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The Critical
Journal of
the BSFA



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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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Detail from a photo of M. John Harrison © fireandwater.com

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Editorial • The View from Plomer Hill

I've never been a diligent astronomer, although it's always been something that interested me. In another life I was a birder, and so have binoculars rather than a telescope, but even so both would be useless for the task. At some point I drifted out of birding, and can no longer tell all those brown dots apart. One evening over this last summer, the seven o'clock news before *The Archers* announced that that night's Perseid showers would be particularly impressive because of the new moon that night, and if we stood outside after 10.30 and looked east we would be in for a spectacular show.

At this point, of course, I should have done some more basic research. It's no problem finding East – West Wycombe is towards the left of my flat and I'm East of it (*High Wycombe, East of Krakatoa*) so if I go down to the pavement and turn right, that's East. What's rather more to the point is that I probably needed to know the angle of elevation that the central point of the shower would be at.

Perhaps even more to the point I should have realised how much this was the triumph of optimism over experience. I'd struck lucky with Hale-Bopp, a remarkably bright comet which had appeared in the West and led wise men (and women) (and other fans) to Liverpool one Easter moon. But that was probably an isolated stroke of luck compared to a series of disasters, aside from the odd lunar eclipse. When we had that total eclipse of the sun in 1999, I was unable to make plans to go south in an attempt to witness the world going dark in the day time; in fact I was heading north out of the zone to York, where it was 75% or so. I did get cold, but you would not really have known that something was in the way of the sun. (The ducks seemed to know, and were roosting, aside from the unlucky ones who were being roasted.) So much for a once in a lifetime event.

Then there was that once in a lifetime event – or was it twice since it came back round the sun as Earth advanced in its orbit – back in about 1987, when Halley's Comet appeared. I can remember going into my parent's back garden and watching the fog descend almost immediately. (Or does fog actually ascend?) The fog, which lasted for an entire six months, earned itself a place in the *Guinness Book of Records* and I never got to see the comet – or, since I scoured the entire sky one night, I must have seen it but not observed it.

Then there was an occasion at a BSFA t'Committee Meeting in Everdon when we all went out into the Billingers' back garden to watch the space station go over head. After about half an hour Tony Cullen realised that the *Guardian* listed times in GMT and we were standing outside in BST and had missed it by an hour. I still think that's a metaphor for something, but I'm not clear what.

So it should have been with no great hopes that I left the flat at about ten thirty to witness the brightest meteorite shower this century (which is hardly saying much, less than two years into it). The first thing I realised I would count against me is that High Wycombe is a hole in the ground. I use that as an accurate description rather than a critical judgement, although if pushed I might make the latter, too. Or perhaps it would be more charitable if less timely to get you to imagine the geography of the area as a Hot Cross bun, with the cross being more deeply scored than usual. In any case the point is I'm more or less surrounded by hills

which prevent me seeing a horizon at anything like sea level. I've not measured it, but I'd say that anything between 20% and 45% of the sky is obscured.

Fortunately there are some lesser hills nearby that I could climb to get more of a vantage point, and the vista East is not quite so bad. But that still involves you being able to see the sky and on a night like this you suddenly become aware of how much light pollution is caused by street-lighting – partly it spilling into the sky, but mostly from the lamp itself dazzling you as you look into the sky. Still, there are enough street-lights not working in Wycombe to provide an area of darkness, and after fifteen minutes I found a relatively exposed spot where two lamps in a row were out. I stood and waited.

So, I discovered that there is an official time to walk dogs, and each of their owners gave me a funnier look than the one before. And far more people there are given lifts home just before eleven than statistically would be expected (kicking out time is twenty minutes' later). And either we have a lot more police cars than the local force admit to ("...fighting the fear of crime...") or I was cruised three times by the boys in blue. At this point I decided that standing in someone's hedge was a recipe for getting arrested rather than for spotting something astronomical.

I decided to relocate – I knew the brow of my hill to the west of my flat had three street-lights out recently, but the council has finally fixed these after a year and anyway the trees overhang too much. Fryer's Lane offered me a vantage point, and some darkness, and was back from the road. It wasn't perfect, but I could see a lot more stars there. Almost immediately I was rewarded with what I took to be my first meteorite – except that my memory of seeing them in the Outback (did I mention I'd been to Australia?) was that they vanished from sight rather more quickly, and didn't curve quite like that.

Okay, so it was an aeroplane.

In the next quarter of an hour I decided that meteorites were unlikely to be red, to flash, or fly in formation of threes. Oh, and make engine noises. There never seemed to be less than three planes in the sky at once, and Heathrow is clearly doing a roaring trade.

But still a little worried about how low the event was supposed to be, and aware that there was a building blocking part of my view, I decided to relocate to one of my Thotful Spots (that's literary allusion not a typo): the bridge over the river Wye where oft I stand, looking for trout and whistling Colonel Bogie. As it's on the edge of the park, it ought to be pretty dark – although given I was on my own I decided to take the long way round to the bridge rather than cut through the park. I'd forgotten, however, the car park's arc lights next to the bridge, and still there was a certain amount of light pollution. I could have gone into the park, but that wasn't a sensible idea given nobody knew I was there (apart from the muggers and the Thames Valley constituency). And as I looked south, a band of cloud was already beginning to move to hang over my head, as I stood over the mighty river Wye.

Grand total for two hours in the dark: one, maybe two. But still, at least I got to go home, rather than spending the rest of the night in jail. Next time perhaps. Or, then again, maybe not.

Are We What We Read?

What are we if we are what we read and we read science fiction? It's a worrying thought.

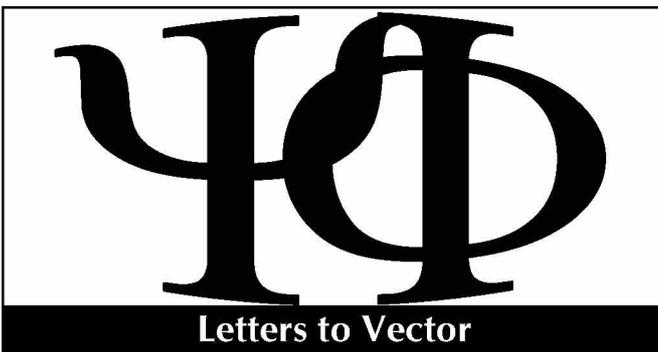
To mark World Book Day on March 6 2003, the World Book Day people are holding a poll to see what book best describes life in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Unfortunately publishers are getting to submit the books which will then be whittled down to shortlists the public can vote on:

(http://www.thebookseller.com/news/dnadisplay.cfm?id=2002_08_07_1.dat)

But in a spirit of creative theft – which sf or fantasy book or short story best describes our present? Not necessarily in some ploddingly literal 1936-story-from-Astounding-which-describes-something-like-the-internet way – although we'd be

happy to see those too – but who's got it right in a more oblique way? Do the Sheep Look Up at cows, cows, burning bright? Do we really love Big Brother (or do we prefer *Survivor*?). Could we all stand on Zanzibar? Did anyone anticipate George Jr? Did anyone imagine an election where nobody came?

Send about five hundred words on the book or story of your choice to Andrew M Butler, D28, Dept of Arts and Media, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, High Wycombe, HP11 2JZ or to ambutler@enterprise.net by 10 January 2003, and you may see your words appear in *Vector*. You might even win a prize...



Roy Gray responds to V224, which included Stephen Baxter on *TV21* and Mark Greener's review article on *Remnant Population* by Elizabeth Moon.

From Roy Gray, via email:

Thought I'd let you know I enjoyed the issue, especially Stephen Baxter's 'confession'. I was too old for those programmes so it's interesting to hear of their effect on youngsters of the time.

Stephen might be interested to know that Manchester's rocket building company, Starchaser Industries, (www.starchaser.co.uk) are calling their launch vehicle the Thunderbird. Possibly Steve Bennett, the company's founder, was similarly influenced as a youth. He looks about the right age.

Mark Greener's article was thought-provoking but as one of the older generation of BSFA members might I say that the reason older people may be less valued in our present society is because, perhaps, we have less value. Why would I say that? Experience has been considered a valuable asset but now change is so rapid compared with 10 generations ago that it often has no relevance or is considered to have no relevance.

My father was a steelworker and his experience is long outmoded. Technology does what he did and it does it in Taiwan. I remember the women at my workplace discussing disposable nappies. I told them old-style washables weren't a great problem but they weren't impressed. I believe old-style washables are coming back into favour for green reasons but suspect they are radically different in design. I've not checked.

Perhaps Elizabeth Moon has an answer but as society has changed, and continues to change, so very rapidly this devaluation of experience will continue. Unfortunately this may well be the correct response to those changes in the circumstances.

From Mark Greener, via email:

It's difficult countering personal experiences and attitudes, such as Roy's. But I'd argue that experience is not simply the ability to effectively and efficiently perform a particular task: it's also the number and variety of cognitive strategies we use to solve problems. It's the ability to use situations in the past to throw a new light on a current problem. The technology might change. But many fundamental concepts and problem-solving strategies remain the same. The more experienced we are, the greater our repertoires of problem-solving strategies, if we can also remain intellectually flexible. Roy seems to have a downbeat view of ageing. I'd argue for a more optimistic perspective, which might be Moon's message.

Ageing certainly bring limitations. However, as Thomas Cole notes in his seminal book *The Journey of Life*: 'Human freedom and vitality lie in choosing to live well within these limits, even as we struggle against them.' Indeed, he points out that older people may experience 'higher peaks and greater depths' than younger people 'that enrich reality in later life'.

And there are numerous examples of people living lives of such enriched reality in middle age and beyond. To take just one example to hand: William de Morgan led a successful career as an Arts-and-Crafts potter until the age of 66. Then he felt depressed, and friends suggested writing as therapy. The resulting novel, *Joseph Vance*, became a best seller. Over the following nineteen years, de Morgan published eight more best-selling novels.

In any case, although the pace of change is fast, society will, for demographic reasons if nothing else, increasingly draw on older people's experience. Both the proportion of elderly people in the population and their absolute number is set to rise dramatically over the next few years. Simple logistics, combined with increasing demands to live fulfilled lives, should mean that older people have an increasing influential voice in our society.

I really hope Roy is wrong. I really do. Older people can offer much to society and do much to live in that enriched reality. And that's, perhaps, one of the key messages from Moon's book.

Letters to Vector should be sent to Andrew M. Butler, D28, Department of Arts and Media, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, High Wycombe, HP11 2JZ or emailed to ambutler@enterprise.net and marked 'For publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.

When the BSFA and the Science Fiction Foundation found that they could not hold annual general meetings at the usual venue – the annual Eastercon – in 2002 for legal reasons, there was much scratching of heads. The SFF had experimented with holding the AGM elsewhere – at a day's symposium in Birmingham – and had attracted more or less the same numbers as usual. In 2002 both organisations decided to join forces and booked a room at Friends House near Euston Station in London, and persuaded Ann Halam to talk about her work in schools and M. John Harrison to be interviewed. Mark Bould was chosen to be the interviewer, and he immediately immersed himself in the reading and re-reading all of Harrison's published fiction, and the interview which had been conducted by Chris Fowler in Foundation. By one of those odd coincidences, that first interview had been intended for Vector rather than Foundation, so printing Mark's interview has a curious rightness about it. So imagine a slightly overcast but warm Saturday afternoon in central London, the chants of Buddhists occasionally breaking through the walls, and a hundred people crammed into a room to witness the following...

Old, Mean and Misanthropic – an interview with M. John Harrison by Mark Bould

(This is a lightly edited transcript of the interview conducted on 13th April 2002 at the *Signs of Life* event co-organised by the BSFA and Foundation.)

M. John Harrison: Old, mean and misanthropic – now, I don't recognise that M. John Harrison...

Mark Bould: Don't worry, we'll get to it. 1978/1980 represents a turning point in what you were writing. What can you tell us about that time? What prompted the change of direction?

MJH: I think to an extent I was bored with what I'd been doing prior to that. I wasn't entirely satisfied with it in what you might call artistic terms. In the sense that artistry or craft is a pivot between what you think – what bill of goods you're trying to sell the reader – and the readers themselves, I wasn't happy with the job I was doing. One of the reasons for this was simply that I was rather bored with *New Worlds* and the New Wave. Also fantasy – and I would use that word in a very broad sense to include sf and horror and anything like that – didn't feel to me as if it could do the job I wanted to do.

MB: One of the things that really marks that transition is that you move away from entropy as a metaphor and begin to use disease or illness as a major metaphor. The *Low City Plague* in *In Viriconium* is transitional, both an entropic and a pathological metaphor; and then in stories like 'The Incalling', 'The New Rays' and novels like *The Course of the Heart* and *Signs of Life*, disease becomes more dominant. Why this change of metaphor? And what is so compelling about disease as a metaphor?

MJH: I have to say that I didn't actually notice this shift until you pointed it out to me. I write an introduction for a retrospective collection of my short stories, and in it I say – blithely – 'After about 1980 my stories seem to be full of very sick women, and I have no idea why'. Two days later you turn up and tell me. It's an interesting observation. There does seem to be a shift into illness as a metaphor for the political illness of the nation, and maybe that did become a substitute for the entropy metaphor of the New Wave. But there were a lot of very ill people in my life at that time, and some of them were women, and there is a part of you that *doesn't* make conscious political metaphors. So I suspect it was unconscious. The unconscious is better at doing that sort of thing. By *Climbers* it was a lot more under control, obviously.

MB: One of the other things about this period – and it is perhaps paradoxical – is that it is at this point that one begins to perceive in your work a social vision, but you've gone from an encompassing, perhaps even social, metaphor like entropy to a very personal metaphor like illness. Sorry, that's one of those annoying 'it's more of a comment than a question' ones, isn't it?

MJH: Yeah, but it's a good one. Just put a question mark on the end and it'll work.

MB: Imagine I made my voice go higher at the end.

MJH: Yeah, lift your voice at the end in that Californian way. I think that is a lot of the point. Entropy was somebody else's metaphor. I had stopped being comfortable with that. It had been developed and delivered by maybe fifteen of us across ten or twelve years. To be frank, I'm not entirely sure we understood what entropy was in a scientific sense, anyway. Running down is only half of entropy. There's a whole lot more to it than the simple looking around and saying, 'Well, all these things are broken – we must be in an entropic situation'. I was kind of bored with it, but I also felt that your politics, such as they are, must come out of your own perception of what's around you. And I think that equates with the really big shift at that time, which was: I wanted to look around me. I was sick of looking inwards. I was sick of doing fantasy simply because it was what I did. I wanted to look around at the world that I saw, but not the political world, not the socially-constructed world, not directly and consciously. I just wanted to look at the things around me, the people who were around me, and see what I could say about them that would say something about the default politics of the time. This was 1980, 1982, when Thatcherism was really beginning to get a grip. I was still collecting material for *Climbers*, and a friend of mine who was a steeplejack took me to Sheffield on a job. The rest of his team were, er, probably recovering from drugs hangovers, and I was the only climber he could find. We went up one of the remaining steelworks chimneys in Sheffield. All we could see was cutting arcs, all we could see was this gigantic industry being dismantled; and all I could think of was Margaret Thatcher, and feel this terrible shame. Two days later, I was out in the Peak District – I was climbing almost every day then – I was sitting on a partly finished millstone in an old millstone grit quarry, and the guy I was with said, 'Do you know anything about this?' I didn't so he told me. Basically what happened in the millstone industry in the early 1800s was that every time French millstones were cheaper than British millstones they just closed the quarries. They didn't pay anybody off. They didn't even finish the millstones they were working on. They just let them lie and sent the workforce home. And I thought, That's what they're doing over in Sheffield now, that's what they've done to the miners, nothing's changed. The connection between those two times made me think I could write about it.

MB: Thatcher – a very sick woman.

MJH: Mummy Vooley, the sick woman of Europe.

MB: You've often described *Climbers* as your most successful novel. What is it that it achieves that your other novels do not?

MJH: Lots of things. But one of them is that it's a fantasy

without any fantasy in it. It's a fantasy of reality, and I'm really proud of that. The difference between fantasy – constructed worlds, virtual worlds and so on – and reality is the consequences. What *Climbers* do is completely real, in the sense that the consequences of it are desperate (not death particularly, not in the Peak District, where most climbs are single pitches. But fall from 70 feet and you can expect to break both legs and your pelvis, which is like three or four months out of your life, starting in Intensive Care), so climbing is not a fantasy in the three-decker sense. And yet it is a complete fantasy world in a similar sense – a heartfelt and desperate attempt to escape from the circumstances of an ordinary, quotidian sort of life. I like *Climbers* because it got me to that understanding. I could start working behind fantasy, or prior to it, in people's fears, needs and wish-fulfillments. Fantasy without any fantasy in it.

MB: And that's one of the main things you were doing throughout the 1980s, stripping the fantasy out of fantasy stories.

MJH: Yes.

MB: Let's move on to *The Course of the Heart*, your melancholy, gnostic anti-*Brigadoon*. It focuses on a couple who build up this complex mythology to sustain the aftershock of encountering what is unrepresentable. Without resembling something by Arthur Machen, it's your most Machen-like fiction; and along with *Climbers* and stories like 'Egnaro', 'The Ice Monkey', 'The Incalling', 'Gifco' and 'Empty', it's built around this very fierce kind of materialism, an incredibly intense focus on descriptions of the real – particularly of landscapes – that somehow produces a sense of immanence, of the numinous. And then, having produced this sense, you leave it hanging, you refuse it, you dare the reader to desire it. As a friend of mine put it, why are you so mean?

MJH: This is the 'old, mean and misanthropic' – have we done old yet?

MB: No.

MJH: Are we going to do old?

MB: Old's at the end.

MJH: This is central. *Climbers* – and short stories like 'The Ice Monkey' and 'Old Women' – gave me the techniques for scraping the fantasy out of the fiction, but it also freed me. It was pivotal. After that I could do anything I wanted to do. If I wanted to do fantasy, I no longer needed to feel bad about it. Essentially there is no point in doing anything, any kind of fiction, unless you have a reason. This whole question is central to the way I worked the other side of that pivot. I stopped writing fantasy and started to write about fantasy. The reason for producing a kind of hyperrealistic, hypermaterialistic text, and then injecting – or crippling – that with one note of fantasy, and then refusing to allow that to be anything more than equivocal... the whole point of that is to bring the reader to the point where normally they would go through the portal, they would be allowed to go through the portal, encouraged to go through the portal... Most of my short stories are portal fantasies, but you are not allowed through into the imaginary country, you're not allowed to believe in the fantasy. You are not allowed through, or it's undermined, or it's shown to be just as ordinary as what you left – which is actually the one I favour – mainly because what I'm trying to get the reader to do in that kind of story is this: if you run the reader as quickly as possible through the narrative with plenty of narrative push-through, plenty of speed, you get a crash at the end, you get a real sense of 'Who! Why aren't I allowed through?' or 'I walked through the door and there was no room on the other side' or 'I just fell' or 'the door was slammed in my face'. That is a violent collision. For me it's a kind of particle physics. What flies off? What happens to the

reader in that instant? What happens to the particular fantasy in that instant of coming off the rails? It's the equivalent of colliding particles to try to get a look at what actually is going on in the universe. For me, it was a way of trying to see what you see when you flick between television stations. To actually see what makes fantasy work, especially how it transfers from our heads to a made narrative. Or at least to make the reader question both the nature of fantasy and the nature of reality.

MB: And on some level as well this is a critique of consumerism?

MJH: Later on it becomes that. 'Egnaro' was the pivot point for me with that. I adored that story because it seemed to be about individual human desire where it rubs up against and is hijacked by advertising: the way we are told constantly that we can achieve those internal desires by consuming products. Advertising offers us a trip through the portal which is closed the moment you buy the product. You buy things to make your life better then find that you're still you. Nothing has changed. And I think certainly there is a direct line through from 'Egnaro' to *Signs of Life* where *Signs of Life* is a very deliberate, very conscious attempt to talk about that.

MB: *Signs of Life* is the most brilliant satire on the Britain of Thatcher-Major-Blair. The earlier novels contained passages of pointed social comment – the plague in *In Viriconium*, the descriptions of people and landscapes in *Climbers*, the incest-rape in *The Course of the Heart* – but with *Signs of Life* we get a much more wholesale, less metaphorical, critical engagement with the Britain of that time. What prompted this?

MJH: Partly I got some techniques that would enable me to do it properly. I got some techniques that would allow me to attack it more directly, and at the same time I realised I'd missed something in *Climbers*. At the end of *Climbers* I introduced the character who would later become Choe Ashton in *Signs of Life*. He's based on two separate friends of mine. I suddenly understood – unfortunately after I'd finished – why I'd put him there and why I'd made him the way he was. He really needed to be developed as a kind of animation of the way guys like this brought an adventure-sport ethic to Thatcherism and made it work for themselves. The Choes of the world are very brainy indeed: but they don't think if they can possibly avoid it. That made the eighties a brilliant time for them. They had no concept of politics. They have no concept of anything except a sensual engagement with the world. Put that against the kind of dull, passive, middle class hypocrisy of the narrator and poor old Isabel's desperation – what I think of as her Californian desperation to self-transcend – and you've pretty well sketched-in the Thatcher period; and, indeed, that which followed. I forget the name of that plastic surgeon who guarantees to be able to turn you into a bird, and, honestly, I'd never heard of him before I wrote the book, but we're moving into a century now where we'll be able to have stuff like that if we want to, and the result will be that a few hundred thousand more people will starve in the undeveloped world to pay for it.

MB: One of the techniques that is developed in *Signs of Life* is the kind of designer-label realism that you normally find in shopping'n'fucking novels, William Gibson, Stephen King. A couple of examples, two of my favourite quotations: 'Did you really like Marillion?' and 'Fat Michael Douglas, every woman's dream'. You've taken this technique and it seems to me you've transformed it in some way through irony and an appeal to judgement, discernment. Is that what you were aiming for?

MJH: In a sense, yes, but a lot of this is to do with observation. I've believed for a very long time, from long before I joined *New Worlds*, that one of the things writing should do is

comment by observing. That if you observe correctly, you don't need to make a comment. If you observe the 1980s correctly, you can allow them to condemn themselves out of their own mouths. And I think that that aspect of *Signs of Life* was simply if you got it right – if you showed exactly the kinds of thing that people wanted, and used the brand names – then you wouldn't need to do any more. It would condemn itself. You'd only have to add the little touch here and there to make it work. But also, it's fun. It's fun to do that, to look for and use designer labels as a kind of irony.

MB: It's related then to this other recurring technique, particularly in your nineties work: the caustic observation about whole groups of people. A couple of examples from the story 'East': 'They arrived [in the streets between Tufnell Park and Holloway] young and quickly became middle-aged – in the end they owned a shelf of outdated sociology texts and some albums on the verge of collectability'. And 'It was Spring, and suddenly the streets were full of haggard young men and women from Stoke Newington, made tired and anxious by their success at marriage, culture journalism and modern parenting'. The same friend who thinks you're mean, has spoken of this admiringly as your misanthropic streak...

MJH: Well, I think I have a misanthropic streak but that I've harnessed it in the service of good writing and politics. Your first example is true of us all, it's how we all end up, we all end up with albums on the verge of collectability and if we have any sense we keep them until they become collectible. The second example – again this is to do with observation. If it's an accurate observation and you have a political purpose, then it's fine, you can harness your misanthropy to that. The second example was based on a friend of mine, Adam Lively. We were walking in Clissold Park, and he had his baby son with him, and he was looking absolutely slagged from trying to do all those things. In the context it was quite a kind, human observation of a friend. But then put it in the context of the story and it's an alienating passage. It serves to flip that story: it's the point at which the narrator realises that the world has been invaded by people who are alienated versions of us; so it has a purpose in the text. But I wouldn't deny I'm misanthropic. Why should I?

MB: Only one bit of the title left to go...Another recurring device which becomes particularly prominent with *Climbers* is the overheard fragment of conversation. I remember reading interviews in which you spoke of wanting to overhear just a couple more conversations so you could finish writing a particular piece. What's so appealing about the overheard conversation?

MJH: There are so many things you could say about that. It's an alienating device. It's a backgrounding device. You can foreground it too, so that it becomes a comment on itself. It's also a way of suggesting that the world goes on at a remove from your central characters, or that there is a world going on at a remove from those characters. I mean, people talk about the compactness of my work – well, that's one of the techniques you can use to compress, to stuff it down. You can't spend time in a 6,000-word short story fleshing in every background character, so that kind of overheard conversation is just a boon, really. 'I Did It' is composed entirely of moments like that, stuffed down to 1200 words. That's the technical side of it. The biographical side of it is that during the 1980s I spent most of my time in cafés and pubs and on the tops of buses, listening to people talk. And at one point – I hate to have to admit this – I was wired. I actually used a tape recorder. The other thing people say to me is, 'How on earth do you write such realistic dialogue?' I have to admit, 'I don't, I don't; I steal it'. I just take it.

MB: One of the things that's very striking about your novels is that each one is clearly written by the same author

although in a very different style. It's as if the process of writing each novel is the process of looking for the style.

MJH: I think that, from the author's side, the whole point of writing is to find out what you decided to write, or why you decided to write it. Finding the voice you are going to write it in is part of that examination, that interrogation. You've got a proto-text that's in your head even before you write a word, and you then go on to interrogate that to find out what it's trying to tell you, who it is. I have no clue as to why I'm writing a book until I get to about three-quarters of the way through it. At that point, I understand the tone of voice that I was supposed to be writing it in, and why I chose it. So the two are very much equated, and that is the reason why all the books are the same but they're all different, I hope.

MB: What else can you tell us about the actual process of writing?

MJH: Again, a huge part of the pivot in the late 1970s, early 1980s, was technical. I felt that even on *New Worlds* what we had learned was a set of extremely specialised techniques for doing a very specialised kind of writing, and that essentially if you learned to do that there were lots of other things you couldn't do. For example, *The Centauri Device* taught me that I couldn't write dialogue. I couldn't do characters who resembled anything human. I couldn't write about – I'm still trying to do this, actually – I couldn't write about decent, ordinary human emotions, and decent, ordinary human behaviour. This is one of the problems with commercial fiction. It's a fiction of sensation, and the techniques you learn are those which best convey heightened sensation. These techniques are designed to manage subject matter which is a billion miles away from ordinary human activity or ordinary human perception. And I felt that that was a lack. I felt that though there was nothing wrong with the *New Worlds* project itself – and there's absolutely nothing wrong with the project of fantasy or sf or horror or any of these vital, lively, generic ways of doing things – those kinds of projects would be more successful if you could do all this other stuff as well. So all the changes I made in the way I wrote around 1980-81 were about getting techniques I hadn't had – or needed – before. One of the things I did, I bought a notebook and I went out and I just listened to people and wrote down what they said. I wrote down what they did. I learned very quickly that I wasn't observing them, I was writing down my opinions about them. I had to interrogate that, get involved in that; but it gave rise to a method I used for fifteen years. I would write huge chunks of what I can only describe as proto-fiction – bits and pieces that were taken from reality whole – dysfunctional families in cafés in Holmfirth written down verbatim, bits of my own intimate life, stuff about climbing. I'd keep all these pieces in separate files and take them out every so often and juggle them. Five years – ten years, fifteen years – later I'd realise that if I attached one chunk to another in a new way, I could start to build up a fiction. And the idea of turning it into a fiction was to find out why I'd written the original note in the first place. That was such fun. I rarely sat at a desk (I was the first person in Britain to use a laptop on an abseil, forty minutes of sheer fear I'd drop the fucker on someone's head). I just wrote down anything I wanted to, and eventually something would come out of it that was worthwhile; and I thought of that as, at that time, a better way of being a writer. Recently I've reverted to what I think of as Michael Moorcock writing – being the sit-in-front-of-the-keyboard-and-if-you-haven't-written-x-thousand-words-per-day-you're-not-a-writer writer. That's a whole different kettle of fish.

MB: Is that the process, then, that up until your most recent novel led you to use short stories as a kind of laboratory for pieces which would later appear as part of a novel?

MJH: Very much so – short stories would get expanded or broken up for parts, or have a kind of epiphytic life as a half a

chapter of a novel. I was interested in what makes the difference, what is the difference, between a chapter of a novel and a modernist short story? You can spend quite a lot of time thinking about that, and writing examples to test-bed your ideas. It led to that whole challenge of 'let's write it as a short story and see if it will pump up into anything else'. In *Viriconium* was written like that. It was written as a 20,000-word short story in which I deliberately left two-line drops for all the Grand Cairo material. None of the dwarf material was in the original version, and you can get it like that in the American version of *Viriconium Nights*.

MB: You've mentioned your new novel. What can you tell us about it?

MJH: I don't know. People ask me this, and I don't know. I always say, 'It's got three strands, and although it's a space opera one of the strands is completely contemporary'. They look at me blankly because that isn't a description of a book. It's a description of a formal device. Anyone who's read the short story in *Travel Arrangements* about the guy called Ed – the title of which escapes me; the story which turns out to be set in virtual reality – will recognise the subject matter of the new book. I'm really interested in the tension or dialogue between the virtual, which has no consequences, and the real, which does. It's another way of talking about dreams and desire. So I thought, 'Well, I'd really like to write a space opera, because I haven't done anything like that in ages, and it would be crazy, and people would be very puzzled that I'd done it, so what can I write it about?' And I thought, 'I'm pretty obsessed by that stuff, so let's write a space opera in which the virtuality or consequentiality of everything is questionable'. This isn't describing it either, is it?

MB: I suppose an important thing to mention is that it's called *Light*...

MJH: It's called *Light*, and it is a space opera. It has actual spaceships in it. I was originally going to call it *Rocket Jockey* but they wouldn't let me. I thought that was cool, and I also thought of *These Dirty Stars*, which no one else liked either. Some people! I can't describe this book. I've just spent fourteen months writing it and I haven't got a clue. It's a rocket opera and it's really good.

MB: And it has an anti-capitalist stance...

MJH: It has an anti-capitalist stance. It does. I broke one of several of...my basic rules. One rule I broke was that you should never lecture the reader. There are lectures all the way through *Light*. For instance there's a planet called New Venusport (isn't there always?). The southern hemisphere of it is strip mines and spaceship yards, and basically that's where you go to be exploited if you're ordinary in the universe. The northern half of it is corporate heaven. It's basically Barnes or Warwickshire, and there's so much to eat and the women are beautiful and blonde and the men give them honey-coloured fur coats and the women give them children with honey-coloured hair. And you've got this brilliant sort of corporate idyll. And this whole section ends with: 'New Venusport, Planet of Choice'. Which I think is about as overt as you can get.

MB: So to what extent do you identify with the post-Seattle anti-capitalist movement?

MJH: I try to. You have to see this from the point of view that I'm a political idiot, a political naif, and that actually I prefer to remain that way because that keeps me an ordinary human being. But I feel that the politics I was offered in the 60s and 70s were neither satisfactory nor realistic, that they were the politics of two huge lumbering machines which were never going to come to any kind of conclusion that was useful to real people. I also felt, certainly from the late eighties onwards, that the West is now a gated community. It's like an organism which exports its entropy to the rest of the world. That's what exploitation is, it's so that you can live the dream,

so that you can live in the Northern hemisphere of New Venusport, and by various mechanisms you export all the entropy, anything that would disrupt the dream, elsewhere, and then you close your eyes to it. And I feel that anti-capitalism after Seattle is a politics that recognises that, whereas the kinds of politics I had as a young person didn't, couldn't. They were very old-fashioned politics that had their roots in the twenties and thirties. So I do feel that, but I try to avoid theory to be honest, partly because I'm too thick to understand it and partly because I would like to remain as ordinary as I possibly can.

MB: That's why we have Trotskyists, they can do all the theory and organising.

MJH: Is that what they're for? I did wonder.

MB: Are you working on anything else at the moment?

MJH: No, I'm having a holiday. This consists basically of getting up and thinking, 'I've finished my book, great!' and then sitting in front of the computer for twelve hours, thinking, 'What can I do?'

MB: So does that mean you're not a writer?

MJH: Oh, you're not a writer, mate, if you're not writing. That's what they used to tell us *New Worlds* apprentices; a bit the way we used to sneer at weekend climbers. Basically, I'm kind of coming alive again and I hope to have a holiday and get fit because I've got fat from writing. No, it's true. And then start the next book, which is what you do.

MB: Is the retrospective anthology American?

MJH: Yes. The guys at Night Shade Books asked me if I would like to run a whole load of short stories together and make a kind of major American collection because normally I've got nothing in print in America, so we ran together *The Ice Monkey*, *Travel Arrangements* and a few weird things which haven't much seen the light of day, and wrote an introduction. China is writing an introduction...are you writing your introduction, China?

China Miéville: I am. I've started. Honest.

MJH: And that should be out later this year, some time, with the weirdest cover.

MB: And the title?

MJH: Oh, yes, the title, the title. The book, Mike, the book: it's called *Things That Never Happen* – which I'm very proud of.

MB: Right, we can get to the 'old man' question now. In your 1981 interview in *Foundation* your final comment was that you 'sometimes dream that out there are young science fiction punks who are going to come up with something which will make me reel back and realise that I've become an old man. I hope they hurry'. Have you been disappointed? Or do you feel like an old man?

MJH: I feel like an old man. Well, both, both in a way. I was disappointed then because I didn't feel that anything was happening that would make me think, 'My God, why didn't I think of that?' or, 'My God, I don't understand this: things have moved on suddenly', and it wasn't until a bit later that I began to see that, thank God, it was happening. I think for me what had a huge impact was Mike Smith's first novel, *Only Forward*. I remember reading it and thinking, 'My God, I'm irrelevant – and I don't even know why'. I was really excited by that book and I couldn't say why, and that's what you look for, you look for something you don't quite understand. At the same time, I wasn't understanding Seattle: I was thinking, 'Wow, there's this weird thing going on and it looks really good and I just don't understand what it is', and that's what you want, that's what you want from books and that's what you hope to do yourself. And you know, or you hope, that you will also be replaced. You're bound to get slow, people are bound to get used to what you do – you're going to get used to what you do – and you want new stuff to happen. But I feel replaced now. I feel replaced by people like Mike Smith,

Jonathan Lethem, Kelly Link, China Miéville, and I'm quite happy about that, quite encouraged. But also, I'm not giving up because I'm not *actually* that old, and all this new stuff has got me going again.

MB: Thank you. Okay, let's open this up to some questions from the audience.

Judith Clute: When you were talking about closure at the end of a story, when you say, 'Okay, now, you can't go through the door', I was half-expecting you to say, 'Well, I've done that purposely so that the reader then goes back and re-reads the story'...

MJH: That, too, I think, that's part of the whole idea of causing a particle collision at the end of the story, part of that was a device designed to get the reader to go back over the text because they think they've missed something.

JC: Also to savour it again, because part of the way you write is just the beauty of listening to you get there.

MB: Hmmm. I don't know about that, but I do know about forcing the reader to go back over the text – it's a kind of Umberto Eco idea, really: if the text doesn't quite satisfy you, your tendency is to think about it for longer. It becomes parasitic on you and never dies.

China Miéville: I'm interested that you locate *Climbers* as the point at which you recognise the impossibility of the escape *there*, at which you start coming to grips with the problem inhering in the real world. I had an alternative location for that in the story 'A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium' which is all about the impossibility of getting out, about the search for the numinous, about continually nearly seeing the numinous but not being able to get to it, and it being glimpsed through public toilet mirrors... You've said several times that you wanted to call that story 'A Young Man's Journey to London' but then kept not being able to, but I think you now feel able to do that and in the recent version you've actually changed the name of that story. And what I was wanting to suggest was that when that was 'A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium' part of why you were so mean was the enagement – of being so enraged about what's wrong with the everyday but in a way blaming fantasy because it is an attempt to escape which is so flawed – and so you're punishing the characters in fantasy, the readers of fantasy, even though you love it...

MJH: And myself.

CM: Absolutely. But now that you now feel able to call it 'A Young Man's Journey to London', in a way you've made peace with – no, accepted – the fact that the problem is actually in the here-and-now and that it is London which is actually unattainable, not the fantasy. It's real life that's unattainable. And I want to tie that into the fact that you've now come back to genre: you've forgiven genre because you've realised it's not genre's fault, which is why the new novel is back to fantasy. And you're okay with it now, it's real life that's the problem. Er, question mark.

MJH: Hmmm. I think that question answers itself. Yeah, I think so. The point is, if you're like me, then you have to make the argument, you have to go through the argument, and it took me twenty years to go through the argument. And in a sense I wouldn't want to stop having it or going through it, and simply because I've written a space opera this time doesn't mean a) that it's an ordinary space opera, because it isn't, it's very self-undercutting; b) that it necessarily offers passage through the portal; or c) that I'm going to do the same next time, because probably I won't. But it does seem to me that the failure to achieve the fantastic, the loss of it, is an almost Kleinian sense of loss: we come into the world already having lost Egnaro, and there's a desperate attempt to get back which will never succeed, and that's already a metaphor for looking for life, that's already a metaphor.

Unidentified speaker: You've mentioned that your space opera is explicitly anti-capitalist. I wondered if after September 11th publishing made it difficult to take on those things?

MJH: I don't know. I have to say in a sense the book was finished for me before September 11th because I knew what I was going to write, and even though I finished it afterwards I was going to continue whatever happened. It wasn't going to change the way I did it. It might have become more difficult, but I think it's wearing off very quickly, particularly in Britain, to be honest. What is wearing off is – I'm trying to find a way of articulating this politely – what is wearing off is this idea that we should not be able to talk about that *out of reverence*, that we should not be able to have political opinions around that *out of reverence*. That seems to be wearing off very quickly, especially here, but I wouldn't allow myself to be limited by that. I thought on the 11th that the publisher would ring me up and say, 'You've done what you normally do, Mike: cut it', and I was thinking, 'Well, great, this means I can go out there and be martyred. Yet again', but it didn't happen. There are several writers in this room and I doubt that it's bothering them, either.

Paul McAuley: It was 'Suicide Coast'.

MJH: 'Suicide Coast', yes, that was the story. Thank you.

PM: No, that wasn't the question.

MJH: But your voice went up at the end.

PM: Actually, I was going to ask about restlessness. One thing you said was that you couldn't get to grips with writing about a domestic situation – you know, kids around the kitchen table, drawing with wax crayons, and so on – and I think most of the writers in this room have the same problem for various reasons, and I was just wondering whether you've come back to genre because of that, not because you can't write about that but because you're not interested in writing about it? And is that a problem with genre, or is it something quite separate that belongs in what people now call *introspective fiction*?

MJH: I see it as a problem with me. To an extent I still see myself as possessing a character flaw which does not allow me to be quotidian, and what I've used the space opera for, in a metaphorical way, is to talk about that. What I intend to write about from now on, and in fact what I intended to write about from the middle eighties, is that collision in myself. It seems to me to be deeply interesting, both to me and to readers of fantasy, to get into the idea of, why do we find the quotidian so boring? And what sort of conflicts does that bring up? How do we earth them out? How do we deal with them? How do I personally – obviously, this is what I'm really saying – deal with them? I have a deep and desperate desire to be ordinary and to be able to write mundane novels – it's just that I don't seem to be fitted for it, and I'm really very, very interested as to why. And I'm also interested in how that can act as a kind of jemmy that the reader can use to lever open their own experience. Machen shows you the door in the wall and you kind of tumble through it, and really that's like being in love, like the first three weeks of being in love; a bit later you wake up and realise that the other side of the door is just the same as this side. We can't write fantasy like that any more. We have to write fantasy which is written from the point of being grown up, of having understood that there is nothing on the other side of the door in the wall. I can't escape that, I can't escape that knowledge, but neither can I escape my desire to be something more than I am or to go through doors in the wall, or to make doors that can be gone through. I can't escape that. But I can write about it, and I do feel that fantasy writers, sf writers, horror writers are the writers who are best fitted to write about that, and that furthermore, if you extend that – we live a fantasy now; this is the whole thing about the

gated community of the West. We have made a fantasy out of reality. We want to have wings and it looks as if we could get them. We're all in the position of people who are trying to live in our dreams at the same time as with the consequences of those dreams. And, as you say, there are a lot of writers in this room who are in the best position to be writers about that in Britain.

Andy Sawyer: You've both mentioned Arthur Machen. Machen's technique of dealing with fantasy, and writing specifically about London, seem important to what you do.

MJH: I think those are two separate issues, because I actually prefer Machen's stuff that's set out of London, but there's no doubt about the fact that, however much I might struggle to get away from him, he's absolutely influential. Much of what I've done in this denial of what's behind the portal has been done in reaction to Machen; and to start with it was a very simplistic reaction, it was, 'Okay, well, if he gives it, I'm going to take it away'. Now it's a more complicated reaction which tries to understand why he wanted to give it in the first place, and what effect, for instance, the Golden Dawn type of thinking had on him. And he's not alone in being a central influence. I would add Charles Williams, another ex-Golden Dawn member, and Yeats, for that matter. They went beyond the veil for their reasons, and now it seems to be my job – again, speaking personally – to find out why that fascinated me so, and to write stories that will deal with that.

AS: It seems to me that there are currently a number of writers doing very similar things, albeit in different ways.

MJH: I must say that I noticed recently in a piece of Iain Sinclair's criticism the first direct reference I've seen in his work to Machen. I think Machen is a vastly underrated writer. I mean, I'm not so keen on his prose but what he was doing and the way he was doing it seem to me very interesting

indeed, so it wouldn't surprise me (along with the rehabilitation of Lovecraft, which we saw in *The Guardian* recently – that piece really made me want to spit) to see him taken up by the establishment. He's been dead long enough now, you know?

Caroline Mullen: You've talked about people living in the fantasy of the gated Northern hemisphere, but surely people who dream of a different kind of world in which the hemisphere is not gated are also doing their best to build their fantasy. My fantasy garden is just as much a fantasy as my fantasy suburban semi – with five bedrooms and three bathrooms and a hot tub...

MJH: I agree. I have a feeling we cannot escape it, and that basically almost everything we do is a fantasy and we may spend the next century learning a rhetoric and a type of ideology and politics which takes account of that – as long as we're left alone long enough by the circumstances which we are generating for that to happen. I'd be glad not to be around because, to be frank, I think it may be difficult to achieve the real, but that's the real task

MB: Which sounds like an appropriate place to end. It just remains to thank Mike. He's old, mean and he's misanthropic: he's M. John Harrison. Thank you.

MJH: Less of the old!

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Mark Bould lectures in film and media at Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College and has reviewed for Foundation and Science Fiction Studies. His book on John Sayles will be published by Wallflower Press — Eds.

CHINA MIÉVILLE'S THREE NOVELS ARE SOME OF THE MUST-READS OF THE LAST FEW YEARS. BUT TO FULLY APPRECIATE HIS WORK, IT'S PERHAPS NECESSARY TO GO BACK TO ONE OF HIS INFLUENCES: ONE OF THE GUESTS FROM SIGNS OF LIFE, M. JOHN HARRISON. WE ARE PLEASED TO REPRINT MIÉVILLE'S INTRODUCTION TO A NEW COLLECTION OF HARRISON'S STORIES, *THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPEN*, A COLLECTION WE RECOMMEND WITHOUT RESERVATION.

The Limits of Vision(aries): or M. John Harrison Returns to London and it is Spring by China Miéville

CLIMBING, NOT FOR THE TOP

Writing is not rock-climbing. M. John Harrison knows this – though there was perhaps a time when he worried about the fact, and wrestled to make writing rock-climbing, knowing it couldn't be, but managing to make it *almost*. It is very important that you read this book, but when you do you won't have reached the top, and you won't be able to look down over anything. There are readers who dis particular books on the basis that they are 'depressing', that they are not 'inspirational': *Things That Never Happen* will not inspire such readers. That, obviously, is their failure, not its.

They've failed in two ways. They've misunderstood literature – and art in general – to be some kind of how-to plan for Life. (*The Celestine Prophecy's* masterstroke, in its push for this alienated market, was to *actually proceed according to numbered rules*: after the sequel *The Tenth Insight*, only two more follow-ups are necessary before literature will finally have become a 12-step program.)

They've misunderstood inspiration. It has become a blind for introspective, middlebrow terror. This is 'inspiration' as a late-modern variant of the church homily, in which Everything Happens For The Best has become Everything Happens For A Reason, and exhortations to Be True To God are replaced, or

more likely joined, by the vapid and destructively useless Be True To Yourself. What is meant by 'inspiration', here, is comfort.

The work of M. John Harrison is, in fact, profoundly inspirational: but *real* inspiration and comfort, consolation, are violently opposed. To the extent that his writing is almost like rock-climbing, the point is not the reaching the top, but the climbing itself.

TWO THESES ON GENRE AND THEIR MISCONTENT

1) Science Fiction/Fantasy vulgarly prioritises plot over other considerations, particularly characterisation: we're too concerned with shit happening.

2) Science Fiction/Fantasy is devoid of the engagement with language that leads to what is sometimes called 'fine writing': we can't write for shit.

Harrison's career is inextricable from *sf/fantasy* (here elided as *sf*). In 1968, he became the literary editor of *New Worlds*, the house journal of the *sf* New Wave – of Ballard, Moorcock, Aldiss, Zoline, Bailey and others – in which Modernism, experimentalism, intellectual and emotional

seriousness were brought to bear on a genre which had (let's not parody) sometimes neglected them.

These days, some of those involved like to play the ingenue – do what, squire? Modernism? Cor' blimey, I don't know about that, we were just printing a few stories – but the smart money says that's a feint. These people knew exactly what they were doing, and why, and a fucking good thing.

It is impossible to understand what any of them did or do without understanding their roots in sf. That doesn't imply any limitation: these writers, Harrison in particular, have strained against the constraints of genre (and of other things). It would be as misleading to see Harrison as an sf writer *end of story* as it would to say he had *moved away from sf*. The relationship is more mediated, complex and tense than that, as we'll see. But let's start by stressing that *among other things*, Harrison is a writer of sf and fantasy. Harrison deploys the critique of sf against sf from within: but conversely, that means we can deploy Harrison's sf against the critique.

Specifically, in response to the two theses above:

1) Far from being narrowly plot-driven, these elliptical short stories are evocations of loneliness, of people, very particular people, of place. They are austere, sometimes opaque and always desperately moving, because they embed moments without any concession to the pedestrian rhythm of 'narrative arc'.

Not that Harrison isn't interested in plot. His understanding of the *structure* of fiction – unsurpassed by any writer in any genre – is too deep for that. The first sf writers who gave the lie to the 'you're-too-plot-y' charge were the genre's *idiot savants*, pulp visionaries like Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith who didn't bother letting plot get in the way of the Weird: it was a genius born of structural incompetence. In contrast, the uncanny in Harrison is very precisely modulated by strong plot. The thing is, though, that it tends to be happening just off-stage. The stories are the messy, contingent, particular, organic journeys through and around narratives. It's the journey we follow, not 'the plot' – but without that plot, there'd be no journey.

2) The language is everything. There are certain things that Harrison can do with unique brilliance – I don't know a finer writer of landscape, for example – but to put it simply, sentence for sentence, he is the equal of any prose stylist alive. And yes, he writes sf and fantasy – though of a form, scale and brilliance that shames not only the rest of the field, but most modern fiction.

A SPOTTER'S GUIDE

Climbers call very short routes *problems*, and they pick at them and worry them and try different techniques until they 'solve' them. As I said, Harrison's fiction is *almost* rock-climbing. There are certain problems in the world, and the stories try to solve them. As do Harrison's novels, for which these shorts often work as laboratories. When you read *The Course of the Heart*, for example, you'll uneasily recognise several of the central characters from 'The Great God Pan', for example, though the names are not always the same. Though they sometimes are.

Characters recur, and names, and settings, stories, and 'problems' – situations which contain their own hidden solutions (which contain problems). It's an echo chamber, spanning more than thirty years.

Among less precisely parametered themes, inside you will find the following, recurring (I haven't allocated points for each of these, but give a copy of the book to a friend, read them competitively, crossing off the list, and whoever completes it first has won MJH Bingo).

- Sprake

- Ash, in various forms (-ton, -lyme, a 'dirty trap of -es'). (MJH's father's initials were ASH. I have no idea what that means.)

- A wounded woman (a dangerous one, this – it might read as sexist, that the casualty of the world would so often be a woman. I don't take it that way because despite being Fisher Queens, the women have no less and no less real agency than the men, who are in any case often just as hurt. Still, though, the figure of the wounded woman does recur.)

MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS

From this point in I can't promise discretion. This is a serious warning. It's impossible to finish this discussion without a few spoilers. The unusual relationship these fictions have to plot (see above) means that this'll hardly be a catastrophe like seeing the last page of a whodunnit, but still, if you don't want to know the result, look away now. Come back when you've read them.

...
Alright?

Of course, the stories vary. A few, relatively speaking, are confessions. 'I Did It' is an unusually light-hearted look at Harrisonian concerns (loneliness, alienation, absolute emotional inarticulacy and the impossibility of pure experience, but here *played for laughs*). 'Settling the World', in its none-too-subtle critique of a suburbanised world ('... this paradise for bad poets and old-age pensioners ... this half-wit's utopia') is Harrison doing *New Worlds* as high camp.

But the most throwaway of these pieces is still incomparably more tenacious and 'serious' than the bulk of mannered little poses, the mawkish wanking that constitutes a lot of Modern Literary Fiction. And there are pieces – 'Egnaro', 'Gifco', 'The East', 'A Young Man's Journey to London', 'The Great God Pan' ... more, too fucking many to list – that are *astounding*. That mark the reader indelibly.

The second entry I ever made in a diary (on 23 May 1988: the previous day was taken up with a now cosmically embarrassing poem) was all about 'Egnaro'. It was an utterly inarticulate attempt to express 'Egnaro' – not just the story, the *place*, the thing, the idea. I remember absolutely vividly the breathless urgency with which I read it, and others, the first time. I responded to them not as if they were new ideas but nagging memories. These stories said what was in my head, *that I hadn't been able to say*, gave it shape. It's no wonder I'm still saturated by them, a decade and a half after I first read them.

They are part of my mind. MJH expressed a part of my mind – and, I know, the minds of many others – that I, we, could never have given words.

VISION, 1: PROFANITY AND GODHEAD

[We have at our disposal finally only the worldness of the world... we find some way of escaping into that...]

M. John Harrison, 1989

M. John Harrison is a visionary. This is a term that has become noxiously debased. A quick browse online for 'visionary writers' now nets mostly management gurus, lumpen futurologists and the ghouls of misery who write 'self-help' books. But even if the language to express it has been stolen from us, there is a thread that stretches through history, of mystics and apostates and gnostics (a term almost, but not yet quite, as etiolated as 'visionaries'). Writers that struggle at truth *that is immanent*, that is inexpressible but embedded in everything, in the everyday.

The modern roll-call of visionaries tends to include Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, Michael Moorcock, Alan Moore, and

that's fine – but to me, MJH has more in common with earlier, and bruter, traditions: Julian of Norwich; William Blake; Milton; Christopher Smart; Charles Williams; Francis Thompson; Arthur Machen. However, something fundamental divides MJH from these, something that does not, in fact, get any more fundamental: the God-head. These women and men are religious: MJH is much more than secular, he is *profane*. Where they strive to experience God, MJH strives to experience something else – call it the Pleroma, *fullness*.

For the forerunners, experience of God was direct, unmediated: the numinous was in the everyday. Just think about that for a moment. It is painfully ambivalent. On the one hand, the dispensation with priests, team-leaders and spiritual line-managers of all sorts is radically democratising: these are not visionaries by virtue of their own putative transcendence, but because they have noticed that we are *all* visionaries. That is why, whatever the personal politics of the individual writers, their works are *insurrectionary*. Not for nothing did William Blake proclaim himself a 'Liberty Boy', or does MJH salute the punk-diy-gnostics of Seattle and Genoa.

But there is a more discomfiting side to vision. Real inspiration, I've said, is the opposite of consolation. Because with inspiration we realise that we can only have our grass-roots relationship with God, or the Pleroma, because God is *totalitarian*. It can be felt directly because it is everywhere, *always, everywhere*, watching, silent, looming, embedded in everything, making Big Brother seem like a two-bit amateur voyeur.

The Victorian mystic Francis Thompson tells us that the Kingdom of God is 'in no strange land':

*The angels keep their ancient places;-
Turn but a stone and start a wing!*

Is this meant to inspire, or terrify? Every pebble you scuff... is that the storm of wings? St Paul's suggestion that we 'pray without ceasing' suddenly sounds less like an ecstatic shout of joy, more like the crack of a whip.

That's why Lucifer is the so-thinly disguised hero of *Paradise Lost*, and that is the meaning of The Great God Pan – both Machen's, and Harrison's. That's the tension that brims in Harrison's work. A yearning for the something uncanny and *full* in the most drab moment of the everyday: but a desperate fear of it.

And there is a further complication, which Harrison's profanity allows him to see, in a way that his mystic predecessors could not.

There is no God. The Pleroma does not *manifest* in the everyday but is *embedded in it* – Godhead in the mundane means mundanity in God. If the angels hide under stones, they cannot keep their feathers clean (read 'Isobel Avens ...' to see just how unclean they are). From the Barley Brothers of his *Viriconium* books, to the pornographic archons of 'The Great God Pan', to the tawdry urban voodoo of 'The Incalling', MJH investigates the terrible dilemma of the secular visionary: transcendence is necessary, and it is (im)possible, and it is all around us... and it leads back here.

VISION, 2: PUNISHING FANTASY

It hasn't been uncommon – usually but not exclusively among 'mainstream' critics – to excoriate fantasy for its escapism. Harrison extended the critique *and embedded it in fantasy*. He has been a purveyor of *punitive fantasies*.

These are works in which fantasy, as a mode of escape, as a running into a realm 'where action has no consequences', a prolonged childhood, 'a feeling that you have given life the slip' (MJH, 1989), destroys itself from within, punishes its readers for reading it, punishes its characters for living in it.

Gravity yanks it back and back and back to the everyday, where we have to live. It is not fitting, these magnificent stories say, that you would seek this escape, into this imagined place: reality, like blood, will out. (And even if you got there, reality will get their first, and it will only be what you have now.) But where the genre snob sneers at the desire, Harrison empathises, *shares* it, knows that we all – including the snob – do. It's just that we can't have it.

VISION, 3: FORGIVING

It doesn't help. The desire won't stop. Harrison can't stop writing about it (thankfully). And over time, in his work, he has reached a kind of peace. What makes this collection so invaluable and timely is that it lets us follow that arc.

Before anyone gets the wrong idea, I am *emphatically* not saying that he's lost his edge, or gone fluffy, or lost any of his austere brilliance. Read 'Gifco' and try saying that. But there is a softening in the later works. What has happened is that without loss of technique or precision, M. John Harrison has begun to forgive fantasy.

It's the profanity again. All there is is us. The God in the everyday is the everyday. The oppressive uncanny, and the transcendence we so want – it's us. It's this.

Harrison's always known that. In 1989, he wrote about climbing and Thatcherism that 'the walls of the Verdon Gorge are as much a fantasy-world as Middle Earth; the wreckage of Sheffield is the landscape of a political fairy tale'. But 'Egnaro' still read like a challenge, and so did 'Young Man's Journey...'. It's almost suspiciously fitting that it's that story which illustrates M. John Harrison's own trajectory.

For many years, it was called 'A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium'. It came at the end of a volume of exemplary (anti-)fantasies, set in the entropic otherworld of Viriconium. The stories destabilised us: desperately, we read and loved them, and wanted a map at the front and a glossary at the back, but Harrison casually changed the city's name and its parameters, making it quite unsafe. We loved it, but we could not trust it as a retreat. And then at the end, suddenly like a slap, it was taken away, and we fumbled with the narrator of '... Journey ...', trying to find our way back.

'A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium' was the *ne plus ultra* of the anti-fantasy. The imagined land is hidden like a squalid Narnia behind toilet mirrors. No one can get there, no matter what anyone tells you. Your fantasies will get you nowhere, we were scolded. Not cruelly, but none-too gently either.

But like the rock-climber he is, Harrison knew that he hadn't quite completed that problem. Over the years, he went back to it, tried and failed and tried to do what he thought might work. He needed to replace the one word. He needed 'Viriconium' to become 'London'.

I've heard him describe this process. It was hard on him. We live in an age of word-processors: how tough can a Find/Replace command be? But Harrison was like Borges's Pierre Menard, who agonises over writing sections of *Don Quixote*, because his words may be identical to Cervantes's but he has to completely change the story. Changing one word made '... Journey ...' a new story, and Harrison couldn't quite get it right.

Until now. He's cracked it. He's changed the word, and it works. And he's forgiven fantasy.

You can't get to Viriconium, he once told us. But now he's telling us we can't get to London, and how can that be? Because I live here, and so does he. It's because we want to escape, and God is all around us, but there is no God, so all that's around is what's around us, and we still want to escape into it. And even though it's real, we *still can't* – but that doesn't stop us living here.

He changed the word, and it's not Viriconium's fault, it's London's, it's the world's, and we still want what we can't have but what we've already got, and *perhaps that's ok*. That's how we live. M. John Harrison has forgiven fantasy, because he's forgiven the world. That's what's here. All the alienation, the pain, loneliness and loss are still there, but he's forgiven it, a little, anyway.

It is an honour to introduce this book. Like a rock-climber I cast my eye to the concluding problem, at the other end of the pages, to 'Science and the Arts', where the wounded woman brings things to a close. And she is still wounded, but now it's such an everyday pain – a period – such a very bearable condition, such a part of life. It's no longer an injury at all. 'I'm bleeding a bit', she says, 'you won't mind, will you?' and no,

because she doesn't, we don't either, any more.

– China Miéville, 2002 (from *Egmaro*, which is Viriconium, which is the Pleroma, which is London, which is where M. John Harrison lives, and where I live, and where you live too).

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Editor's note: I suspect that the St Albans: Panther, 1974 edition of *The Centauri Device* is actually 1975 as that is the listing for it in the National Library of Scotland catalogue and the SFE gives it as (US 1974). However the M John Harrison website says 1974 and I bow to their superior wisdom.

Simon Ings was born in 1965, and began his career in the anthology *Other Edens III* (1989), before publishing in *Interzone*, *New Worlds* and *Omni*. His second novel, *City of The Iron Fish* (1994), has been compared to *Cormenghast* and to M. John Harrison's *Viriconium*; it should not be a surprise that he collaborated on a story with Harrison, "The Rio Brain" (*Interzone* 104, February 1996).

On not being a science-fiction writer

by Simon Ings

When I was young, and knew no better – when I thought fiction was to do with originality; and had not the remotest inkling that it might be to do with truth – I ran through a series of workshops. These were dedicated to the art of the science fiction short story. They were residential, in the sense that they lasted for a weekend, and anyone who wanted could bring a sleeping bag, and spend Saturday night on the floor of my rented flat under the Crystal Palace TV transmitter. (Now and again, alternatives to the floor presented themselves. The tryst. The menage. I was the Svengali of Sydenham.)

Now and again, an outsider disrupts the strange, bohemian living enjoyed by the science fiction community (all those stunted social transactions, at once so inept, and yet so

sinister). By 'outsider', I do not mean a person who is not an aficionado of science fiction. They are ten-a-penny. The sf community is interpenetrated by them, just as any cultural community is interpenetrated, in its day to day affairs, by friends, relations, hangers-on, business contacts – people, in other words – who have no special community connection. (We are, after all, not monks, and we do not live in a monastery.)

The outsider I mean is one who, entering the science fiction community, decides that it ought to be refashioned in their own, efficient, less bohemian image.

They are business people in the main, though probably not very successful. Failed leaders of men, they take to sf fandom as Paul Newman's alcoholic attorney took to the medical

negligence case in *The Verdict*: as though it were their last chance at self-respect.

They are relatively unfrighting: maimed alpha dogs, toothless and past their prime. One such outsider turned up at a workshop I was running. (Later, he would try single-handedly to take over the British Science Fiction Association. I carry no flag for that organisation, but I will say that they gave him a dreadful and righteous drubbing.)

His first tactic, in assuming control of my little workshop, was to establish his credentials as an sf fan. This, indeed, he was. He attended conventions, and all the right parties. He had a genuine love and respect for the literature. I believed his interest was sincere then, and I imagine it is still active today.

So that when I spoke on behalf of the wider world – when I suggested that common-or-garden literary fiction was a pleasure in itself and an instruction to any writer, of whatever stripe – his reaction was immediate. He declared that modern literary fiction (he used the correct community terminology: he called it 'mainstream') wasn't worth the paper it was printed on, it being a miasma of child abuse, broken marriages, infidelity and incest.

He then fetched a copy of his Sunday newspaper and read out the book reviews. To my dismay, out they toppled. All his stories were to be found there, in black and white. There was the divorce novel. There was the abuse novel. There, incredibly (but perhaps not), was the incest novel.

I made to reply, and I found to my horror that I had nothing to say. I had been caught wanting. I liked the *idea* of a wider world. I liked the *idea* of cross-fertilising literary and genre materials, because all my literary heroes had done so (I was, and am, a New Wave child). But I had not yet gone so far as to actually read my way into the wider literary world that I was speaking of. As to what this world actually looked like, or consisted of, I had no idea.

I was left with an infuriating conviction that the man's position, however well evidenced, was *nakedly* ridiculous. But I couldn't even begin to say why.

In the spirit of one who only ever thinks of the witty line after the party is over – and this party ended over thirteen years ago – let me tell you what I should have said to him.

What are you upset about?

Is there to be no literature of love, and its perversions? No literature of care, and the corruption of care? No literature of ecstasy, and the dissolution of ecstasy?

I have spent my rather scrappy career writing about the senses, and about the nature of embodiment. I am perfectly comfortable with the notion that someone else might rather prefer to write about something like love, or childhood, or parenting, or loneliness, and that some other person might prefer to read it. I am equally comfortable with the idea that these other subjects might speak to more people, more directly, and more poignantly, than the subjects I have chosen to write about.

It has always seemed to me that science fiction is a separate, labelled genre due to some pure ecological accident; that, just as the space race inspired science fiction, other events inspired other literatures that might have easily acquired lasting labels. Remember, for example, that the great Depression, and the mental health crisis it triggered, and the cheap, quick, invasive treatments that were developed to address that crisis – gave rise to something we might have called asylum fiction; frontal lobotomy fiction, ECT fiction (I am being only marginally facetious). This literature, on acquiring such a label, would then have enjoyed – or suffered – the fate of any population that becomes ideologically isolated: on the one hand, rapid, colourful specialisation; on the other, long-term memetic obsolescence. In such a world it is, I think, unlikely that general readers today would remember Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, any more

than – in our own world – they remember that other highly regarded, expensively filmed book: Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*.

In my workshop, I had taken the line: Literary fiction isn't all humping in Hampstead. To which the obvious reply is: Actually, by and large, it is.

My argument should have been: Humping in Hampstead has at least as much right to be written about as, say, embodiment and the senses. Unlike the heroine of my first novel *Hot Head*, I have never yet plugged myself into a dog and seen through its eyes. I have, however, humped (in Hampstead, at that). If ever a writer had to defend the relevance and topicality of his or her output (they don't) it would have to be me.

So, the popularity of all literatures being self-evidently not a matter of justice or 'good marks', but simply an accident of ecology, why was my guest sneering at this other, bigger, more popular, more venerable, more immediately topical form of literature?

A couple of years ago I wrote a novel called *Painkillers*. It was a crime thriller about a man's disintegrating marriage, and his despair when faced with the care of his severely autistic son.

One young science fiction fan – a child armed with a website – said that by leaving science fiction, I had sold out.

Sold out what?

I had sold out science fiction.

When we sell something out, we relinquish something of great worth for a considerable (but shallow) benefit. The child assumed I had acquired a shallow benefit. To wit: money. Status. Prestige.

And this is the crux of the matter. In this child's mind, the world outside sf – the Outside, if you will – had snob value.

Some complaints endemic throughout the science fiction community:

The Outside doesn't organise our books properly in the book stores.

The Outside doesn't give us its awards.

The Outside steals our ideas and recycles them as its own.

And:

The Outside is (by turns) dull, outmoded and insincere.

That last plaint is interesting. It is different from the other three. The first three are about the Outside's superiority, its strength, its dominion.

The fourth one, on the other hand, is a denial of its integrity. The Outside might look bigger than you are, but it *isn't really there*; and it *just doesn't know it's dead yet*; and it's *just fooling you*.

A casual definition of snobbery is: 'To look down on someone'. So one can 'snub down' the social hierarchy. One can not 'snub up'. So the more substantive complaints of the sf community cannot be easily articulated through snobbery; only through whining and special pleading.

The sf community, so long as it clings to its image as underdog, can only be snobbish if it denies the Outside's social reality. (*It's a wasteland; or it's a forgotten land; or it's a hail of mirrors.*) There is a name for this sort of snobbery. It is called 'reverse snobbery'. The reverse snob is someone who lives in a dirty and dangerous place and calls it 'vibrant', and other, better-tended, better-liked places 'dull'.

There is nothing particularly heinous in all this. (I am a Peckham reverse-snob of some ten years' standing, so, at this point in my argument, my house is glass.) Snobbery is, after all, just one of many kinds of everyday personal defence; just one of many kinds of weapon.

But one should choose one's own weapons; not have them foisted upon one. And though I have tried valiantly to master this weapon, to be a good member of the community,

to be a 'science fiction fan/writer/[fill in the blank]', I never have been able to swing this particular gizmo without it landing point-first through my foot.

Snobbery, for all that it can hurt people, is a thing of very little substance. The smartly suited businessman points at the inferior garb of the bohemian and laughs. The objective, visible difference between the snob and his target is already there: all the snob has to do is to represent that difference as though it were an index of general inferiority: '*Gentlemen don't wear plaid.*'

Reverse snobbery, by contrast, must work against the evidence. It must take the same difference and play it upstream, counter to intuition. The difficulty then is, how do you make your point convincing enough to stick?

Reverse snobbery is characterised by the sort of impotent rage evinced most spectacularly by the Black Knight in *Monty Python's Holy Grail*. The snobs – the knights who rate his prowess as of little worth – cut him, quite literally, down to size, lopping off limb after limb with infuriating casualness. How? Because they can't be bothered to listen to him. By ignoring the Black Knight's blandishments, they are safe.

Such anti-sf snobs as there are in the world, can safely ignore the science fiction community's responses, because they are not (or they think that they are not) very much threatened by science fiction, and so they need (or they think they need) little in the way of sophisticated weaponry. A few lazy chops of the sword are enough for them and afterwards, deaf to all imprecations, they ride away.

In a recent issue of his newsletter *Ansible*, David Langford quotes the Bookseller (17 May 2002; regrettably, he does not credit the writer):

'You hear this sort of thing all the time from SF wallahs, who bang on about the Booker Prize and never seem to take the pleasure they should in the fact that they are Not As Other People. In fact I am contemplating a series of riotously funny fantasy novels set entirely in Chipworld, a self-contained universe that hovers permanently just above Terry Pratchett's shoulder.'

Langford calls this a 'predictable reaction' to the complaints that regularly arise from the science fiction community. On the contrary, I find the Bookseller's observation both original and telling. In any event, we could at least try and answer the question. Why do we not (do we not?) 'take pleasure in the fact that [we] are Not As Other People'?

Much as I dislike it, I think science fiction's adolescent mentality – its refusal to grant any cultural validity to its Outside, and its determination to rehearse its resentments *ad nauseam*, even though no-one is listening – is its most telling diagnostic contribution to any debate about values. In an age where values no longer integrate, but compete instead as rival Absolutes (*art for art's sake; war for war's sake*) – in an age where, inevitably, the value of 'Exchange of Values' itself becomes a juggernaut non-value (we call it 'Business', and use the expression 'it's just Business' to excuse its obliteration of every other value) – small, harmless, very well defended Absolutisms (cults, if you prefer) clearly have their place. They keep variety alive.

The pity of it is, the tools we use to 'stay special' are the very tools that make existence within the science fiction community (I would hardly call it a 'life') so unpleasant and unrewarding. The tools, I mean, of reverse snobbery, which are these: a ruthlessly reduced cultural vocabulary; a cult of siege; above all, the tacit assumption that other people's snobbery is worth searching out, worth recording, and not just that, *worth replying to*.

And this is why, though I continue to write science fiction, I am not a 'science fiction writer': because the Black Knight, doughty as he is, is a rather limited conversationalist.

No, let me spell it out: because snobbery, and the manifold articulations of snobbery – the 'How Others See Us' pieces in *Ansible*, and all of that cock – these things bore me to a weeping rage.

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Simon Ings is the author of Hot Head (1992), Hotwire (1995), Headlong (1999) and Painkillers (2000) – Eds.

Science Fiction is sometimes thought of as being a branch of surrealism. Jeff Gardiner visits a museum by and to the greatest surrealist of all...

Salvador Dalí - Theatre Of Memory

by Jeff Gardiner

Salvador Dalí's greatest work of art is his Theatre Museum in the little town of Figueres, Catalonia, North-East Spain, which I was lucky enough to visit during my sundrenched summer holiday in Dalíland. The Theatre Museum is the largest surrealist object in the world and he considered it his most important legacy, dedicating it, of course, to his muse and object of worship – Gala.

Erected in the town of his birth and next to the church where he was baptised, Dalí designed the building itself on the site of a theatre. Its walls are made to look like goose-flesh and what greets you as you approach the strange building in the middle of the town are the giant eggs perched on the top of this castellated edifice. The gallery (Dalí did not want it to be a museum, but rather an 'experience') is entered from a courtyard filled with typically odd sculptures and statues with a working television screen embedded into one. The façade of the building is decorated with sculptures of the four Fates

holding loaves of bread, two either side of a figure in an old-fashioned diving suit. And why not? It is tempting to try to analyse the symbolism behind these everyday objects put off context. I could suggest that bread has a religious significance or represents the ordinary and the domestic; or perhaps the diver is ready to submerge deep within our psyches and explore the id of our darkest desires. I could ... but is that really what Dalí wanted us to do? And anyway, what use is my interpretation to you? You have your own dreams and nightmares to contend with.

Dalí spent thirteen years perfecting his masterpiece and the pink walls and the incredible geometric dome are indeed something of an architectural wonder. So far I have only mentioned the exterior; what of within? Inside are some of his most majestic paintings, sculptures, sketches and installations. You can follow a guide book or follow the numbers as suggested by the curators, but Dalí preferred his patrons just to

wander randomly through the maze of dark rooms, like we are being allowed to roam inside his crazy mind. Corridors spiral around the courtyard containing the *Rainy Cadillac* – the centre of the museum – what Dalí called the ‘car navel’ (carnival). I am tempted to call his work anarchic, but this exhibition reminds us just how obsessive and orderly he was, attempting to express his madness with an almost scientific rigour, constantly finding theoretical bases for his work. He famously pounced upon Freud’s work on dreams and neuroses, calling his process of expression his ‘paranoiac-critical method’.

So in no particular order, other than how they affected me, here is a short appreciation of some of the works to be found in the theatre museum.

The Palace of the Wind is a large room with a ceiling to rival the Sistine Chapel except instead of the hands of God and Adam the focus is the foreshortened feet of Dalí and Gala as we see them from beneath flying upwards to heaven. To one side we see the usual Daliesque paraphernalia of soft watches, elephants with impossible legs and the facial shape of *The Great Masturbator*.

Three famous self-portraits are on display: *Cyclopean Self-Portrait* of a dashing 17 year old Salvador peering out of a mist and with only one eye visible; *Self-Portrait with*

l’Humanite outrageously including the front page of the French Communist newspaper; *Self-Portrait with Grilled Bacon Rasher* with his soft, golden facial skin propped on crutches and being devoured by ants.

The incredibly tasteless Mae West installation is a hilarious and huge joke; a room containing giant red sofa lips, a fireplace nose and picture-frame eyes, which when viewed through a high lens, surrounded by swathes of real hair, makes up the face of Mae West. The effect is like a painting in that you are forced to view a three-dimensional subject in two dimensions.

The canvas, *Poetry of America*, is a stark portrayal of the brutal competitive nature of capitalism with a reference to how America bled Africa dry with its cruel slave trade. Dalí uses the motif of a Coca Cola bottle (he was the first to do so) to represent corporate America. The figures are desolate and literally empty.

My favourite painting is one entitled *Singularities* with its startling phantom-like lady whose breasts and hair sprout like bushes. She stands elegantly with a gloved hand waiting to be kissed. To her right a monstrous and sexual mass of white hair protrudes from the doorway ready to be unzipped. It is a dark canvas containing unidentifiable spectral figures.

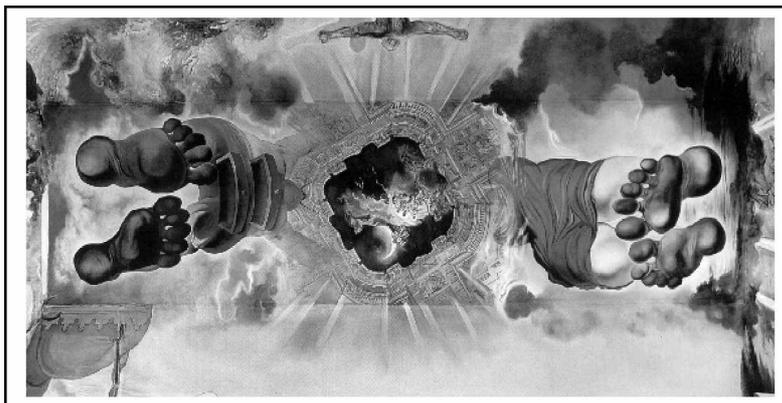
There are so many famous pictures here that I cannot mention them all, but the collection also includes the ridiculous *Spectre of Sex Appeal*, the elegant *Galarina*, the perplexing *Galatea of the Spheres*, the disturbing *Atomic Leda*



and the painfully realistic *Basket of Bread* that reminds us just what a talented draughtsman he was. The final painting in the entire exhibition is of the angel of death mooning at us, which is an extremely appropriate way for Dalí to wish us all adieu.

The theatre museum reminds us constantly that Dalí worked with a sense of humour and there is much here to amuse, horrify, upset and confuse. What is also

apparent is that most of his visual experiments are of an autobiographical nature, either employing very personal symbolism regarding his family, friends and homeland, or allowing us to see a more spiritual side of a man who struggled with both the church and a religious faith. There is no doubt that he was a man who encountered mystical visions. His work is difficult because for Dalí beauty is edible



and the world is seen as one that is slowly rotting into a state of putrescence. Some of his paintings play visual tricks on the mind, celebrating ambiguity and artifice with their cleverness. His sexual desires are sometimes juvenile and often comical or strangely perverted. But, after all, here is a man who has opened

up his most inward and private thoughts, allowing them to be displayed on public view. For us mere mortals, gazing upon Salvador Dalí’s work becomes a voyeuristic journey into an uncomfortable world of delirium. Most of us, perhaps wisely, keep our deepest desires to ourselves, but here we are lucky enough to catch a glimpse into the nightmarish genius of the world’s greatest fantasy artist.

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Jeff Gardiner writes columns for Prism (British Fantasy Society) and for www.thealienonline.net. He is a writer and part-time English teacher. The Age of Chaos, on Michael Moorcock, is published by The British Fantasy Society and can be ordered from the BFS Cyber-store at www.britishfantasysociety.org.uk, or by sending a cheque payable to 'BFS Publications' or postal order for £8.49 (including p+p, UK only) for the standard paperback edition, or £26.50 (including p+p,, UK only) for the deluxe, signed (by Michael Moorcock, Jeff Gardiner and cover artist Bob Covington) numbered, hardback edition of only 100 copies to BFS Publications, c/o 3 Tamworth Close, Lower Earley, Berkshire, RG6 4EQ, UK — Eds.



First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Steve Jeffery

All novels marked: [📖] are eligible for the 2002 BSFA Award for Best Novel

All collections and anthologies marked: [📖] contain stories eligible for the 2002 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction

Lynn Abbey – *Sanctuary*

Tor Books, New York, 2002, 480pp, \$27.95 ISBN 0-312-87491-X

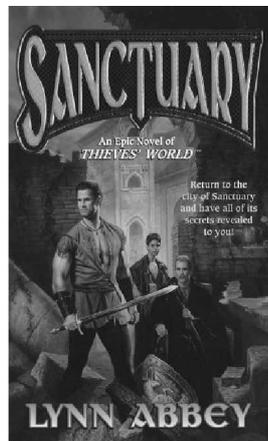
Reviewed by Alan Fraser

There have been many 'shared world' series, but most of them started off as one author's vision and then others were invited to join in – think *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, André Norton's *Witchworld*, etc. However, *Thieves' World* was the first intended from the start to be a shared creation (the other most notable one is *Wild Cards*, edited by George R.R. Martin [see the review of *Deuces Down* elsewhere in this column. Ed.]).

The first *Thieves' World* anthology was published in 1979, edited by Robert (Lynn) Asprin, who was later joined by his then wife Lynn Abbey. Up to the twelfth and last anthology in 1989, the series attracted many well-known authors including A.E. Van Vogt, Joe Haldeman, John Brunner, C.J. Cherryh and Philip José Farmer. There are also around twenty *Thieves' World* novels, by authors including Poul Anderson, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and David Drake,

not to mention a series of graphic novels and a role-playing game! Now, after an absence of more than a decade, Lynn Abbey has returned on her own with a full-length novel set in the thieves' city of Sanctuary. This book is set at least a generation after the others, so the previously well-known characters are long-gone. It could be seen as the starting point for *Thieves' World: The New Generation*, and Lynn Abbey has edited a new anthology, *Turning Points*, featuring all new characters in stories from herself, Jody Lynn Nye, Raymond E. Feist, Andrew J. Offutt and others. Also, re-releases of the original twelve *Thieves' World* anthologies should be appearing soon from Tor.

Sanctuary is now a decaying city, with only half its previous inhabitants left after a long and vicious occupation by the cult of the Bloody Hand. Molin Torchholder was content as a priest in the Empire of Ranke until exiled by the Emperor, his



insecure brother-in-law. Now over ninety, he has lived in Sanctuary for decades, distinguished himself in battle against the city's enemies, and become the custodian of its most vital symbols and secrets.

After a surprise attack by a Bloody Hand assassin, Molin is left weakened and dying from using sorcery to overcome his assailant. He is rescued by Cauvin, a big but slow-witted handyman, who turns out to have been a child member of the cult. To save Sanctuary from being taken over again, Molin must quickly pass the Torch and the secrets of Sanctuary over to a new Torchholder. Only Cauvin and his bright nine-year-old foster-brother Bec can help him do it.

The problem here is that we have a good 200-page story spread over 480 pages. It starts and ends well, but the middle section crawls as most of the characters meander round Sanctuary giving us info-dumps about

the history and past characters of Thieves' World. These seemed designed more for past readers of the series, to refresh their memories and link this book to the previous ones. All this doesn't propel the story forward; so that the sense of urgency and danger that should drive the whole book just isn't there.

A thing I hate about *Farscape* is their continual use of the word "frell" in place of a certain expletive. Here, Ms. Abbey uses "frog" instead, especially when the story is being told from the illiterate Cauvin's point of view. Cauvin's favourite insult/expletive is "sheep-shite", so we get pages in which one or both words are used in every sentence, not just dialogue. After a while it gets to be, well, a froggin' load of sheep-shite!

Did *Sanctuary* make me want to get into Thieves' World? Not the new series, but I may go back and check out the earlier books.

Poul Anderson – *The Broken Sword*

Gollancz, London, Fantasy Masterworks 32, 2002, 274pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-575-07425-6

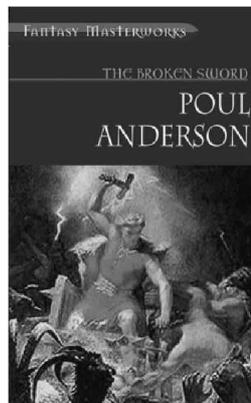
Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

This early heroic fantasy originated in 1954. A decade later, Fritz Leiber coined that genre-defining phrase 'Sword and Sorcery' and Poul Anderson's broken sword is *par excellence* a weapon sortilegious. One of those christening or initiation gifts which bestow both magical benefit and a baneful destiny, it is brought by a messenger of the ancient gods to the naming ceremony of Skafloc, a Viking baby abducted by elf-earl Imric. Imric has substituted a changeling, a hybrid elf-troll moulded to a likeness so perfect as to deceive the robbed Viking mother, who rears him as Valgard, her own child. The two grow up alike in body but different in nature. Valgard turns viciously and fatally against his unwitting fostering family (only Skafloc's blood-sister, Freda, surviving) to ally himself with, and then to lead, the trolls, who are warring with the elves and who eventually command the whole faerie realm of England – their warfare mostly invisible to the Saxon and Danish settlers.

Skafloc Elf's-Foster, meanwhile, in growing to manhood, has become elfish in nature and magical prowess. A leader in the war against the trolls, he rescues Freda from their clutches, and, ignorant of their kinship, they become lovers. In defeat, Skafloc seeks and regains the broken sword, which, when re-forged by the giant Bolverk, must kill whenever unsheathed. Deserted by a broken-hearted but christianised Freda (having learned

from family spectres of her incest), Skafloc, now berserk, wields the sword to rid England of the trolls, both he and Valgard the final victims of its remorseless magical thrust. Odin, who has contrived the whole tragedy, claims the child to which Freda has given birth.

Of Poul Anderson's multitudinous works, why should this be thought of and revived as a Masterwork? First, perhaps, for something hard to convey in a brief review: the underlying, brooding presence and occasional theophany of game-playing ancient gods, themselves diminished, on the way out, but still scheming, still malicious. The novel is in some respects a threnody for the very Asgard/faerie world that it creates – or co-creates, for this is a second distinguishing feature. Anderson, well-versed in saga and Norse myth, draws elements of these authentically into his fiction, this stylistically to the extent of plausible pastiche. There is about his prose, even when it goes over the top, a wonderful feel of 'northernness' – instance his descriptions of the Wild Hunt and Skafloc's icy voyage to Giant Land. He also intersperses speech uttered in alliterative trochaic dimeter and trimeter, evocative of the skalds' verse-speaking. This sometimes falters, as may his prose when in adjectival overdrive, but more often they both work to fire the imagination, and ability to do this is sure hallmark of any true Masterwork.



James Barclay – *Elfsorrow*

Gollancz, London, 2002, 454pp, £10.99 ISBN 0-575-07329-2

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

I note that this latest offering from Barclay has a new series title of *Legends of the Raven* (the first three being 'Chronicles') but *Elfsorrow* appears to continue directly on from events in the last book.

Despite the efforts of *The Raven*, Balaia is once again under threat – this time it is the four feuding colleges of

magic that threaten its very existence. The death of Lyanna, and with it the threat of the "The One Power", has failed to bring the expected peace between the colleges as the struggle between Dordover and Xetesk escalates to outright war.

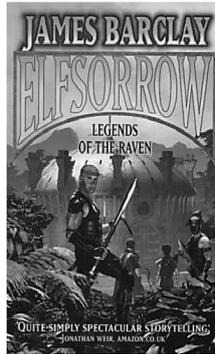
The Raven has its own problems. Erienne and

Denser struggle to come to terms with the death of their daughter, Lyanna, and Erienne is also struggling with the magic transferred to her from her daughter. Grief-stricken, Erienne blames everyone for Lyanna's death – including members of the Raven. Hirad Coldheart is still nursing the two dragons trapped in this dimension following the earlier casting of Dawnthief, the “spell to end all spells”, and awaits the arrival of a group of Xeteskian mages who are to attempt to open a way back for the trapped dragons. As is the way with Xetesk however, they arrive in force and with a very different agenda than The Raven understand. On a slightly more positive note though, the young shapechanger, Thraun, is beginning to recover from his own grief and loss and is slowly re-integrating back into The Raven.

In far-off Calaius, home of the reclusive and secretive elves, all is not well. Following a raid on a temple by Humans, the heart of their religion and belief system has

been desecrated. Elves are beginning to die – struck down by a mysterious and incurable affliction. The Raven must travel to Calaius to find the cause, as this will inevitably affect their own elven Mage, Ilkar. This will be no easy task, though; the elves already despise humans, and the blame for their affliction is being laid firmly at the feet of humankind.

I have reviewed all three of Barclay's previous books about The Raven, so I won't repeat everything I've said before about his wonderful characterisation, writing style and storytelling abilities. *Elfsorrow* displays all of these talents and much more. It is much darker and somehow more serious, and covers in depth a race that have been given little real attention in his previous books. It's a page-turner as always, and reveals so much more about the order of his world that future books can only get better and better. I would rate this as one of my best reads of the year.



John Gregory Betancourt – Roger Zelazny's *The Dawn of Amber*

iBooks, 2002, 299pp, £10.99 ISBN 0-7434-4552-X

Reviewed by Carol Ann Kerry-Green

John Gregory Betancourt has set out to answer some of the questions of the world of Amber; how it came into being, who created the pattern, how Oberon became the ruler of Amber and why the Courts of Chaos and Amber are at war.

Anyone who has read Zelazny's Amber series will be immediately at home in this first part of a prequel trilogy, as Dworkin manipulates shadow and uses trumps to move between places. For those not familiar with it, this might be a starting place, though I think it is more likely to appeal to those completists who wish to know more about the beginnings of Amber and the pattern.

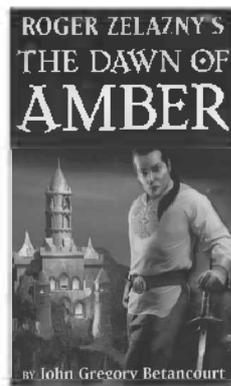
Obere is a guards captain fighting in the Army of his King, Elnar, to deliver his land of Ilerium from the hell-creatures that have been attacking relentlessly for the last year or so. Dragged from his bed late one night by Dworkin, a friend and mentor from the past, Obere is thrust into a new world. He learns that the sole reason for the hell-creatures attack on Ilerium is to kill him, and that he is, in fact, Oberon, son of Dworkin, Prince of Chaos. Plunged into Shadow in the company of his new-found father and sister, Freda, Oberon tries to come to terms with what is happening.

On arrival at Juniper, Dworkin's current base, Oberon learns more about his new-found family and he meets several of his brothers and sisters. Dworkin is

gathering all his living children to him in an attempt to ward off an attack by enemies he has gained in the Courts. All of Dworkin's children have at one time successfully traveled the logrus which gives them power over Shadow and the ability to manipulate it. Some of them, including Dworkin himself, had a difficult time in traversing the logrus and Dworkin's own brother was killed in the attempt. When Dworkin examines Oberon's mind he finds that he will not be able to travel the logrus, the ability is there, but the Pattern is different, and if he attempts it he will die.

After his initial disappointment in Oberon's inability to traverse the logrus, Dworkin becomes convinced that Oberon has the power to create a new Pattern, a new logrus that the children of Dworkin will be able to follow. As they begin to experiment with this, the long-awaited attack begins and Oberon is thrust into a new fight against the hell-creatures. The idea of a new Pattern and his ability to manipulate it will have to wait.

I found this a very easy and quick read, though it hasn't Zelazny's depth of vision to it, it makes an interesting, if brief, read about how the whole story of Amber started. Hopefully in future volumes Betancourt will go into further detail about the Courts of Chaos and the feud that Dworkin is involved with.



Alice Borchardt – *The Dragon Queen*

Bantam, London, 2002, 473pp, £10.99, ISBN 0-593-05062-2

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

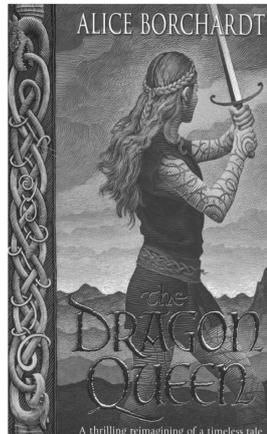
Lob a brick in any good library or book shop, and you will hit a Guenevere trilogy. So the first question I asked

myself when I received *The Dragon Queen*, the first volume of yet another one, was what new contribution

it had to make to the body of Arthurian legend.

Recent years have seen many books, not only about Guenevere, but about other women of the Matter of Britain, giving them a more central place than they occupy in the medieval legends and showing them as people of power. This was unusual and interesting once, but I can't help feeling it's becoming a cliché by now, and I didn't feel that Borchardt adds very much. Her Guenevere is powerful, but the power is less inherent in her character than in magical gifts, such as enchanted armour, which help her surmount the tests she has to face.

The other Arthurian characters Borchardt depicts are mostly far removed from the personalities a reader might expect from either the 'historical Arthur' or the 'Arthurian romance' traditions. I rather enjoyed the picture of an evil Merlin – preferable to the cuddly old gent or the repository of pagan wisdom depicted by some other writers – but others seemed to have strayed too far from their originals to be called Arthurian at all; they're new characters with Arthurian names. Arthur himself, shown as an abused child who



faces tests of his courage against overwhelming odds, never struck me as having the clout to become 'rex quondam rexque futurus', though it will be interesting to see how Borchardt develops him in future volumes.

The style is readable, but I found its imprecision irritating: the word 'cataract' for example, to describe stars reflected in a polished floor, or the occasional appearance of American slang. I also found irritating the multiplicity of spellings of the name 'Guenevere' – intentional, I think, to reflect the different facets of her character, but still enough to pull a reader out of the story.

Borchardt has written books about wolf shapeshifters – which I admit I have not read – and she imports some of these characters into an Arthurian setting. I couldn't help feeling that she is more interested in her wolves and the community which they set up – among whom the child Guenevere lives – than she is in the Arthurian characters. I think I would have enjoyed this novel more if I had been able to read it as a completely original fantasy, rather than trying to fit it into the Arthurian genre.

Eric Brown – New York Blues

Gollancz, London, 2002, 309pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 57507 301 2

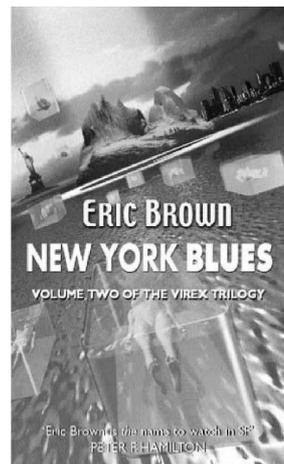
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Ahh, the Virtual Reality backlash begins! I noticed that those stupid helmet-and-glove combinations had disappeared from *Tomorrow's World* and our amusement arcades; now Eric Brown is putting the boot in too.

In a 21st century American city going to the dogs Hal Halliday runs a missing persons agency. When the beautiful VR star Vanessa Artois comes to him for help finding her missing sister, what first seems a textbook 'teen runaway' case very rapidly turns into something far more convoluted for all those concerned... but how are the anti-VR revolutionaries known as Virex connected to the case, and who is the mysterious Big Ed?

New York Blues owes more than a little to *Blade Runner* – the background of decay and incessant rain coupled with ex-cop Halliday's nocturnal modus operandi infallibly conjure up Ridley Scott's classic neon streets. This is by no means a bad thing in this context since Eric Brown uses Scott's imagery as a subtextual shorthand to help frame his own particular noir future. I did wonder why (apart from the evocativeness of the title – Great Yarmouth Nights doesn't have the same ring to it) a trilogy by an English writer should be set in the States. As Paul McAuley showed in his recent

Whole Wide World we can do 'grim and gritty' just as well here. Ridley Scott is English, and Raymond Chandler, who wrote the rule-book for the hardboiled detective genre went to school not a mile from where I'm sitting now.



I suppose the homage to those core aspects of the genre – the down-at-heel gumshoe, beautiful rich dame in trouble, powerful and dangerous people with their own powerful and dangerous agendas – are more appreciable in a 'home' (i.e. US) setting. The main thing I would question is the way that Brown, having impeccably set up his pastiche, then fails to really use it, which is a shame as I was having good ironic fun with it.

Having not read the first book in the trilogy, I don't know if much of the background herein alluded to has already been dealt with or is pure scenery. However, I do know that I'll be picking up the final part of the trilogy hoping to find out. The skin of an sf story laid over the flesh of a detective plot is hardly a new idea, but *New York Nights* deals sensitively with the issues raised whilst keeping a competent and well-told story ticking over nicely.

Mark Chadbourn – *The Fairy Feller's Masterstroke* 

PS Publishing, Harrowgate, 2002, 109pp, signed, numbered limited edition £8.00 (pb) ISBN 1-902-880-32-2 (500 copies) / £25.00 (hcl) ISBN 1-902-880-33-1 (300 copies)

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

The story behind Victorian fairy painter Richard Dadd's miniature masterpiece *The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke* is almost the stuff of fantasy itself. Two things, writes Neil Gaiman in his introduction to Chadbourn's charged and dark novella, strike you about the painting, which hangs in the Tate. One that it is so small, its dimensions barely able to contain the detail of numerous tiny and distorted figures against the (to them) oversized foliage Dadd has crammed into it. The other, which Gaiman is surprised that no one seems to have remarked on, is that it is unfinished, the lower left corner below the tiny Moorish couple fading into the light fawn of the underpainting.

What has been remarked is the density of this tiny painting, that everywhere you look you can discover more and more details, tiny forms and faces hidden in the undergrowth. The other is the fraught sense of significance of Dadd's painting, of a small world poised, waiting for something momentous to happen in the instant before the Feller's axe falls on the chestnut before him. It is this sense of poised significance that leads John Clute, in *The Geography of Fantasy Art* (*Unearthly Visions*, 2002, Greenwood Press) to call this one of the true fantasy paintings, art as fantasy rather than merely the illustration of it. The expressions of the watchers staring out (the Feller has his back to us, so that we never see his face) are variously expectant, intent, even fearful. And one of those figures, the small worried-looking white-haired dwarf almost in the centre of the painting is Dadd himself. A Dadd who, when he painted it, was in London Bethlem (commonly Bedlam) hospital for the insane. Before this, Dadd's paintings were pretty, innocuous, chocolate box illustrations of fairy scenes from Shakespeare. Then he went mad. Not just a little potty, but spectacularly, floridly and murderously mad, babbling of demons and Egyptian gods. After murdering his father he was arrested on a train for the continent



where he attacked a passenger, on his way to kill the Emperor of France. And after that his paintings (he was never released, and died 40 years later, in Broadmoor) took on a new tone, obsessed and driven, darker and mysterious.

This is the painting that comes to haunt Danny, the gifted but slacker protagonist of Chadbourn's novella and leaves him, at the start and end of his story, staring out into darkness from an exhaust filled car, waiting for... what?

Danny is a child prodigy, only child of poor but devoted parents. With a spectacular IQ and almost photographic memory, he gains a Double First at Cambridge at 19, with the prospect of a full Professorship before he turns 26. Instead, he drops out, signs on the dole, drops into a life of drink and drugs. But a bad score one night nearly kills him. In his panic and delirium he believes he sees a small figure staring at him from an alleyway, although his girlfriend sees nothing. The scare of his OD cures him of drugs, but replaces one obsession with another, his lifelong fascination with Dadd's

painting, which his mother took him to see in the Tate when he was a child and which he is convinced has a hidden message if only he could unlock it, to see things with Dadd's eyes. To do this he believes he must retrace Dadd's fateful journey to Egypt to try and discover what it was that Dadd saw that propelled him into madness.

And something, we learn, happened to Danny as a child. One night, his father tells him, as they sit talking shortly after the death of his mother, Danny disappeared from the house, to reappear next day to a frantic household. Except, his father recalls, Danny's mother didn't seem worried at the time. "But that was your mother," he says, "always a mystery to me."

Like Clute's description of Dadd's painting, Chadbourn's masterful novella and Danny's journey begin and end poised on a moment of waiting, of a potential significance that the reader can only guess at.

Paul Cornell – *British Summertime* 

Gollancz, London, 2002, 341 pp, £10.00, ISBN 0-575-07369-1

Reviewed by John Newsinger

A science fiction novel set in Bath! Not a very promising prospect for anyone who knows the city. But in fact *British Summertime* is very enjoyable and well worth a look. It impressed this reader enough for me to search out his earlier novel, *Something More*.

The story throws its main character, Alison Parmeter, a young woman with a remarkable talent for calculating odds and understanding situations into a cross-time conspiracy to sabotage the Earth's eco-friendly communist future. The damage the conspiracy has already accomplished can be seen in the world around

us with a rampant corporate capitalism threatening the very survival of life on the planet. Among the odds that Alison calculates for her bookmaker employer are those for a bet on the End of the World. As the book proceeds they start at 5000-1 but by the end are 2-1 on.

And then help arrives from the future in the shape of Squadron Leader Douglas Leyton, a stiff upper lip, very proper, dashing hero in the Dan Dare mold. He is a devout Christian, embarrassingly English and a staunch communist. Accompanying him is his navigator, Jocelyn, a disembodied head, brought back from the dead. Someone or something, Alison realises, is changing history:

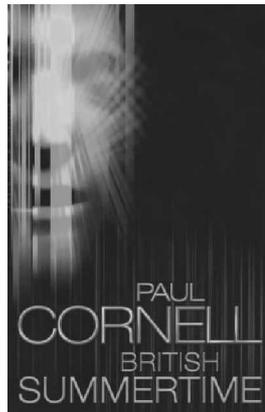
I think you lot sorted it out when you got rid of money. I think that capitalism can't react fast enough to save the world... I think by the time global warming gets obvious and the multinationals and the government's they influence start reacting, it'll be too late. It is too late. Because *this* is what's written now. It's written over what was once written.

Even the future's Bible is different from that in Alison's time, a version produced by the changes that

have been made in the past. Leyton and Jocelyn came from a future that is both communist and gnostic.

There is much more to the book than just this. Who is the contemporary Douglas Leyton, a child murderer, secret agent, man of disguise, who haunts the city's streets and pubs, a man who drills holes in his own head? What are the Golden Men? Are they devils or angels? How did they hijack Christianity? What is the role Frederick Cleeves, the head of a British security agency, in the conspiracy? And what was the fate of Alison Parmeter in the original version of the past? It all adds up to an enjoyable novel.

One last point, Paul Cornell has written, among many other things, a number of Doctor Who novels. This has obviously had an impact on his writing because everything that happens in the book seems designed to be within the capabilities of the old BBC special effects department and the budget of the *Doctor Who* series. Moreover, both Alison and Leyton have the definite feel of Doctor Who sidekicks. This is not a criticism. It is part of the book's charm.



John Crowley – *The Translator*

Reviewed by Farah Mendlesohn

Morrow, New York, 2002, 295pp, \$25.95, ISBN 0-380-97862-8

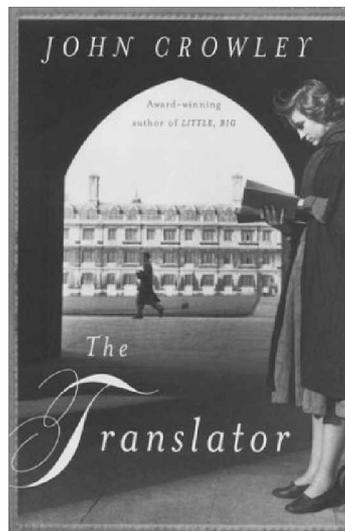
There is a stillness at the heart of change. To move on, one needs must know from where. The past is a peninsula isolated by time, connected by the sharp tugs of memory encoded in the scent of a sweater, the slippery crack of decaying onion skin, a stray line of verse.

Christa/Kit Malone is a college student in 1963. Her freshman year has been delayed by an event made tragic by social pressures, but the balance of what is truly tragedy and what conspires to be so is held in tension throughout the novel. A one-time poet, when we first meet her she is no longer writing. For her poetry is about what she can say and at this time in her life, that is nothing. A chance encounter with a Russian refugee poet, Falin, an expellee from Kruschew's USSR, leads her to his poetry class and to a world in which what is not said is equally, not more, important than what is spoken.

The Translator is a Cold War novel. Falin may be a spy, but if so it is unclear for which side. The late 1950s and the early 1960s made politics impolitic, impolite: neutrality, democracy, centricism, all these were best dressed in a Norman Rockefeller button-down collar shirt. Falin's expulsion from the USSR is not an acceptable topic of conversation, this is a period in which Holocaust survivors choose to shield their

children and their adopted land from history. With this silence, other landscapes of horror are shrouded in a more domesticated propaganda of repression. There are only hints: a government man asks Kit to watch Falin, knowing that she will tell him. The nuns in the convent watch and condemn... what? A friend refuses Kit a ride home, knowing that a black man with a white girl will attract attention. The fear leaks, undercutting the bright colours of the advertisements and soap operas Falin studies.

Poetry is a talisman which takes us into the heart of fear, disembowels the creature that stalks souls. The inquisitor asks "Do you know what you have done? Do you know why you are here?" stealing meaning from the everyday, making poetic even the horror without diminishing it one iota. In the holding camp, a disused school, Falin and others suck greedily on the books the guards distribute, hoarding words, ideas, memories. Only if you learn it can you truly feel a poem. Only if you speak a poem in the poet's language is there the author's meaning. Subtleties of language are, as one might expect, intrinsic to *The Translator*. Memory translates. Time interprets. The act of translation is creative and fantastical, a collaboration between author and translator that creates something quite new and estranging. This is the heart of



the novel. Kit arrives at the end of the century in Moscow, an acknowledged poet, an academic and the 'translator' of a body of poetry whose originals disappeared with their author in 1963.

The status of these poems are disputed. Are they Falin's work? Are they collaborations? Did he intend them for publication? Did they have political resonance and for whom? Are they love poems and were he and Kit ever lovers? Whether they shared the fluids of the flesh becomes trivial, laughable in the light of great fear and great betrayal. But important because our need to know, our twentieth century obsession with sex, is a fair-ground mirror inflicted and imposed upon the novel and the poetry.

Our desire to categorise books, to define what is or isn't fantastical haunts this work. In language is identity and in translation is dissonance, departure of meaning and a creative melding. Falin submits his poems to the

translator but takes with him the originals. He leaves behind him a message: he is an angel who can intervene, prevent the international crisis, but only at a cost. The translations gain from these moments, they make fantastic the mundane, and create tension in our understanding of the novel. Falin's elusiveness, embodied in the status of the poems, leaves open the possibility of the fantastic, his disappearance remains unexplained.

In the end Kit finds her centre, her historical island, but it is a ruptured, scarred place. There is no safety in either silence or words, but in words Falin, and Crowley, have offered a passage through, not to safety but to uncharted waters. The present is reconfigured in fitful shards of coloured glass, fragile and mundane in composition.

David & Leigh Eddings – *Regina's Song*

Reviewed by Penny Hill

Harper Collins, London, 2002, 424pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00-713033-3

David and Leigh Eddings have turned to a different genre and written a supernatural-tinged thriller instead of their usual light generic fantasy. Is it any good? – well, no. It is bad on so many levels that I recommend you don't read this book. The characterisation is thin – it's almost impossible to tell which character is speaking – and the writing is shallow. I found the whole plot morally dubious. Not only are we looking at revenge ethics here but a level of disproportionate response that ups the ante in vigilantism.

I was prejudiced from the start against the unlikely basic premise, that there could be two twins so identical that even their parents couldn't tell them apart. Surely freckles, moles and scars play a part here? Further plotting by numbers was revealed by the blatantly obvious link between Twinkie's mood swings and the murders. This was ignored by all the characters until it was convenient for Mark, the narrator, to 'discover' it. Overall the story was neither tense nor chilling.

Another failure was the unprofessional behaviour of virtually every character, from Belcher, the star-struck policeman who spills all to the media, Bob the 'good' policeman who shares confidential findings with his brother and relative strangers, the psychiatrists who consider taping conversations without permission and do tape some private conversations without informed consent, to the judge and barrister who banter with each other in a court hearing in exactly the same informal way the students do among themselves.

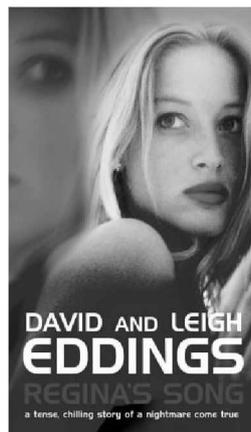
There is a jocular tone to the writing which jars with the serious plot. Our group of heroes (as well as being

impossible to tell apart) have irritating catch-phrases such as calling Belcher "Burpee" and referring to the mentally ill as "buggsie" versus "normie". And if Mark said one more time that it would be "A clear win for the other side" if Twinkie regressed to her "buggsie" state then I was going to take out a contract on the Eddings.

By setting the action in a university and having a graduate student as the hero, the Eddings try to show off their erudition and only succeed in showing that they can't write very well. Twinkie's 'amazing' papers that bowl over staff and students alike, struck me as rather pedestrian, and Mark's info-dumps on the nature of John Milton's Latin prose and how he didn't like "John-boy's" work had me calling for the literacy police. Quite frankly, the work he was covering at graduate level was below the stuff I did at undergraduate level – rather more specialisation and maturity would be expected of a graduate student.

No wonder our hero is completely without a sex life, especially if his idea of a hot topic of conversation is the difference in linoleum laying techniques between the 1950s and now. Surely no-one in their late twenties actually knows this stuff? It was, of course, a clumsy way to describe the murder weapon to the readers.

One final reason not to read this book: once again we have the infuriating sexism whereby all the women are feistily determined to keep men out of 'their' kitchens while the (adorably domestically helpless) men mend cars and put up bookshelves. A man who does not know how to make coffee is not attractive! He's pathetic. Believe me.



Raymond E. Feist – *Talon of the Silver Hawk* 

HarperCollins, London, 2002, 390pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00-224681-3

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Talon of the Silver Hawk is Book One in a new series called 'Conclave of Shadows' and is the story of Talon – known to all fans of Midkemia and the Riftwar series.

Kieli, a young man of the Orosini tribe, is making his trip up the mountain peak of Shatana Higo to fulfil his manhood ritual and discover his name and his place in the universe. After four days on the mountain, increasingly cold, tired and hungry, he is woken from a dream by the feeling of sharp claws; a rare Silver Hawk has settled on his arm. In his deteriorating physical and mental condition, Kieli is unsure whether this really happened or whether it was a dream, and so he returns to his tribe still an unnamed boy. His tribe however, are under attack by a marauding army and, seeing his people slaughtered before his eyes, he throws himself into the fray. Kieli is destined to be the only survivor of this battle. Left for dead amongst the bodies of every man, woman and child of the Orosini, he takes two things away with him from that fateful day: the faces of the leaders of those who wiped out his tribe, and a distant voice in his head which says "Rise up and be a Talon for your people..."

Kieli is discovered on the battlefield and taken to safety where his long recovery begins. As he grows he realises that his vision on the mountain was a true vision and assumes his man's name of Talon of the Silver Hawk. Growing up, Talon learns that he has been rescued by a mysterious network of very powerful people who are secretly known as 'The Conclave of



Shadows'. Their mission is to eradicate evil wherever it manifests, and as the Riftwar is in full swing there is plenty of evil to go around. Tutelage under the Conclave, and Talon's eagerness to learn, turns him into a clever, mean, killing machine with only two aims in life: to repay the conclave his debt of life, and avenge the Orosini as he is the last.

Whilst Talon is growing up, learning and honing his fighting skills, he slowly becomes aware of who was behind the slaughter of the Orosini and why. Avenging the Orosini is only the beginning of a life of struggle against evil for young Talon.

In this new trilogy Feist returns to Midkemia's biggest period of strife and selects one of the most interesting characters from the Riftwar series for a 'life-story'. As with all of Feist's books it is a page-turner, and reveals a lot more than just Talon's story - the wheels within wheels, the plotting and scheming not always revealed in the original saga. However, although this book works very well, as the story does so far (bearing in mind there are at least two more in this series to come), Feist may be treading a thin line bolstering a story now that worked very well at the time it was written (*Magician* was 20 years ago! [see *Particles* this issue, Ed.]) There is a very real danger that little in this series will eventually come as a surprise to the reader and a much respected author may be on the slippery 'Eddings' slope. I hope not, but we'll have to wait and see. For now, read and enjoy.

Lisa Goldstein – *The Alchemist's Door*

Tor, New York, 2002, 286pp, £23.95 ISBN 0-765-30150-4

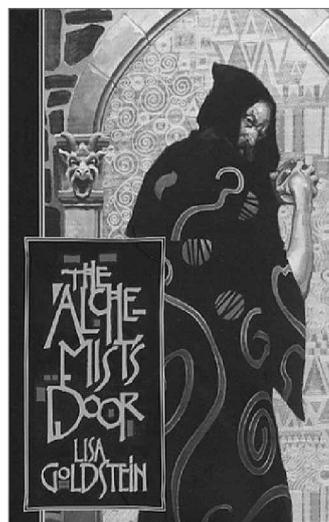
Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

In the mid-16th century, the English scholar, mathematician and astrologer, Dr John Dee, having fallen out of royal favour, was forced to flee with his household (including his assistant Edward Kelley) to Europe, where they made their way to Prague, hoping to seek patronage from Rudolph, Holy Roman Emperor and alchemist manqué.

Goldstein builds on the coincidence that Jewish legend has it that this was also the time that Rabbi Loew of Prague constructed and animated a man of clay, a golem, by placing a parchment bearing the name of God under its tongue, charging it to protect the citizens of the Jewish ghetto from the threatened program. As Goldstein admits (as does John Crowley in regard to another fictional meeting, this time

between Dee and Giordano Bruno in Aegypt) there is no evidence these two scholars ever met in real life, but the coincidence, for a writer fascinated with two such enigmatic characters, is too good to pass up. Goldstein also adds another reason for Dee's flight to Prague. In one of his scrying sessions with Edward Kelley, Kelley has inadvertently called up a demon, which initially takes possession of Dee's daughter Katherine. But if it gets loose to inhabit someone with greater power, it can threaten the stability of the world by forcing open a door (Prague's old name, Praha, also means portal or threshold) between worlds.

Add in vampire countess Elizabeth Bathory and a shapechanger called Magdalena and Goldstein is in danger of over-egging the pudding. Goldstein's



undoubted skill as a storyteller and a drawer of sympathetic characters (not least the golem, which has overtones of Baron Frankenstein's hapless creature, yearning for a humanity it can never realise) manages to keep everything on track, but there are moments in which the necessary suspension of disbelief becomes overly strained.

One of these is language. Goldstein makes no attempt to emulate sixteenth century speech. Her characters sound contemporary, as if they had stepped, improbably clad in doublet and hose, from 20th or 21st century London or New York. Possibly she thinks it wiser not to attempt a reproduction of archaic speech – especially as Dee, of necessity, is constantly switching between a number of European languages including German, Polish and Czech – than to risk stumbling and spoil the effect. Then there is the Jewish question, in an age notorious for religious hate, ghettos and pogroms and the blood libel. Goldstein sidesteps this by supposing that Dee's thirst for knowledge of all branches of the mystical arts is sufficient to overcome, with just a few mild reservations, the deep social division between Jew and Gentile and for him to strike

up a close friendship with Loew, even to assist him in the construction and magical animation of the golem. (Which the real Dee, a devout Christian for all his attempts to talk with angels, could only have seen as necromancy.)

Kelley is again, as so often, cast as the villain (But was he? This is one of the most fascinating aspects of this whole period of Dee's life, whether Kelley was merely a con man and a charlatan, and possibly a counterfeiter and forger, or something more enigmatic, or even self-deluded), sent spiralling down a path of opportunism, avarice, paranoia and madness. Goldstein even hints that Kelley's forgery extended to sections of Dee's diary, forcing Dee to write in code (This does seem to be supported by Dee's own diaries) Fascinating, but – if Goldstein had had more confidence to truly tackle the language and mindset of sixteenth century Europe, as Crowley and Ackroyd before her – what might this have been?

Ben Jeapes – *The Xenocide Mission*

David Fickling Books, 2002, 389 pp, £10.99 (hc) ISBN 0-385-604122

Reviewed by Farah Mendlesohn

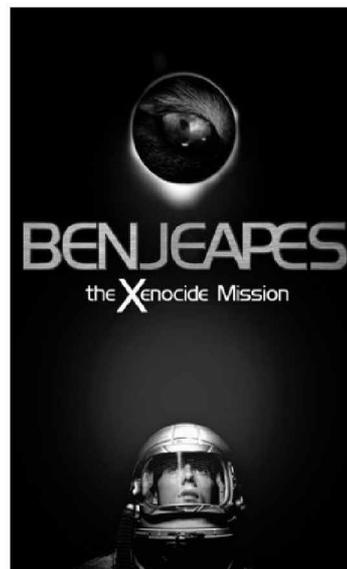
In Ben Jeapes's first novel, *His Majesty's Starship*, the post-modern nations of Earth competed to become the overlords of an alien race desperate for someone to give it orders. I held my breath, unable to believe that anyone could posit such imperialist clap-trap in this day and age, and was deeply relieved when Jeapes undercut the game of Diplomacy with a lesson on the idiocy of biological determinancy, the extent to which expectation conditions response, and the degrees to which we all believe what we are told about our abilities in the face of all evidence to the contrary. At the end of the first novel Jeapes took his First Breed into a new Commonwealth with the people of Earth, as equal partners if a little hesitant about exerting their equality.

In this new novel Jeapes plays similar games. The new XTs are predators, just piscine enough that we won't make the mistake of seeing them as cuddly, and they have invaded the new bi-species space station set to spy on them, wiping out almost everyone on board. They are also known to have wiped out the neighbouring planet. They are, therefore, cowardly and dishonourable killers and Earth should wipe them out before they can find us.

His Majesty's Starship and *The Xenocide Mission* are both sold as Young Adult novels (although they are as adult as anything Feintuch, Weber or Asimov ever wrote) so the relative subtlety of the moral unpacking is perhaps justified. It makes sense that the most vociferous advocate of genocide should come from the

Confederation that nuked a city out of spite. As Captain Gilmore pointed out in the first novel, one projects onto others what one believes one would do oneself. It makes sense also that the initial 'invasion' should turn out to have been a planned occupation of an empty rock, and that much of what guides the reactions of the UK Navy is in part about politics between and among the humans and the First Breed. And this is where this novel is extremely successful. *His Majesty's Starship* was a first contact novel, and Jeapes carefully avoided providing too much information; much of the time we were never told what was in the information pack Captain Gilmore and his crew received. In *The Xenocide Mission* Jeapes uses another old sf plot to expand on our XT understanding: lock some characters up together in a prison/life boat/on an alien planet, and let them get to know each other. This time it's Captain Gilmore's son, Joel, who draws the short straw, finding himself in close confinement

first with the First Breed Boon Round, and then with the XT Oomoiing. All three are brilliantly realised: Joel's tendency to be patronising, the late shift to Boon Round's point of view; Jeapes's refusal to allow sign language to progress beyond more than the most rudimentary, enable him to keep his characters on their toes. Perhaps the book might have been tenser had we, the reader, not been allowed to understand Oomoiing, but that would have been at the expense of generating empathy for her and her people – and as Orson Scott



Card pointed out in *Xenocide*, we aren't very good at empathising where we can't communicate.

The book is, unfortunately, timely. It neatly and unpatronisingly points to the double standards we apply in politics: we are exploring, you are invading; we are ignorant, you are stupid; we recognise authority, you are slavish and therefore suitable to be enslaved; and it

goes beyond this.

By the end of the book there are new questions to be asked about the First Breed, and other new questions about the universe. As Jeapes couldn't resist a tasteful romance for Joel Gilmore, I am sure we will be getting a third generation of this promising sequence.

Gwyneth Jones – *Castles Made of Sand* 

Gollancz, London, 2002, 356pp, £10.99 ISBN 0-575-07033-1

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Castles Made of Sand continues the story which Gwyneth Jones began in *Bold As Love*. In a near future world, the technology and social structures of present day Britain have collapsed; the separate countries of the United Kingdom have recovered their independence, and England is governed by a combination of Parliament and a group of rock musicians, known as the Rock and Roll Reich. *Bold As Love* charted the rise to power of three of these musicians, Ax Preston, Sage Pender and Fiorinda, whose efforts have staved off complete disaster; in *Castles Made of Sand* the crisis grows more acute.

Two things come together in this novel. There's the depiction of the new society, beautifully imagined and credible in its detail, near-future sf at its best. Unlike much post-catastrophe work, the atmosphere isn't all gloom and doom; along with the deprivation and the problems there's beauty and humour as well, a sense of community and of people doing their best to help each other and come through. Interestingly, a new kind of science is developing based on the power of the mind, to replace the vanished technology that depended on large-scale installations and machinery; with it comes the growth or the reappearance of magic.

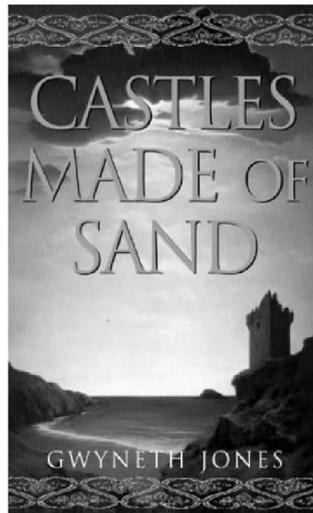
Within this wider picture is the focus on individual character, in particular the central trio of Ax, Sage and Fiorinda. This is their love story, told with a depth and tenderness that moved me to tears. Threats to the relationship arise from within the characters themselves, and from the outside, including an horrific attack from

Fiorinda's abusive father. The personal story interweaves with the political.

Part of what interested me in this book is Jones's handling of Arthurian themes. Ax is explicitly identified with Arthur, leaving Sage and Fiorinda to take the roles of Lancelot and Guenevere, but it would be a mistake for readers to assume that their relationship and story will develop along the same lines. Sage and Fiorinda in particular differ from traditional representations of Lancelot and Guenevere, and all these characters address their dilemma more creatively. Other themes appear – in particular a stunning take on the journey to Caer Siddi – adding depth and resonance to the novel's action.

The style is lucid and precise, showing a fine visual imagination in the way Jones describes the settings. The dialogue in particular is a joy; it lifts off the page in the living voice of the characters.

It should be obvious by now that I liked the book very much. Gwyneth Jones is already a highly respected SF writer, and this series of novels should enhance her reputation. *Bold As Love* was a worthy winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award. If you haven't read it, I'd suggest doing so before *Castles Made of Sand*; although the second novel sketches in the background, it is complex, so it's much easier for new readers to immerse themselves in the world by starting at the beginning. I can't recommend both books highly enough, and *Castles Made of Sand* will certainly be one of my books of the year; SF doesn't get much better than this.



Lene Kaaberbol – *The Shamer's Daughter* 

Silver, Hodder Children's Books, London, 2002, 216pp, £4.99 ISBN 0-340-85067-1 (First published in Danish as *Skammerens Datter*, 2000)

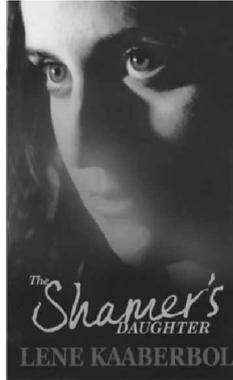
Reviewed By Steve Jeffery

Dina's mother is a Shamer, someone who can look into a person's eyes and unmask their darkest secrets, guilts and fears. As such she is regarded with a mixture of awe and fear and suspicion by the inhabitants of her village, who need her skills to uncover the truth in crimes, but also fear her as part witch. Dina has inherited her mother's talent, and is thus subject to the same fear and distrust, so that her childhood is apart and alone.

One night a stranger calls, asking for Dina's mother,

Melussina Tonerre, to take her to the coastal town of Dunark, a long ride away, to determine the guilt in a case of murder. The Castellan of Dunark, Ebenezer, his daughter-in-law and his grandson have all been murdered. Ebenezer's youngest son, Nicodemus (the elder having died some years ago) has been discovered in the apartments drunk, insensible, covered in blood and with a knife in his hand. It all seems clear cut. Except that Melussina has looked into his eyes and said

that he is not guilty. The man who fetched her, Draken, will not accept this, and has her locked in the dungeons until she will proclaim Nicodemus' guilt. To help her decision he returns to bring Dina to Dunark, and forces her to spend the night in the same cell as Nicodemus. Since (this is not really giving anything away at this point) we are already convinced that Nicodemus is not guilty, nothing happens. To Dina, anyway. Draken, however, tries to poison Nicodemus by giving him wine spiked with dragon blood. There is a fight, and Draken is stabbed with Dina's knife, allowing Nico and Dina to escape. This is glitch number one. Surely no one would allow someone in a cell with a suspected murderer and not make sure they weren't



carrying anything that could be used as a weapon. The escapees make their way to Nico's old tutor where Dina disguises herself as a boy, and this is where they learn that her mother has been condemned to be executed as a witch.

Apart from what might seem that one incident of idiot plotting that allows Dina and Nico to escape from incarceration in the dungeon, *The Shamer's Daughter* is a compelling read. It wrong-footed me at the end since, even though it's obvious from the start that Draken is trying to frame Nico for his own ends, the reason he is seemingly alone impervious to the Shamer's gaze is not the one that first occurred to me

(which has to do with his affinity for dragons).

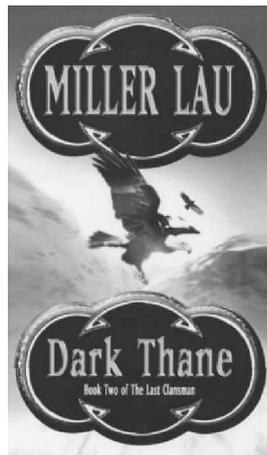
Miller Lau – *Dark Thane* (Book 2 of the Last Clansman)

Earthlight, London, 2002, 548pp, £7.99 ISBN 0-7434-0401-7

Reviewed by N.M Browne

Dark Thane is the second book of the clansman series and like its predecessor *Talisker* is an enjoyable, fast-paced read. The action is split between the world of Sutra and contemporary Edinburgh, the original home of Talisker and his compatriot Sandro. In this volume Talisker's adopted son Tristan, becomes Thane of Soulis Mor in Sutra. Talisker's daughter, Regan, pretends to be Tristan's twin and rules with him, but, as she has been touched by the dead god Corvus, she has ambitions of her own. She persecutes the Sidhe, old allies of Soulis Mor, and falls under the evil influence of Jahl who uses powerful magic to threaten the whole of Sutris and contemporary Edinburgh, when Tristan is transported there to save him from Jahl's attack. Talisker and Sandro must return him to Sutra. Jahl uses an artefact stolen from Tristan by Knox, an Edinburgh vagrant/cult leader to increase his power.

Miller Lau is excellent at keeping the pages turning and like *Talisker* this book is full of action; ghosts, demons, artefacts, ageless seers intervene at key moments, and amoral gods and blood sacrifice all make



an appearance. This is great fun but I didn't get much sense of an underlying and consistent logic to either the magic or the 'cosmology' of the book. I didn't, to take

one example, grasp why Talisker and Sandro were rejuvenated by their journey back to Edinburgh while Regan and Tristan were not (though I might not have been paying enough attention as I was swept along by the pace of the story). I also missed Talisker himself in those parts of the story which focus on his daughter, whom I found less interesting. Talisker does not see Regan for ten years which is useful for the plot but less helpful for underpinning the tragedy of their deteriorating relationship. I think I would have cared more for Regan if her link to Talisker had been stronger. I also found Tristan less intriguing than the Edinburgh-born characters and found the Edinburgh

sections of the book stronger than those in Sutra. These are not serious criticisms and I would gladly read the next volume in the series, but, as with *Talisker*, I was left with the nagging sense that this book could have been even better.

Megan Lindholm – *Cloven Hooves*

Voyager (Classics), London, 2002, 360pp, £8.99 ISBN 0-00-712773-1

Reviewed by Jan A. Malique

To be honest I'm not sure what to make of *Cloven Hooves*. The heroine, Evelyn, appears to be a lost soul surviving unwillingly within the context of 'civilised' urban life but yearning for the wilderness of her youth. Her marriage to Tom starts straining at the seams once they temporarily move in with his family. They can only be described as being rather dysfunctional individuals (anally retentive would be the technical term I believe) and to top it off her son Teddy is caught in the cross-fire between the warring parties. I can only sympathise with

Evelyn's predicament; she is not allowed to truly be herself and how many of us can say that we can be who we want to be in this world? Until, that is, when Pan suddenly appears to her in a shopping mall, of all places. (Though not the Great God Pan himself, but one of his kind.) This Pan is an echo of unfettered wilderness, a gift of redemption from nature as it were. Pan has been companion to Evelyn from childhood but during that fraught transition into adulthood he is consigned to the dim recesses of her subconscious.

Time moves on and the tatters of her marriage are blown apart by the accidental death of Teddy. Death makes way for the growth of new life (and that's all I'm saying on this). Evelyn has come out of the wilderness, and to the wilderness she returns with her nature god, but ultimately even he is lost to her.

To be honest I did not enjoy the book as much as I thought I would. In spite of sympathetic lead characters, a stirring narrative and some quite wonderful imagery of wilderness, it didn't quite 'hit the spot' and I'm not sure

why. Great Pan is absent from these pages but he is not dead, as proclaimed all those centuries ago, only biding his time. In my opinion he is an archetype difficult to articulate and breathe life into because he is so complex. Pan represents the awesome face of the natural world and of our innermost desires and hopes, and we aren't always ready to face what he stands for. Perhaps that is what I was looking for in Lindholm's book but could not find. Someone else may think differently of course.

George R.R. Martin (ed.) – *Wild Cards: Deuces Down* 

iBooks, London, 2002, 324pp, £12.99 ISBN 0-7434-4505-8

Reviewed by Colin Bird

According to my trusty *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* the Wild Cards series commenced in 1986 with a volume of stories edited by George R.R. Martin. Martin prefers to call these shared world anthologies "mosaic novels" because of the way the stories are planned and linked.

In 1946 an alien weapon is detonated over New York City killing countless thousands and releasing the Wild Card virus. The survivors find themselves mutated in random and extraordinary ways. A select few are mutated in beneficial ways and become superhero 'aces' which have featured in many of the previous volumes in the series. The rest are divided into 'jokers', freaks suffering from monstrous mutations, or 'deuces', blessed with seemingly useless abilities. *Deuces Down* is the sixteenth volume in the series and, as you would expect, focuses on the deuces; ordinary joes with decidedly unglamorous powers.



narrative. Too many of these stories feature similarly two-dimensional, hardboiled characters, perhaps an unfortunate side-effect of the series cross-fertilisation with the comic book world.

The best story is Melinda Snodgrass's 'A Face For The Cutting Room Floor', a knowing slice of Hollywood fun which addresses the likely, if distressing, advent of mutant porn. Real Tinseltown figures are found working side by side with deuces who put their deformities to use as particularly convincing film extras. The concept works well and this story is the most at ease with the wild card concept. Snodgrass has acted as assistant editor for much of the series and her familiarity with the material shows.

A big thumbs down for John Miller's 'Four Days In October' because I don't appreciate dull baseball game commentaries and the not very surprising ending, which

gives me the feeling the author got the idea for this story from a question in *Trivial Pursuit* (about Fidel Castro's tryout for the major leagues).

The other stories vary from the intriguing, Tarentinoesque 'Father Henry's Little Miracle' to the rather dire 'Promises', which turns the agonising wild card virus to a disease-of-the-week weepy. The stories are generally too calculated for my liking but fans of the series are sure to enjoy this glimpse of the other end of the Wild Card food chain.

C. L. Moore – *Black Gods And Scarlet Dreams*

Gollancz, London, 2002, 438pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-575-07417-5

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Reading the literature of an alien culture is always disconcerting. This selection of C.L. Moore's short stories, reissued by Gollancz in the Fantasy Masterworks series, is no exception. The assumptions of the 1930s are not our assumptions, and these stories make that very clear.

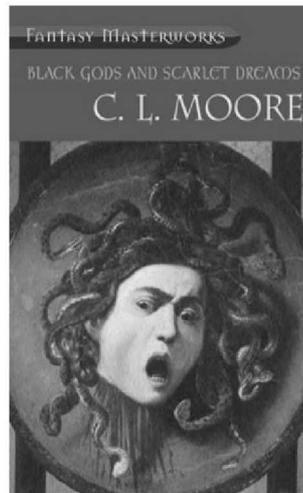
The collection contains five stories featuring the swordswoman Jirel of Joiry ('Jirel Meets Magic', 'Black God's Kiss', 'Black God's Shadow', 'The Dark Land',

and 'Hellsgarde'), and ten featuring the spaceman Northwest Smith: 'Shambleau', 'Black Thirst', 'The Tree of Life', 'Scarlet Dream', 'Dust of Gods', 'Lost Paradise', 'Julhi', 'The Cold Gray God', 'Yvala' and 'Song in a Minor Key'.

The Northwest Smith stories, although framed as science fiction, are correctly presented by Gollancz as fantasy – two of them are overt (and acknowledged) retellings of the legends of Medusa and Circe, and the

standard plot involves Northwest Smith confronting and defeating an evil Elder God. All the stories are action-adventure tales; there is no character development and no detailed background world-building. Indeed, cursory references to “the Patrol”, the hot wet climate of Venus, and the canals, drylands, and ancient civilisations of Mars, give the stories a very “shared-world” feeling – but the world being shared is the collective imagination of the American science-fiction-reading community of the 1930s. The vivid one-dimensionality of the stories gives them a cartoon or comic-book feel. They are heroic, unsubtle, highly coloured, immediate and strong, and they give satisfaction by following the expected formula (Good defeats Evil) with the single, powerful twist that Northwest Smith is not an agent of the Patrol, but an outlaw, a loner, a steely-eyed laconic survival expert – replace his ray-gun with a revolver and redesign his leathers a little, and he’d be completely at home in Western pulps. As I said above, some of the background assumptions are very disconcerting to a modern reader – for example, that humankind comes in “races”, evolved (or devolved) from separate “root races”, and that each “race” has both an immediately identifiable character, and a

unique destiny. Northwest Smith also repeatedly (I am tempted to say, continually) meets human(oid) women so beautiful that he is (almost) driven mad simply by perceiving them – which strikes me as weird, but probably not in the way that the author intended.



Jirel of Joiry is also a bit of a paradox. On the one hand, she’s one of the first swordswomen in the genre (so I ought to be applauding her pioneering role in expanding women’s roles in fiction). On the other hand, she is embarrassingly non-PC. When the castle she commands is taken by Guillaume the conqueror and he forcibly kisses her (the dastard!), does she promptly lop off his head? Does she heck! She sneaks down into the Underworld, kisses an evil idol, and transfers the horrible death in the kiss to Guillaume next time she meets him. And then repents in agonies of remorse, and spends most of the next story trying to liberate his soul from eternal torment, because actually what she felt for him

wasn’t hate... it was... lurve, I assume – though this isn’t stated explicitly. Sigh. Thank goodness things have changed since then! Jirel ends up annoying me immensely. Are there still people around who are attracted to this sort of thing?

Kim Newman (ed.) – *Science Fiction / Horror: A Sight and Sound Reader*

BFI Publishing, London, 2002, 325pp, £13.99 ISBN 0-85170-897-8

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

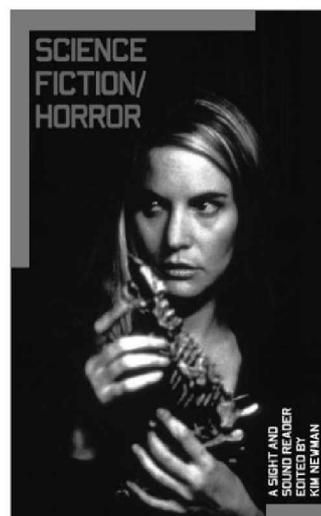
This is a collection of articles and reviews taken from the last ten years of *Sight and Sound* magazine. There is a mixture of critical analysis and historical studies, although it largely avoids material that has proliferated in other film magazines, like director and actor interviews. Whilst concentrating on the cinema of the nineties it also includes material that covers the whole history of cinema all the way back to *Nosferatu* with a particularly good article that covers the origin of that film and links it to *Shadow of the Vampire* (a film that purports to tell the making of *Nosferatu* where the lead actor is actually a vampire), followed by a review of the later film.

The book begins with an article ‘When Dr No Met Dr Strangelove’ exploring the spectrum of hi-tech spy and ‘bomb’ movies and their relationship to the real world, and ends with a ‘Case Study’ devoted to the other chilly sf and horror films of Kubrick himself. There are two other ‘Case Studies’. ‘Teenage Postmodern Horror’ explores trends in the horror genre since the release of *Scream* and includes reviews of the film and its sequels, along with many of the films that were influenced by it before the

cycle began burning out with such ‘comedies’ as *Scary Movie*. There is also a rather good article, ‘Blood Sisters’, on the werewolf film *Ginger Snaps*. There is a further ‘Case Study’ entitled ‘Gamesworlds and Rubber Reality’ that explores such artificial and twisted realities as *Groundhog Day*, *The Truman Show* and *eXistenZ* and films inspired by video games such as *Mortal Kombat* and the *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*.

Although it covers core films of the genre(s) in its other more general sections, the book has enough reach to include slipstream works like *Fight Club*. We get coverage of the usual suspects such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and its remakes, *Rosemary’s Baby* but *Star Wars* is conspicuous in its absence as is most of the trash end of the spectrum, though there is a delightful love letter to the *Godzilla* series by Newman himself. We also have such eclectic subjects as an interview with Eduardo Paolozzi by Christopher Frayling and an essay by Iain Sinclair on his own bizarre film-making actives.

Given its pick ‘n’ mix structure there is no grand scheme put forward and given the richness and depth of some of the essays it is perhaps better to dip into rather than read cover to



cover. Be aware that the reviews are all the *Sight and Sound* 'standard' in that they give a detailed 'spoiled' summary of the plot before examining the film in more

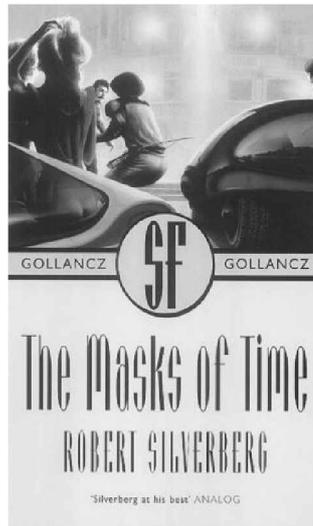
depth. However this has something for anyone with any interest in the two genres. Highly recommended.

Robert Silverberg – *The Masks of Time*

Gollancz, London, 2002, 252pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-07218-0

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

At first glance the title sounds like a *Doctor Who* episode and possibly the plot begins like one. On Christmas Day 1998, Vornan-19 materialises on the Spanish Steps of Rome in front of ninety-nine witnesses. How could this naked man have arrived from the sky without the witnesses seeing any sort of vehicle? Soon the world is in awe of the enigmatic and charismatic Vornan-19, who claims to come from 2999 wishing to learn about the 'mediaeval' ways of contemporary society. Leo Garfield, a professor at the University of California studying the time-reversal of sub-atomic particles, is assigned to a team of academics put together to investigate Vornan-19's origins. His job is to learn how Vornan-19 claims to have travelled through time. The President of the United States is eager to validate Vornan-19's story in the hope of not giving in to the subversive Apocalyptists who believe that the world will end with the Millennium. Vornan-19 is elusive about his origins, only giving vague and unhelpful comments about his time of origin. He speaks of the Centrality and the Time of Sweeping, but no details are forthcoming as he claims not to know much history. He says that his people can travel through time, but he offers no explanation of how, much to Leo Garfield's annoyance. Vornan-19 is also infuriating in that he is mischievous, wreaking havoc wherever he is taken, from parties in his honour



to legalised brothels, from restaurants to Wall Street as well as subtly playing off members of the investigation team.

The plot and characters are well developed though the ending isn't too much of a surprise. Admittedly I was occasionally sidetracked with how different the world is now to how the author envisaged, but that is a minor point really as Silverberg himself appears to be more obsessed with sex and nudity than physics and the future. Many of the characters are openly promiscuous (Vornan-19 in particular is ever eager to experiment), but there is nothing overly graphic or gratuitous (which I'm sure will disappoint many). I imagine this is probably a reflection of the free love era when the book was first published in 1968.

I have never read any Robert Silverberg before this and I was reasonably impressed as I have found books from the Gollancz Collectors Editions and SF Masterworks series unrewarding on occasion. What I particularly enjoyed about *The Masks of Time* is that it avoided the hackneyed dilemmas and paradoxes explored in most time travel stories concentrating instead on the validity of Vornan-19's claims. In short, this may have been the first Robert Silverberg I have read but I doubt it will be the last.

Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber (Eds.) – *Fantasy: The Best of 2001* iBooks, 2002, 424pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-7434-5247-X

Reviewed by Chris Amies

Fantasy seems, as yet, to be an inexhaustible genre. The term is often used to describe only certain subgenres: sword and sorcery, high fantasy, and the depressingly interminable cod-mediaeval series which should really have stopped after Volume 1. But Fantasy is also the literature of the fantastical, of what happens if the products of the imagination are assumed to be reality for the space of a story. What if mammoths had really roamed North America in the time of Lewis and Clark? (As Lawrence Miles postulates here, in 'Grass'.) It can even include science fictional tropes such as space stations (Robert Thurston's 'Slipshod, at the Edge of the Universe' does just that here also).

Having established that its variety is pretty well infinite in all directions, what constitutes the *best* stories of any particular year, and in this case that most sfnal of years, 2001? The settings are varied (see above): the United States some time in the 20th century, and the

early 19th; the wreck-choked seas off Papua New Guinea; England at the time of the Reformation, and a couple of pseudo-mediaeval otherworlds, but strongly imagined. The grounding however is secondary to the story and in most of the cases tertiary to the way those events are told; because a lot of these stories foreground language to a refreshing degree. Lucius Shepard's long and brawling 'Eternity and Afterward' does curious things to language ("it might have been the sacred light of Mother Russia soon to become an axle joint") appropriate to his story of a Russian gangster who may be being given a guided tour of Hell. Lawrence Miles allows the reader complicity in 'Grass' – "not the only 'other story' which will be intercepting us today".

The writers represented vary from the very well established – Ursula Le Guin, Poul Anderson, Rosemary Edgehill – to the less so, but clearly very talented – Greg van Eekhout, Brian A. Hopkins; and the volume closes

with 'Hell is the Absence of God' by Ted Chiang, who possibly has the highest proportion of major awards to published stories of any genre author, ever. Chiang has the closing story, which is usually supposed to be the strongest in the volume: in this, Hell and Heaven are objectively proven to exist, angels come to earth, and what happens to people who are not religious when it is no longer a matter of belief? The opener, Ursula Le Guin's 'The Bones of the Earth', seems to be a very

traditional Fantasy story – set in her Earthsea world, wizards are at the core of it – but is also about what people take from those who have taught them, and how those who teach are changed also.

There are a mere eleven stories here, out of the hundreds that were undoubtedly published in the year. Other choices could undoubtedly have been made, but these are fine examples of the genre.

John Sladek (edited Dave Langford) – *Maps: The Uncollected John Sladek*

Big Engine, Abingdon, 2002, 359pp, £9.99 ISBN 1-903468-08-6

Reviewed by Mark Greener

Maps is a veritable smorgasbord of Sladek. It's all there. The items everyone will like. The items for more refined tastes. The items that you feel you should like, but don't quite agree with your palate. Even one or two items that you wished had stayed in the kitchen.

Maps certainly exemplifies Sladek's remarkable literary range. Even mass-market stories, such as 'Peabody Slept Here' and 'Machine Screw', transcend the form's limitations with wit and verve. And 'Machine Screw' includes the memorable line: "What kind of decent American would go and – and rape a Cadillac convertible?" If that doesn't bring a smile, or at least intrigue you, then, perhaps, this book isn't for you.

Sladek's penchant for puzzles and games also shines through in, for example, 'The Lost Nose' and 'Alien Territory'. But I must warn you about 'The Lost Nose'. It's a literary 'choose your own adventure' story that can be addictive. I certainly wasted too long playing it. *Maps* also showcases Sladek's hallmark savage, unrelenting satire and wit – exemplified by, for example, 'The Future of John Sladek' and 'Goodbye, Germany?'. And there are some unexpected gems. I thoroughly enjoyed the Thackeray Phin detective yarns as well as the stories he wrote for, of all places, *Titbits*, for instance.

And *Maps* helped me solve a personal mystery. Years ago as an impressionable teenager, I read a story about two adolescents arguing about the existence of

God. The story stuck in my mind ever since. I rediscovered the story in *Maps* ('Bill Gets Hep to God!'). It's testament to Sladek that this very short story could make such a marked impression.

But I found some other items on the Sladek smorgasbord somewhat less tasty. The poetry, mostly published in the 1960s, left me cold, for example. (And I'm one of the increasingly rare people that still buys poetry.) I suspect the poems might appeal to some aficionados of the 'beat' poets. However, they might have been better as a chapbook.

Similarly, two of the collaborations with Disch, 'United we Stand Still' and 'Sweetly Sings the Chocolate Budgie', also left me shivering. Both were previously unpublished. And for me, they should have stayed in the bottom drawer. I found them corny, even a tad infantile; the sort of story that's funny when you write it, but maybe not later.

Maps is a somewhat eccentric collection – which might reflect the writer. I couldn't recommend it as an introduction to Sladek: the *Roderick* books or *The Steam-Driven Boy* would be a better first step. On the other hand, it's not just for completists either. There are some real gems in *Maps* that makes it worth a tenner of anyone's money. Indeed, the real mystery is why so many of these stories remained uncollected for so long.

Jack Vance – *Alastor*

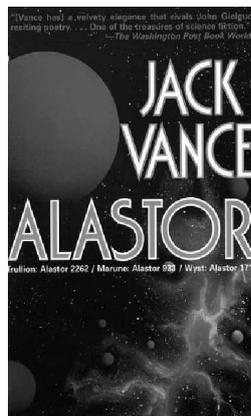
Orb, New York, 2002, 479pp, \$14.95 ISBN 0312869525

Reviewed by Chris Hill

This is an omnibus edition of three novels set in the Alastor Cluster, a system of thirty thousand stars and three thousand inhabited planets.

In *Trullion: Alastor 2262* Glinnes Hulden returns home after years of military service to find his father presumed dead and part of the family estate sold to a new cult. He takes up the game hussade in an attempt to get the money to buy back his land.

In *Marune: Alastor 933* a man turns up at the main spaceport of Bruse-Tansel with no memory of his past. Eventually he discovers that he is the hereditary lord of an



estate on Marune. He returns home determined to find out who was responsible for his misfortunes.

In *Wyst: Alastor 1716* Jantiff, an artist, arrives on the world of Wyst seeking inspiration. He makes friends with others living in his hotel and becomes a unwitting tool in their scheme to overthrow the Connatic, ruler of Alastor Cluster.

There are few other writers who have the same combination of inventiveness and sardonic humour of Jack Vance (Cordwainer Smith is the only other that springs quickly to mind). In these three

books (originally published between 1973 & 1978) Vance creates bizarre alternative social systems and entertainments, from the sport of hussade to the eating habits of the pseudo-communists of Arrabus on Wyst. Unfortunately often this inventiveness does not stretch to characterisation, with his heroes sounding rather similar – proud, ambitious and more than a little dour.

Of the three books here, *Wyst* is the weakest, much of that due to the fact that it comes close to outstaying its welcome. Vance's particular style works best at short length; after a while the ornate language can start to irritate. Plot-wise, *Wyst* also sags in the third quarter as very little happens aside from delays to the resolution.

The other two volumes are rather stronger. *Marune's*

story of the amnesiac lord fighting to regain his kingdom is a classic plot and Vance uses it well. Indeed, it could be argued that *Tirullion* is another variation on the same theme. The sport of hussade, core concept to the first book, sounds quite fun if it were not for the scoring system. This involves threatening to reveal the, um, full glory of the (supposedly) virginal mascots of the team. One cannot help but feel that this smacks of misogyny, even given when it was originally written.

Still, reservations aside, these are entertaining novels and it is good to see them back in print.

Kim Wilkins – *Fallen Angel*

Gollancz, London, 2002, 552pp £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 333 5

Reviewed by Mark Greener

Sophie Black, a freelance journalist, decides that a feature about London's occult scene would sell to the glossy magazines. So she joins the Lodge of the Seven Stars, but soon becomes bored by the members acting like "self-important extras in a B-grade fifties biblical epic". Then Deirdre, a psychic sensitive, reports that she's met a Wanderer – a virtual immortal who can't find peace until she finds someone who'll listen to her terrible story.

Dismissing the warnings, Sophie follows the lead and, despite the Lodge's increasingly desperate attempts to protect her, meets an old woman with few possessions other than a first edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. She tells Sophie a tragic story about the blind poet and his three daughters. Their mother left a unique legacy; an incantation to invoke Lazodeus – a guardian angel. Following a family tragedy, Anne, the only one who knows the invocation, keeps the secret from her siblings. However, the simmering animosity between the girls and their new stepmother prompts Anne to reveal her secret. The other sisters persuade Anne to invoke their Guardian once again. The invocation changes the girl's lives, influences the shape of the blind poet's masterpiece and reverberates through the centuries to profoundly affect Sophie.

When Wilkins's previous book *The Resurrectionists* arrived for review, I held little hope that neo-gothic novel would be much good. And was I surprised. *The Resurrectionists* was brilliant. So I approached *Fallen Angel* with high expectations. And I wasn't disappointed. *Fallen Angel* is every bit as impressive as *The Resurrectionists*.

Again Wilkins draws the characters in considerably more psychological depth and with a degree of ambiguity unusual in horror stories. Sophie's arrogance – "Nothing ever beats me and that may sound immodest, but I assure you it's true" – makes her less likeable than many leading characters. But, despite first appearances, she is only the narrator, rather than the heroine. Essentially, *Fallen Angel* concerns the tragic corruption of the sisters' innocence. Even the sluttish Mary remains – unlike Sophie – innocent at heart.

The book cracks along. The 500-odd pages fly by.

Wilkins sets most of the book in the 17th century. But the temporal shifts never jar, rather they ratchet up the tension. And there are sections of masterful prose. Lazodeus's description of the war in heaven and the fall of Lucifer from grace are powerfully evocative. Wilkins's touch doesn't fail her in the sex scenes. All too often, and especially in horror, eroticism proves the novelist's Achilles heel. But Wilkins deftly avoids the almost infantile, gratuitous (and failed) attempts to shock characteristic of sex scenes in some modern horror novels.

As in *The Resurrectionists*, Wilkins reinterprets elements from traditional fiction, in this case the fairy tale. Milton's daughters battle against a stepmother, although she is naïve rather than evil. Anne is the Cinderella, held back not by her sister's malevolence, but by a terrible stutter and physical disability. A fallen angel replaces the fairy godmother – and it's not clear for some time whether his intentions are benevolent, malevolent or neither. However, *Fallen Angel* is less dependent on these devices than *The Resurrectionists* was on the gothic tradition. They bolster, rather than dominate, the narrative.

You can pick holes. Sophie joins the Lodge far too easily. Occult societies tend to be somewhat more selective. Neither the speech patterns nor the thought processes of Milton's daughters quite ring true, compared to, for example, those in the letters of Mary Wollstonecraft and the other women Romantics. Yet these were more intellectually emancipated than their 17th century counterparts. Milton's daughters seem more akin to the characters in teenage witch movies, such as *The Craft*.

But I suspect only pedants would even notice. And it certainly doesn't detract from the book. Indeed, I'd really like Wilkins to tackle a period horror story, without the conceit of flitting backwards and forwards in time. I suspect it could be a masterpiece. In the meantime, *Fallen Angel* is another triumph from this impressive horror writer.

Walter Jon Williams – *The Praxis*

Earthlight, London, 2002, 418pp, £17.99 ISBN 0143461118

Review by Chris Hill

The Shaa are the rulers of a galactic empire. They have bombed other races, including humanity, into submission and use a set of rules, The Praxis, to control them. But while the Shaa are immortal, they have been losing the ability to retain their memories and have been committing suicide. The last Shaa is about to kill himself and key players in the empire are planning how they can continue after the last Shaa is gone. Into this background comes Martinez, an ambitious young officer who will become a key player in the new situation, and Lady Sula, a pinnacle pilot who, it quickly becomes clear, has a rather murky past.

There seems to be two Walter Jon Williams: there is the serious author of novels such as *Aristoi* and *Metropolitan* and the author of lighter works, for example the *Crown Jewels* sequence. *The Praxis*, the first part of a series entitled 'The Dread Empire's Fall', is definitely from the latter.

As someone who has very much enjoyed other Williams novels, *The Praxis* is rather a disappointment. The smart-mouthed, ambitious young hero is not a terribly likeable character and his rapid advancement seems unlikely. Sula is a far more interesting, with an unpleasant background and more real choices to make

about how she behaves.

The Praxis ensures that technology is limited: no genetic manipulation, no nanotechnology. The empire is run by noble houses and their connections; patronage is as important as talent. As a result this feels like a nineteen-fifties galactic empire, not an early twenty-first century one.

There are a couple of good set-pieces (the rescue early in the book is particularly involving) but otherwise the pace is fairly pedestrian. It also has a lightness of tone that seems to be at odds with the seriousness of the background. On the other hand the flashbacks showing Sula's background are pretty grim and seem to belong to a different novel altogether.

What also was missing was any feeling that the oppressive empire and the draconian Praxis are bad things. The power struggle within the novel concerns who takes over from the Shaa, not whether the other races should use this opportunity to free themselves. Of course, I may be pre-empting later developments in the series!

All in all, I cannot really recommend *The Praxis*. It has its moments, but just not enough of them.

David Zindell – *The Lightstone, Part One: The Ninth Kingdom*

Voyager, London, 2002, 672 pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 648620 7

Reviewed by Graham Andrews.

To misquote Kenneth Tynan: "The trouble with reviewing commodities like *The Ninth Kingdom: Book One* of the Ea Cycle is that you know in advance that, for all the effect it will have, you might as well fill your column with a relief map of Death Valley."

I generally refrain from reading trilogies and/or multi-volume sagas until the whole 'commodity' is in my possession. For example: Fred Saberhagen's *Book of Swords* wordathon, which might now crumble to dust at the slightest touch, like those books in the George Pal version of *The Time Machine*.

Zindell spins a yarn stronger than Spidey's web-stuff, which is only to be expected from the author of *Neverness*. But stop me if you've read something like this blurb matter before: "On the island of Ea, it is a dark time of chaos and war. Once again Morjin, the fallen angel, is seeking the Eightstone. Already his assassins haunt the forest of Mesh, intent upon the death of the seventh son of its King. He is Valashu Elahad, the champion prophesied..." Well, what took you so long?

Unfortunately, however, *The Ninth Kingdom* has been overstuffed with the usual fantatome word-furniture that serves no function apart from verbal Muzak. Take the following description of Ideal Homes trivia:

"...a large room with rich furnishings. I stood by a magnificently canopied bed marvelling at the gilded chests and wardrobes along the walls. There I saw three long mirrors, framed in ornate gold ...The ceiling was like a chessboard, with squares of finely carved wood alternating with the blackened ebony; an intricately woven carpet showing the shapes of many animals and men covered the floor." (p.260).

The customary back-of-the-book Appendices bang on about heraldry in the Nine, Free and Dragon kingdoms; the gold gelstei ("called the Lightstone"); and a whole slew of lesser gelstei (glowstones, sleep stones, etc.) Zindell even lists the Ean months of the year. Some people read such 'scholarly' impedimenta for enjoyment. But if an author can't explain unfamiliar words and concepts in the main text, then I'm of the opinion that they aren't worth knowing, a'tall a'tall.

I liked the maps of Ea; especially Terror Bay, which might put *Cape Fear* to shame one day. But will Zindell's epic have the staying power of *Kinglord* – sorry *Lord of the Rings* – and even the very *Book of Swords*? I'll make known my judgement five years from now, or when the Ea Cycle stops spinning – whichever comes first.



Here are some of the other books we have seen recently. A review here does not necessarily preclude a full review in a later edition of *Vector*.

Clive Barker – *Abarat* □□

Harper Collins, 2002, 388pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00-225952-4
Seen in unpaginated proof. This is the first part of a YA quartet (though billed as “a dazzling fantasy adventure for all ages”) in which young Candy Quackenbush one day walks out to the edges of the smug and self-regarding community of Chickentown, Minnesota, and finds herself, improbably, at the edge of a sea and the door to another world. *Abarat* is an archipelago, made up of twenty five magical islands (one for each hour of the day) and equally magical and bizarre inhabitants.

Disney Corporation has apparently paid \$8 million for the film rights based on Barker’s illustrations alone, but it has to be said that these (although only seen here in black and white) are variable, to say the least (though I do like the cats), and often threaten to overwhelm the text.

Stephen Baxter – *Phase Space* □□

Voyager, 2002, 426pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00-225769-6
Stephen Baxter, astronaut (failed, 1991) and *Matrix* star columnist (he writes novels, too) returns to his Manifold trilogy (*Time, Space and Nathaniel Origin*) in a collection of some two dozen stories subdivided into thematically-linked sections, Dreams (I), Earths, Worlds, Manifold, Paradox, and Dreams (II), and brought together inside an eye-wrenching fractal cover. The stories range from alternate histories in which astronaut and now sf writer Jay Hollander discovers evidence that the Chinese may have achieved space travel in the 16th century (Moon Calf), the failure of the Apollo 11 mission (War Birds), sentience and artificial intelligence (Poyekhali 3201), evolution and entropy (Huddle and Grey Farth) and a genetically enhanced, intelligent space-faring squid (Sheena 5).

Stephen Baxter/Paul McAuley – *Reality Dust/Making History*

Gollancz, 2002, 76pp+89pp (double), £4.99 ISBN 0-575-07306-3
Paperback ‘double’ edition of two novellas originally published individually by PS Publishing and collected as half of the Gollancz hardback omnibus anthology *Futures*, along with Peter Hamilton’s *Watching Trees Grow* and Ian McDonald’s *Tendelo’s Story* (the latter also reprinted as a paperback double). The *Futures* anthology was reviewed by Gary S Dalkin in *Vector* 219.

Paul Brandon – *Swim the Moon*

Tor Books, 2002, 380pp, £14.95 ISBN 0-312-87793-5
A trade paperback reprint of Brandon’s contemporary fantasy novel, reviewed and recommended by Cherith Baldry in V220. Richard Brennan is a Scottish fiddle player who returns to his home country from Australia following the death of his father and finds himself drawn into the

mystery of the land around the isolated bothy he settles into, and the woman Ailish. Cherith wrote, “The writing is precise and very rich... the characters and remote Scottish landscape come across vividly [and T]he ending is beautiful and inevitable”

Ramsey Campbell – *Scared Stiff*

Tor Books, 2002, 239pp, £22.95 ISBN 0-765-30004-4
A (mostly) retrospective collection subtitled *Tales of Sex and Death*, from “one of the best contemporary horror writers”, with stories dating back to 1976 (‘Dolls’, ‘The Other Woman’, ‘Lilith’s’). From the copyright and title details, this would appear to be a revised and expanded reissue of a collection first published in 1987 (from the date of Clive Barker’s introduction). Three new stories, ‘Limits of Fantasy’ (1992), ‘The Body in the Window’ (1995) and ‘Kill Me Hideously’ (1997) here see first publication in book form, and Campbell supplies a 2002 Afterword to this new hardback edition.

Max Allan Collins – *Dark Angel: Before The Dawn*

Ebury Press, 2002, 271pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-0918-9031-4
A ‘prequel’ novel to Channel 5’s intriguing new sf series created by James Cameron and Charles H. Eglee. *Before the Dawn* ‘fills in’ some of the years between Max’s escape, along with her genetically engineered ‘siblings’, from the secret and brutal Manticore facility, and where the TV series picks up her meeting with vigilante broadcaster ‘Eyes Only’ and her search for the surviving children. In 2019, Los Angeles has been blasted back into the pre-electronic age by the setting off of a ‘pulse bomb’. Electronic money, credit and databases records have been wiped out citywide. In the ruins, Max survives by her wits and enhanced reflexes as a member of Moody’s street gang of kids, until she sees a police broadcast about a rebel they are searching for and recognises one of her Manticore siblings, Seth.

Raymond Feist – *Magician*

Voyager, 2002, 681pp, £25.00 ISBN 0-00-713411-8
‘20th Anniversary’ special hardback edition of Feist’s 1982 fantasy, first part of the Riftwar saga (also recently reissued in paperback by Harper Collins Voyager, No. 20 in their ‘Classics’ series), which was followed by the sequels *Silverthorn* and *Darkness at Sethanon*. (Feist’s *Murder in LaMut* (Voyager 2002), written in collaboration with Joel Rosenberg, is a return to the Riftwar universe, and was reviewed by Vikki Lee in V225, while Feist’s *Talon of the Silver Hawk* is reviewed in this issue’s First Impressions.)

Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson – *Legends of Dune: The Butlerian Jihad* £Q

Hodder & Stoughton, 2002, 616pp, £18.99 ISBN 0-340-82330-5

Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson – *Dune: The Butlerian Jihad*

Tor Books, 2002, 621pp, £27.95 ISBN 0-765-30157-1 (also announced as a leatherbound 100 copy limited edition, \$200 ISBN 0-765-30585-2)

Yet another 'prequel' to the *Dune* saga (now spanning some ten books), following on from Herbert *films* and Kevin Anderson's 'Prelude to Dune' trilogy (*House Atreides*, *House Harkonnen*, *House Corrino*). Back in the Time of Tyrants, control of the Old Empire, including Earth, was wrested by a group who translated their human brains into mechanical bodies and became the immortal race of cymeks. Then the cymeks' own computer system, Omnium, wrested control in turn, and inaugurated the thousand year reign of thinking machines until their overthrow by Serena Butler's war of rebellion. By the time of *Dune*, computers and any sort of 'intelligent' machines are anathema, their place taken by the trained Mentats, while the aftermath of the war also lays the foundations for the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood and the Guild of Navigators and the Fremen of Arakkis.

William Hope Hodgson – *The House on the Borderland and Other Novels*

Gollancz, 2002, 637pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-575-07372-1

The 33rd volume in Gollancz's Fantasy Masterworks series contains, as its title suggests, four novels: *The Boats of the 'Clen Carrig'* (1907), *The House on the Borderland* (1908), *The Ghost Pirates* (1909) and *The Night Land* (1912), with a wonderfully irreverent but affectionate introduction by China Miéville.

Before you open the book at random, and immediately put it back on the shelf, intimidated by Hodgson's ungainly sentences, adjectival overload (though not in the class of Lovecraft, who learned all he needed of blasphemous ichor and unnameable horrors from WHH) and 'maritime porn' ("Mizzen t'gllant clewlines and buntlines" – *The Ghost Pirates* p.262), read Miéville's short essay, 'And Yet...', to see why, despite his manifold faults ("If a committee had been set up to design an unreadable book, they'd probably have come up with *The Night Land*") Hodgson's work retains for many, even now, an almost physical power ("... one of the most extraordinary books in the English language").

Nancy Holder and Jeff Mariotte – *Angel: Endangered Species* ££

Pocket Books, 2002, 377pp, £12.99 ISBN 0-7434-5070-1

Spin-off novel from the TV series *Angel* – itself a spin-off from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for which Holder and Mariotte have also written tie-ins and novelisations, including *Unseen* (reviewed by Gary Wilkinson in V220), and *The Watchers Guide, Volume 2*.

Michael de Larrabeiti – *The Borrible Trilogy*

Macmillan, 2002, 726pp £12.99 ISBN 0-333-900861-9

Omnibus edition of three classic children's/YA novels, comprising *The Borribles* (1976), *The Borribles Go for Broke* (1981) and *Across the Dark Metropolis* (1986). Dwelling in the alleys and shadows of London, Knocker,

Lightfinger and the other Borribles live by their wits and cunning, although always on the lookout for the SBG, the Special Borrible Group of the London police, who will, if they catch them, clip their ears back into shape and doom them to an ordinary, mundane and mortal human adulthood.

Megan Lindholm – *Wizard of the Pigeons*

Voyager, 2002, 298pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-711256-4

Reissue of an early (© 1987) and well-regarded urban fantasy, set in Seattle, from Lindholm (who now also writes as Robin Hobb).

Richard Morgan – *Altered Carbon*

Gollancz, 2002, 534pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-57507-390-X

As reported in *Matrix #157*, Morgan's 'future noir' debut novel, *Altered Carbon*, has been optioned by Warner Brothers at the instigation of producer Joel Silver for £350,000. *Altered Carbon* is set in a 26th century when mankind has conquered both the stars and, in a way, death. Personalities can be stored and uploaded to ("sleeved") a new body, even across space. The disparate colonies are held together under the grip of the UN Protectorate (assuming, by the time you read this, the UN will be a meaningful concept any more) and the peacekeeper Envoy Corps. Takeshi 'Tak' Kovaks is an ex-member of the Corps, now private investigator, and is beamed back a new body on Earth help a 300 year old billionaire work out why he has been 'murdered'. *Altered Carbon* is impressive and, in the words of Vector reviewer Stuart Carter "remarkably violent... a classic sf future world of amazing technology, but where the very worst of humanity continues to thrive beneath the glossy superficial sheen of hi-tech wonders."(V223).

Terry Pratchett and Paul Kidby (illustrator) – *The Last Hero: A Discworld Fable*

Gollancz, 2002, 176pp, £12.99 ISBN 0-575-07377-2

A large format (approx 10 x 11") paperback of Pratchett and Kidby's fable (© 2001) of the last quest of ageing Cohen the Barbarian to climb the Discworld's highest peak and demand an explanation from the Gods to why people and heroes must grow old, infirm and die (and keep forgetting where they left their teeth in the morning). This new edition includes 16 extra pages of Kidby's rather splendid illustrations.

Robert Rankin – *The Hollow Chocolate Bunnies Of The Apocalypse* ££

Gollancz, 2002, 342pp, £9.99 (he) ISBN 0-575-07313-6

By now, with two dozen books under his belt, you probably either regard Rankin's novels as the funniest things since Douglas Adams or the equivalent of being repeatedly hit over the head with a large placard with 'JOKE' written on it. Rankin has a select fandom all of his own and, like Piers Anthony's Xanth novels, this is something of a two-edged sword, outsiders finding his later work so packed with in-jokes that they prove frustrating and impenetrable. *The Hollow Chocolate Bunnies Of The Apocalypse* (a typically Rankin title, but with a rather splendid cover – another example of the author's surreal and often inspired models), however, abandons the in-group mythology of Brentford and alien sprouts for a story set in Toy City (formerly Toy Town) where a serial killer is

on the loose, bumping off nursery rhyme and story-book characters, starting with the literally hard-boiled Humpty Dumpty (in his own swimming pool), and fashion designer Little Boy Blue. Bill Winkle, Toy City P.I., has disappeared, leaving only his assistant Eddie Bear to pick up the investigation.

Alastair Reynolds – *Redemption Ark* £Q

Collancz, 2002, 567pp, £10.99 ISBN 0-575-06880-9
The third novel in Reynolds's 'Inhibitor' universe space opera series, following his impressive debut *Revelation Space* and continued through *Chasm City*. As humanity spreads out slowly to colonise the planets of nearby stars, their efforts, both technological and political, to establish themselves have been undermined by idealistic but inflexible political systems and the ravages of nano-plagues. And all around lies evidence that older civilisations have come before and similarly failed – or been deliberately wiped out. Something in the universe seems inimical to sentient life and humanity, in its establishment of a colony on Resurgam, has attracted its attention.

Connie Willis – *Passage*

Voyager, 2002, 780pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-711826-0
Willis's 2001 Clarke Award shortlisted novel, released in mass market paperback edition.

Joanna Lander is a hospital psychologist studying NDEs, Near Death Experiences, although the interviews with

patients are constantly frustrated by Maurice Mandrake, a self-serving fellow 'researcher' collecting material for his quasi-religious book on the subject. Lander is introduced to, and joins forces with a new doctor, Richard Wright, who is investigating the related phenomenon of NDE-like visual experiences from a biochemical viewpoint. As their volunteer subjects prove more and more unreliable (and in some cases unwilling) to continue with the project, it makes sense for Joanna to 'go under' and record her own experiences. Initially, Joanna's experiences match those reported by her patients, of a dark tunnel with a light at the end. But as the experiments continue, she finds herself returning time and again to the same place, one that feels increasingly and unaccountably familiar, and that may promise to unlock the puzzle of the seeming similarity of NDE reports.

Passage is an absorbing and, towards the end, a gripping novel, although it takes perhaps too long building to this point through an initial 'hospital romance' scenario, and is perhaps only marginally sf.

David Zindell – *The Lightstone 2: The Silver Sword*

Voyager, 2002, 454pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-713996-9
Second half of *The Lightstone* – originally released in one volume, but here split (as with Tad Williams' *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*) into two volumes for the mass market paperback edition. Part 1: *The Ninth Kingdom* (ISBN 0-00-648620-7) is reviewed in First Impressions in this issue.

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Reviewer's Key: AF – Alan Fraser, CA – Chris Amies, CAKC – Carol Ann Kerry-Green, CB1 – Cherith Baldry, CB2 – Colin Bird, CH – Chris Hill, FM – Farah Mendlesohn, GA – Graham Andrews, GW – Gary Wilkinson, JAM – Jan A. Malique, JN – John Newsinger, KVB – K.V. Bailey, MC – Mark Greener, NMB – N.M. Browne, P – Particle, PB – Paul Bateman, PH – Penny Hill, SC – Stuart Carter, SJ – Steve Jeffery, ST – Sue Thomason, VL – Vikki Lee.