</i> [MP]	36
.....		
Fritz Leiber – <i>Lean Times in Lankmar</i> [P]	39	Neal Stephenson – <i>Cryptonomicon</i> [LJH]	36
.....		
Valery Leith – <i>The Company of Glass</i> [VL]	29	David Stone – <i>Return to the Fractured Planet</i> [PH]	37
.....		
Jeff Long – <i>The Descent</i> [LP]	30	Tricia Sullivan – <i>Dreaming In Smoke</i> [P]	40
.....		
J M H Lovegrove – <i>Berserker</i> [JW]	30	Martin Wagner – <i>Rachel's Machine</i> [MC]	37
.....		
Ken MacLeod – <i>The Sky Road</i> [AA]	31	Stephen Walker – <i>Danny Yates Must Die</i> [P]	40
.....		
George R R Martin – <i>A Clash of Kings</i> [P]	39	Peter Watts – <i>Starfish</i> [CB3]	37
.....		
Paul McAuley – <i>Ancient of Days</i> [KVB]	31	John Whitbourn – <i>Downs-Lord Dawn</i> [GD]	38
.....		
Paul McAuley – <i>Eternal Light</i> [P]	39	Robert Charles Wilson – <i>Darwinia</i> [RWH]	38
.....		
Paul McAuley – <i>Fairyland</i> [P]	39	Yevengy Zamyatin – <i>We</i> [P]	40
.....		
Paul McAuley – <i>Pasquale's Angel</i> [P]	39		

Reviewers Key: AA – Andrew A. Adams, AF – Alan Fraser, AS – Andrew Seaman, CB1 – Cherith Baldry, CB3 – Claire Brialey, CB2 – Colin Bird, CH – Chris Hill, EB – Elizabeth Billinger, EJ – Edward James, GA – Graham Andrews, GD – Gary Dalkin, GW – Gary Wilkinson, JDO – John D. Owen, JN – John Newsinger, JW – Jon Wallace, KT – Kathy Taylor, KVB – K. V. Bailey, LB – Lynne Bispham, LH – Lesley Hatch, LJH – L. J. Hurst, LP – Liam Proven, MC – Mat Coward, MP – Mark Plummer, P – Particle, PB – Paul Billinger, PH – Penny Hill, RWH – Robert W. Hayler, SC – Stuart Carter, SD – Stephen Deas, SJ – Steve Jeffery, ST – Sue Thomason, TB – Tanya Brown, VL – Vikki Lee.