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**The Critical
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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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Text found at the entrance to a certain famous alien artefact.

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VECTOR

Published by the BSFA ©2003 ISSN 0505 0448

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

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION, LTD.

Limited by guarantee. Company No. 921500 Registered address: 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry, NN11 3BE. The BSFA is a non-profit making organisation, staffed entirely by unpaid volunteers.

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PRINTED BY

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Editorial

The View From the Skydome

It has been a strange time. Half of my first entire week of leave in a couple of years was taken up by an interview at Canterbury Christ Church University College and after several days of sweating it out (it was an extraordinary heatwave) I learned that I would be teaching Media and Cultural Studies for them. There followed the joys of finding accommodation and trying to get references done in a period when everyone else is on holiday – and signing the contracts before I went off on my holiday to Toronto. I'm now mostly unpacked in a city known for being the birthplace of a gay playwright, the murder of an archbishop and the destination of some poetic pilgrims – although, if I recollect, Chaucer abandons the scheme about halfway through and doesn't get his pilgrims to their destination or indeed back. By coincidence the Canterbury Museum has just held an exhibition of works by Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin, including several of the Clangers artefacts.

Toronto seems a very long way away – it is, of course – and I was drawn there by the same thing that drew me to Melbourne in 1999, the spectre of the Worldcon. Whether the same will work for Glasgow in 2005 remains to be seen. I also participated in a conference on Canadian Science Fiction, Fantasy and Speculative fiction organised at the Merrill Collection by Allan Weiss. This was enlivened by the presence of its plenary speaker – Margaret Atwood.

What I immediately have to confess is a failure to read any of her novels or poems, and I suspect I won't be able to give them a fair hearing when I finally do because of the controversy surrounding what she has said about sf in public: science fiction has Martians and spaceships in it, she says, whereas her novels do not; they are not science fiction but speculative fiction. Perceived as attacking sf, and misrepresenting sf whilst doing it, she has annoyed a lot of science fiction writers, critics and readers. Reviewers such as John Clute have meanwhile demolished her latest s—f—novel, *Oryx and Crake*, and there is clearly some residual disgruntlement over her winning the inaugural Clarke Award.

But listening to her talk about her reading as a child, her grounding in the pulps, and her love of some of the less well-regarded genre movies of the 1950s, I wonder whether we're not at cross purposes. If you had only read sf up to the mid-1950s, and had missed, say, Bester, Dick and Sturgeon, if you'd departed the genre and not gone back during or after the British New Wave, if you were ignorant of *Dangerous Visions* and the Damon Knight *Orbit* anthologies, you might well think that sf was just Martians and spaceships. When we've taken her to be dismissing sf, it might be that she's simply describing something she loved when younger and clearly isn't what she writes. Hence, you

could see the need for a different term.

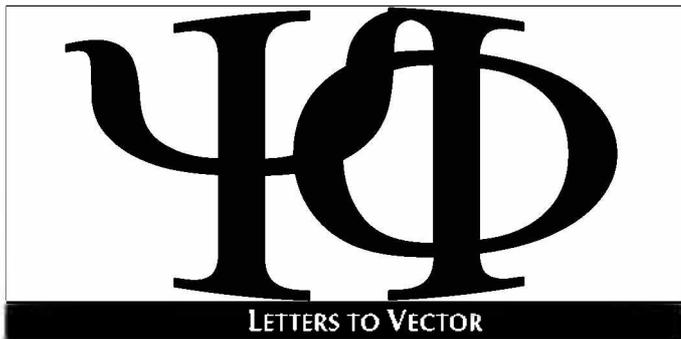
Meanwhile Torcon proved as soulless and alienating as other large conventions have been for me in the past. Where is the heart of these conventions? In the opening ceremony, held in a room at least half the size necessary for it? In the cavernous spaces given over to the masquerade or the Hugos? You could not even say, unlike Aussiecon 3, it was in the bar, since there were several bars, none of which was particularly inviting. Even the dealers' room seemed merely bigger rather than better than the Eastercon bookroom. But we have customs regulations to thank for that.

Then there was the great disappearing/appearing programme. I'd been asked to be on five items, and was therefore disconcerted to find in my draft programme that I would be on one. I queried this, but only had a final draft listing the one item. I was thus once more disconcerted to find from my programme participant's sheet that I was on those five things after all. They printed daily sheets to try to limit the damage caused by leaving so much of the programme out – apparently caused by sending the draft to the printers at the same time that they sent it to participants for them to double check – but failed to give any information as to what the omitted panels were really about.

Meanwhile the participants' instructions told me to pick up instructions for participants and to check in at a certain room to let them know I was there. They knew I was there because they ticked my name when I was given the instructions in the first place, but I tried to check in at the room because I was told to. The people on the relevant desk stared at me as if I was something they'd trodden in. Why would you want to check in? No idea, but I'm simply obeying orders.

The Green Room experience is also different from the British one. In Britain you check in, are introduced to fellow participants and have a chance to chat over what you are going to say. In Canada, as with my experiences in Philadelphia and Melbourne, there is none of this, and you are unlikely to recognise your compamellists, assuming they have even turned up. There's no one in the Green Room who cares who you are, as far as I can see, although (and I didn't figure this out until the final day) you can at least sneak in under cover of your green ribbon and have lunch.

I'm probably completely reprehensible for thinking of Toronto as having a convention there rather than it being a convention that happened to take place in Toronto. So it goes. Many of the panels were actually pretty good, despite no one ever putting much initial thought into them nor anyone ever being quite clear about what the brief for what each panel was. Perhaps the people organising Glasgow in 2005 could take note.



From Stephen Jeffery, MRSC, BOF and PHP

I am writing to point out a small correction to Dr Butler's splendid and well-argued dissertation on *The Clangers* [*A Peaceful Species on a Small, Undistinguished Moon*, Vector 231, September/October 2003].

Dr Butler wonders whether the 'flock of teapots' (is this the correct collective for teapots, one wonders? Or has the author possibly confused this with the name of a UK popular beat combo – as I believe the saying goes – whose single 'Wishing (I Had a Photograph of You)' entered the charts in November 1982?) who appear in the episode May 1971 episode 'Teapot' might have been the inspiration for the Gnostic spacecraft from Planet Gong.

The theory is attractive except, as Dr Butler notes, for the fact that the alien teapot captured by Tiny Clanger is undoubtedly alive, if not probably sentient. Several hours of painstaking research into Daevid Allen and Gong's Radio Gnome Invisible trilogy have failed to corroborate the theory that the space-faring teapots employed by the Pot Head Pixies of Planet Gong are, in fact, an independent life form, although it has left this researcher with a tendency to hum complex riffs with an 11/8 time signature and a severe case of the munchies. There is also no mention of small, pink, knitted aliens, Soup Dragons, or Iron Chickens in the Planet Gong cycle, although it is just possible that the Clangers might be the mysterious Octave Doctors (from their possession of the music tree?) whose vibrations rule the ether and provide the lines of energy along which the Pot Head Pixies pilot their teapot craft. More research is needed, although it is, at this point, beyond this writer's constitution, or ability to remain upright.

What is more, there appears to be a slight discrepancy with dates. The Planet Gong trilogy, which traditionally spans five volumes, starts with *Camembert Electrique* (1971), continuing through *Flying Teapot* (May 1973), *Angel's Egg* (Nov 1973) and *You* (Nov 1974), concluding with *Planet Gong: Floating Anarchy* (1977). The first volume was recorded at the Chateau Herouville in France (later the 'Honky Chateau') from May 1971, but it is unlikely that this episode of *The Clangers* would have been screened on French television. However, it is a fascinating case of synchronicity. (We should perhaps note that a tea-kettle spaceship is used by the hero, Bailey, in Max Merriwell's *There and Back Again* (1999).)

A definitive account of Daevid Allen's final trilogy 'Radio Gnome Invisible' and its place in the Franco-Australian sf canon remains to be written.

AMB replies: And Vector would be happy to publish it. I take the point about the dates of the recording of *Camembert Electrique* making it unlikely that they saw the relevant episode of *The Clangers*. I wonder whether news of the phenomenon had appeared in the media prior to the broadcast (perhaps in *New Scientist*)? We know so little about the flying teapots in *The Clangers* material that it is entirely possible that an adult form of the teapot was encountered by Gong.

From Professor Phillippe Rose, Institute of Exobiology at Pottage Vert, France

I was pleased to see a qualified biologist such as yourself finally drawing the public's attention to the unique biology of the much overlooked species *clangerus clangerae* (aka 'clangers').

As a result of my own extensive researches over many years I am now able to reveal that, in common with other ruminants, the Clangers have a dual-stomach digestive system. As a result, a large amount of methane is created as a by-product of digesting a diet of fibre-rich vegetable matter (primarily the spinach soup provided by the Soup Dragon). This methane is released through the clangers' proboscii (and other apertures), creating the peculiar and distinctive clanger sound vocabulary.

The process of methane generation has over time led to the formation of a combustible atmosphere and this explains the incident that so puzzled you in which the planet nearly caught fire from a rocket. As to location, I can also reveal that the clangers' homeworld is located amongst the 'Gas Giants'.

I had hoped to respond more personally to Professor Rose but his email appeared to be infected with a virus – possibly something from his lab. Having just watched 28 Days Later I deleted it in the space of a heartbeat.

It was gratifying to finally see my biology qualification being put to good use, after seventeen years. If any publishers are reading, I am of course available to write The Science of The Clangers. If I may respectfully disagree with Professor Rose, I'm not convinced that the soup is ever referred to as spinach – although it may be an example of parallel evolution which allows spinach to be used as the most appropriate term. It might equally be water cress (or the equivalent). The core of a planet is still very much mysterious (see the recent travelogue, The Core), but I wonder what the implications of a spinach cored planet are?

Further research has turned up the Mock Turtle's song from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll: "Beautiful Soup, so rich and green, Waiting in a hot tureen!". It could be that the green soup is the residue of some vast turtle, sex unknown, flying through space...

Letters to Vector should be sent to Andrew M Butler, Dept of Media and Arts, Canterbury Christ Church University College, Canterbury, CT1 1QU or emailed to ambutler@enterprise.net and marked 'For publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.

A Citizen of the Galaxy – 40 Years of Doctor Who

by Chris Hill

On 23rd November 1963, the day after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a modest British television series about the adventures of an eccentric time-traveller started. Although the series finished in 1989 (ignoring for that time the 1996 television version) the good Doctor is still very much with us.

Given the wealth of material available this will be, by necessity, a whistle-stop tour of the worlds of *Doctor Who*. It is also, inevitably, an extremely personal view of the programme.

Although mocking the programme is a common pursuit these days, there can be little doubt of the important place that *Doctor Who* has in the hearts and minds of several generations of British sf fans and writers. The Telos *Doctor Who* novella series has books by such writers as Kim Newman, Tom Arden and Louise Cooper (with forewords by the likes of Chaz Brenchley, Storm Constantine and Graham Joyce) and in an interview in the magazine *SFX* last year both John Meaney and China Miéville commented that they would like to write for the series.

For me, *Doctor Who* was definitely the start of my abiding interest in science fiction, before I even knew there was such a thing.

I was not born when the programme started broadcasting and by the time I started watching the programme ('Day of the Daleks' [1 January-22 January 1972] is the earliest story I have any memory of) it had already established itself as a British institution.

The Television Series

By the end of 2003 the BBC will have released all of the available *Doctor Who* stories on video. Thanks to this policy I have had the chance to see most of the surviving stories featuring the first two Doctors.

Reviewing these stories now, the first thing that strikes me is the relatively slow pace, with many serials seeming too long for the amount of story. Some of this is down to economics (the cost of sets, in particular is cheaper if spread over a six-part serial), some of it is down to the fact that the way television programmes are made has changed a great deal. Look at a modern, multi-camera television drama and it is seldom that a scene lasts more than a few minutes and any that do are likely to have a number of changes of viewpoint. In 1963 there was not much in the way of a tradition of television science fiction in Britain and *Doctor Who* owes far more to the traditional BBC costume drama.

It is interesting to see how the character of the Doctor appears in the early stories. It is a bit of a shock for those of us brought up on the heroics of Pertwee and Tom Baker to see William Hartnell's initial interpretation – untrustworthy

and arrogant – and those who complained about Colin Baker's later portrayal should bear this in mind. It is the schoolteacher Ian Chesterton who is the real hero of the early stories. Both he and Barbara Wright bring a sense of realism and sensibility to the early stories. It is more difficult to generate a great deal of interest in Susan, the Doctor's granddaughter, who ends up being the first of the younger companions to fall into the traditional 'screamer' rôle.

As the stories go on the compassionate nature of the Doctor becomes more obvious and the sense of justice that would be the central characteristic of the rôle is gradually established. 'The Dalek Invasion of Earth' (21 November-26 December 1964), in the second season, is the first story to feature what was to become the one of the default *Doctor Who* stories – the TARDIS lands on a world where the natives are being oppressed by invaders, and the Doctor helps them to overthrow their oppressors. 'The Dalek Invasion of Earth' is also the first story to feature the departure of a companion. Although Susan leaves for a fairly traditional reason (to get married) the speech the Doctor gives as he locks her out of the TARDIS turns it into one of the best send-offs a companion would ever get.

The series experimented with various styles during this era, for example surrealism ('The Celestial Toymaker' [2 April-23 April 1966]) and comedy ('The Gunfighters' [30 April-21 May 1966]), some more successfully than others. 'The Gunfighters' in particular, set around the gunfight at the OK Corral, has been much reviled over the years, although I found it to be quite entertaining, with some good performances.

'The War Machines' (25 June-16 July 1966) is the first story to be set entirely in contemporary London, a background that would become a staple of the series, especially in the

Pertwee era.

Finally, 'The Tenth Planet' (8 October-29 October 1966) achieves two landmarks: it introduces the second most popular recurring enemy, the Cybermen, and features the first transformation of the leading man.

The Patrick Troughton era is far more difficult to judge as only six of the twenty-one stories can be seen in their entirety. Sadly, some of the sillier stories ('The Dominators' [10 August-7 September 1968], 'The Krotons' [28 December 1968-18 January 1969]) survive, while those generally regarded as the classics of the era ('The Evil of the Daleks' [20 May-1 July 1967], 'The Abominable Snowmen' [30 September-4 November 1967], 'The Web of Fear' [3 February-9 March 1968], and 'Fury from the Deep' [16 March-20 April 1968]) were wiped.

Of the remaining stories, the surreal 'The Mind Robber' (14 September-12 October 1968) has some interesting ideas but is a little muddled, while 'The Tomb of the Cybermen' (2 September-23 September 1967) is probably

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the strongest. There is some nice characterisation (although the American accents of the spaceship crew are risible) and good design, and a nice, quiet moment when the Doctor talks to his newly orphaned companion Victoria about his own family. However, some of the plotting is weak and there are some badly-directed special effects shots.

The other important surviving story is 'The War Games' (19 April-21 June 1969). The story is enjoyable, if over-padded, and there is some good acting on show. The really significant events of this story appear in the final episode when we finally find out about the Doctor's race and the crimes he has committed. These elements deepened the mythology of the series and would be used a great deal in later years.

With the casting of Jon Pertwee and the exiling of the Doctor to Earth, the style of the series changed dramatically. For the first time the Doctor himself became the action hero, rather than relying on younger male actors to be the muscle. As mentioned earlier, I first started watching *Doctor Who* part-way through the Pertwee era and it is interesting to contrast my memories with more recent viewings.

The group of characters at this time is often described as the 'UNIT family', although earlier stories frequently showed the Doctor and the Brigadier in conflict, usually about means rather than ends.

I will no doubt alienate many viewers by saying that although I was fond of Jo Grant when I was a child, looking back on the character now I find her rather annoying. Somebody that naive and poorly educated would not have been let within a thousand miles of a top-secret military organisation. However, she did fulfil the basic requisites of the 'companion' rôle very well: someone the Doctor could explain things to, someone for him to care about and someone to go off and do something stupid to generate plot. The fact that his previous companion, Liz Shaw, was a scientist who did not need these explanations is often cited as the reason for her short tenure.

Another problem of the Pertwee era that becomes apparent in retrospect is that this was when the Doctor was at his most patromising and sexist.

Of the others, Captain Mike Yates fulfils the upper-class officer rôle, and is the only recurring character to be developed, the first time that a trusted character is allowed to 'go to the bad'. Sergeant Benton is important as the representative of the 'enlisted men' but is somewhat hampered by the fact that John Levene was not really a very good actor.

The introduction of Roger Delgado to the cast was undoubtedly a master-stroke (no pun intended). As well as providing the Doctor with an arch-enemy as clever as he is, Delgado enacted the Master with charm and humour. Given that the series faced a serious cancellation threat after Pertwee's first year, it could be argued, ironically, that the Master saved the series. It is a shame that Delgado's tragic early death robbed the series of the planned final confrontation between the Doctor and the Master.

...this was the period that gained the most complaints from the National Viewers and Listeners Association.

As the Pertwee stories continued, the series started to drift away from the Earthbound setting. As was fitting, given Pertwee's portrayal of the Doctor, it was his scientific curiosity and pride, in 'Planet of the Spiders' (4 May-8 June 1974), that led to his regeneration. He was replaced by Tom Baker, who managed to make the viewer believe that the Doctor was not actually human. Baker quickly established himself in the rôle and, together with Elizabeth Sladen as journalist Sarah Jane Smith, Philip Hinchcliffe as Producer and Robert Holmes as Script Editor, led to the strongest three years of stories that the series was ever to enjoy. Hinchcliffe eschewed the action, stunts and explosions of the Pertwee era in favour of a series of taut,

atmospheric horror stories. It is no coincidence that this was the period that gained the most complaints from the National Viewers and Listeners Association. Those seventeen stories produced no less than eight classic examples of *Doctor Who* stories, and only one or two real stinkers. 'Pyramids of Mars' (25 October-15 November 1975) is my own personal favourite story, featuring good production design, a genuinely frightening villain, good supporting characters, a dénouement that actually makes sense, some cracking dialogue and the relationship between Baker and Sladen at its absolute best.

'The Deadly Assassin' (30 October-20 November 1976) in the following season signified another major change in the direction of the show by showing Time Lord society for the first time. When originally broadcast it was disliked by many fans for demythologising the Time Lords, while today it is considered a classic for exactly the same reason.

Then things started to go somewhat awry. The common version of events is that incoming producer, Graham Williams, wanted to reduce the horrific content of the series that had caused so many complaints, and increase the humorous content. The first story in this, the fifteenth season, was a bleak little tale called 'Horror of Fang Rock' (3 September-24 September 1977) which felt like a hangover from the previous year. However, the introduction of K9 in the following story ('The Invisible Enemy' [1 October-22 October 1977) was an indication of what was to follow. There are some good stories in the next three years including Chris Boucher's *Quatermass and the Pit* homage 'Image of the Fendhal' (29 October-10 November 1977), David Fisher's entertaining romp 'The Androids of Tara' (25 November-16 December 1978), and the perennially popular 'City of Death' (29 September-20 October 1979). Unfortunately, these were the gems among a lot of less inspiring material: the dated satire of 'The Sun Makers' (26 November-17 December 1977), the interesting but muddled and overlong 'The Invasion of Time' (4 February-11 March 1978), together with some absolute dross like 'The Stones of Blood' (28 October-18 November 1978) and 'The Creature from the Pit' (27 October-17 November 1979). It is worth mentioning here that there seems to be some revisionism of Douglas Adams's

involvement in this period, with 'The Pirate Planet' (30 September-21 October 1978) getting particular praise. A recent viewing of this confirms my memory of an okay story spoiled by some over-the-top humour later recycled in the second *Hitch-Hikers* radio series – a much more appropriate place for it.

In the last season to feature Tom Baker there was a strong upturn in the quality under new producer John Nathan Turner. The first couple of stories are not particularly inspiring, but with the evolution-themed 'Full Circle' (25 October-15 November 1980) things picked up (unfortunately it also introduced Adrie, probably the most unpopular companion in the history of the series, but you cannot have everything). Particular highlights of the season were the complex 'Warriors' Gate' (3 January-24 January 1981), the first of two stories by British horror writer Stephen Gallagher (the other being 'Terminus' [15-23 February 1983]), and Tom Baker's final story 'Logopolis' (28 February-21 March 1981). Although this has some slightly camp moments, particularly supplied by Anthony Ainley's version of The Master, it does have a wonderful melancholy tone and Tom Baker has seldom been better.

Peter Davison makes a strong debut in 'Castrovalva' (4-12 January 1982), a direct sequel to the previous story. In fact, much of Davison's era is dominated by some fine stories. There were a few duds ('Four to Doomsday' [18 January -26 January 1982], 'Time-Flight' [22 March-30 March 1982] and 'Arc of Infinity' [3 January-12 January 1983]) but these were more than made up for by unusual and well-written stories like 'The Visitation' (15 February-23 February 1982), 'Black Orchid' (1 March-2 March 1982), 'Mawdryn Undead' (11 February-9 February 1983), 'The Awakening' (19 January-20 January 1984) and 'Kinda' (11 February-9 February 1982), the true classic of the Davison era. Davison himself was a well-chosen replacement for Baker, generally playing it straight after his predecessor's humour, but with charm and a sense of just-controlled panic. He is strongly supported by the Australian Tegan and later the cowardly, untrustworthy Turlough.

Although, like 'Logopolis', Peter Davison's final story, 'The Caves of Androzani' (8 March-16 March 1984), has a nice air of doom and gloom, in other respects it was a rather dull story which might have worked better if it had been shorter. However, I seem to be in a small minority over this as the story has more than once been voted the best *Doctor Who* story ever in polls.

I have always felt rather sorry for Colin Baker. Apart from having to wear the worst costume of all, he is also poorly served by a script editor, Eric Saward, who seems obsessed with the standard *Doctor Who* story mentioned earlier: the Doctor helping a group of rebels escape from their oppressor. Many fans and critics seemed to have problems with Baker's overbearing, arrogant, self-centred portrayal, but see my earlier comments on William Hartnell.

It is difficult to find a highlight of this period of the series, but lowlights were Baker's premier story 'The Twin

Dilemma' (22 March-30 March 1984) and the risible 'Timelash' (9 March-16 March 1985). Baker's first full season also had a tendency to use real historical characters to service the stories (George Stephenson in 'The Mark of the Rani' [2 February-9 February 1985] and H.G. Wells in 'Timelash'. This is all very well in purely historically set stories, or if the people are treated with respect, but here they were not.

Unfortunately, Colin Baker was eventually made the scapegoat for the lowering popularity of the series and was fired, leading, for the first time, to a new Doctor without a proper 'regeneration' story. When slapstick comedian Sylvester McCoy was cast there must have been more than a little trepidation. McCoy's first season did little to disabuse anyone of their concerns. 'Time and the Rani' (7 September-28 September 1987) rivalled 'The Twin Dilemma' for sheer unmitigated awfulness and the next two stories were little better. There was a glimmer of hope in 'Dragonfire' (23 November-7 December 1987), the last story of the season. 'Remembrance of the Daleks' (5-26 October 1988), the first story of the following season, was a full-on action movie, with something to say about the close connection between nationalism and fascism, and was a considerable improvement on the previous stories.

Alas, the remainder of the season does not follow through on this promise. While there is nothing unremittingly *bad* about the remaining serials, there is nothing really special either.

Unbeknown to the cast and crew, the following year was to be *Doctor Who's* last. This seems a great shame as the final season was the best for many years. The first story, 'Battlefield' (6 September-27 September 1989) was a bit of fluff, and does not make much sense under close scrutiny, but it was a good crowd-pleaser, with the return of the Brigadier and a look at what UNIT evolved into. The final story, 'Survival' (22 November-6 December 1989), was fairly unmemorable except for the last paragraph of the script which proved a fitting epitaph. It is the two serials bookended by the aforementioned two that turn the season into something special.

'Ghost Light' (4 October-18 October 1989) was the first story since season eighteen's 'Warriors' Gate', which required several viewings to be fully understood. In essence a ghost story, it touches on the Victorian attitude to empire and evolution; and for the first time the Doctor deliberately put his companion into a situation that forced her to face a past fear. Only John Hallam's slightly effeminate Light spoiled what was otherwise an enigmatic and atmospheric story.

'The Curse of Ee'nic' (25 October-15 November 1989) was also a mature piece of work for different reasons. Again, this was really Ace's story, tying her own past and family into the background of the story. However, it asked serious questions about the morality of certain acts during wartime. It also restored mystery to the background of the Doctor and showed him as an almost mythological

...Colin Baker was eventually made the scapegoat for the lowering popularity of the series...

character. All of the cast give good performances, and special note should be made of Nicholas Parsons' subtle and moving performance as the village vicar, haunted by the Allied bombings of German civilians.

I am left with mixed feelings about the 1989 season. It is great that *Doctor Who* left our screens with the best season for many years (although it has to be said that the season also confirmed Sylvester McCoy's limitations as a dramatic actor), but it also seems somewhat perverse to cancel a show that was at last recovering its identity.

But so things sat until 1996 when the franchise was resurrected as the pilot for an American company. British actor Paul McGann was cast as the Doctor and established continuity was, on the whole, maintained, with Sylvester McCoy being given a proper regeneration sequence.

Reviews of the US pilot were mixed. My initial reaction on watching the first BBC broadcast was that it could have been far worse. Paul McGann made a fine Doctor; the production design, particularly of the inside of the TARDIS, was wonderful; and direct-to-video king Eric Roberts chewed up the scenery entertainingly as the Master. The story was, frankly, a bit of a mess, displaying the US tendency in action series to use extended car chases as a substitute for plot (although the BBC version was not always free of this problem – see 'Invasion of the Dinosaurs' [12 January–16 February 1974]). The most bizarre decision was to make the Doctor half-human – apart from this being rather clichéd, why follow established continuity so closely in other parts of the story, yet drag this fact in purely to make a later, badly thought-out plot point work?

These problems aside, it was not entirely unpromising as pilot episodes go, but as history showed it was not successful enough to lead to a series.

And so *Doctor Who* on television came to an end.

Doctor Who – The Franchise

Of course, this was not the end of the story by any means. The end of the series on BBC television in 1989 only seemed to free it up as a franchise. First, there was the range of *Virgin Doctor Who* novels continuing from where 'Survival' left off. These were of varying quality: while there were a number of very strong novels here and some good writers (Kate Orman, Gary Russell, Andy Eane, Jim Mortimore, Daniel O'Mahony and Paul Cornell), the attempts to create, as the cover quote went, 'stories too broad and too deep for the small screen', led to many of the books losing that indefinable 'something' that made the television series the success it was. The books were often politically correct to the point of mania, frequently got totally tangled in an effort to support their own continuity and occasionally slipped into self-indulgence (50th novel *Happy Endings* take a bow!). Reservations aside, the series was moderately successful and had two consequences: a short-lived 'Missing Adventure' range, filling in stories between the televised ones (not terribly well); and the BBC

taking the franchise back and launching their own range, featuring Paul McGann's Doctor.

The first of these, by esteemed script editor and Target novelisation writer Terrance Dicks, entitled *The Eight Doctors*, is a real self-indulgent mess – an attempt to explain various problems with the continuity in one not-very-coherent novel. After a while the BBC range continued in much the same vein as the Virgin range (indeed, it featured many of the same writers) with much the same variation of quality. At the same time the BBC started publishing their own range of 'missing adventures'. Add to these the Telos novellas and you now have considerably more *Doctor Who* novels than television stories.

In recent years, there has also been a series of audio adventures, published by Big Finish productions. Although these again share many of the same writers as the Virgin and BBC books they are rather more successful, remaining

truer to the style of the original television series than do the books. All of the surviving Doctors except Tom Baker have recorded stories, proving among other things that given some good scripts Colin Baker would actually have made an excellent Doctor; his over-the-top style particularly suits audio. Paul McGann also shines in the recordings. Many of the companions of this era (Nyssa, Turlough, Peri, Ace) have also featured, portrayed by the original actors.

Big Finish have also released some related dramas, including a set of well-acted, but sadly slightly dull adventures with Elizabeth Sladen returning to her rôle as Sarah Jane Smith. More interesting has

been the recent 'Unbound' series of stories, featuring new actors, playing the Doctor (in some form or another...) in 'what if' scenarios such as what if the Doctor had never left Gallifrey? What if the Doctor had begun his exile on Earth thirty years later?

Conclusion

So what is the explanation of the continued popularity of *Doctor Who*?

Well, nostalgia is of course part of the answer – for many of us it is simply a part of our childhood. Even now I cannot hear the fading last few bars of the theme without a feeling of anticipation. The series also appeals to a basic wish-fulfilment – who would not want a wonderful machine like the TARDIS and be able to visit anywhere and anywhen and have adventures?

Although *Doctor Who* occasionally experimented with different forms, at heart the various producers and writers just had a desire to tell a good story, simply and unpretentiously. And of course, if it scares us a bit, all the better.

Despite what Mary Whitehouse and her ilk said, it also provided many of us with our first strong moral framework: the weak should be protected, always accept responsibility for your own actions, the end never justifies the means. A little more of that attitude in current politics would not go amiss.

...it also seems somewhat perverse to cancel a show that was at last recovering its identity.

and stopped; access to the broadcast spectrum – from amateur radio to stereo analogue television – is still governed by the state or by agencies acting on behalf of the state.

The perception of radio, and then television, is that – alongside any incidental benefits of information and entertainment – the output would form a national identity, which is to say: ‘any given set of language practices, myths, stories, and beliefs propagated to justify a dominant group in maintaining power, or to justify a competing group in replacing them or shifting power among them’.² It would make such cultural practices attractive both to those who could participate in them, and to people from other countries who might wish to participate, and would make such practices look normal, part of the heritage.

In Britain, the BBC was not a straightforward wing of the government but saw itself as a bridge between government and people, which could set out to engage the public’s interest in the issues of the day, especially where government policies and legislation would have an impact upon them. As British deference loosened, broadcasters could also act as the viewers’ or listeners’ proxies in holding the government (and others) to account for their actions and ideologies, with this eventually resulting in the current crisis engulfing both the BBC and the Prime Minister’s office over the claims in a dossier on Iraq’s war capabilities.

Until the mid-1950s, the BBC was unchallenged in its broadcasts in the UK, but a series of commercial broadcasters were established with regional licences and they began broadcasting on 22 September 1955. The BBC, clearly not viewing its youthful and commercial rivals with benign eyes, committed a spoiling tactic by choosing that night to kill off Grace Archer in a barn fire on the radio soap *The Archers*. Despite the commercial imperative on the independent television stations, they had the same imperative to entertain and instruct as the BBC, enshrined in the 1964 Broadcasting Act: ‘to provide a public service for disseminating information, education and entertainment ... to ensure that the programmes broadcast ... maintain a high general standard in all respects, and in particular in respect of their content and quality, and a proper balance and wide range in their subject matter’. By the end of the 1960s the ITV broadcasters had established for themselves a reputation for news, with *News at Ten* more popular than the BBC’s evening news, and the two BBC channels (BBC2 having started on 20 April 1964 with a remit in part to reach minority audiences) were most successful in light entertainment.

If such programmes provided some sense of national identity in terms of their content and their underlying ideologies, then this was further boosted by the ostensibly private act of watching the programmes themselves. The 1953 coronation of Elizabeth II had boosted television sales in the post-war years, and there was a sense of the nation coming together not only to watch her enthronement, but

her annual Christmas message to the Commonwealth and other national events, especially the Grand National, the Boat Race, and various cup finals. Families would come together in one room to watch the programmes and discuss them, before these became part of the social intercourse outside the house, on the doorstep, in the corner shop, in offices, in bars and so forth. Individual landmark programmes became part of the cultural heritage – the classic example being the emptying of churches during the broadcast of *The Forsyte Saga*.

During the age of the duopoly broadcasts, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, viewing settled down to a series of straightforward choices between programmes, perhaps along class lines. Saturdays were special, though. After *Grandstand* or *World of Sport*, the family could settle down to children’s programmes, such as Basil Brush (who debuted on ITV in 1963, designed by Peter Firmin), the more family-orientated *Juke Box Jury*, and then a mixture of variety programmes, some comedy, perhaps a film and more sport. BBC1 was the Saturday night broadcaster – especially with the chat show *Parkinson*, the Saturday night movie and football highlights in *Match of the Day* during the 1970s. There was the sense that everyone was watching – even if this was clearly not true.

The ‘never had it so good’ 1960s were a period of the opening up and redefining of Britain. British film was experiencing a last period of greatness, with successes in historical melodramas – a constant reimagining of the Victorian era – and comedy – the end of a golden age of Ealing Studio’s comedies – as well as a burst of fantasy/horror in the shape of Hammer Films and a burst of social realism shepherded by more northern and working class directors and writers. Such categories were not distinct in terms of their personnel, as editors, directors and photographers such as Seth Holt and Freddie Francis worked both on Hammer Horrors and films such as *Saturday Night Sunday Morning*. Revues such as *Beyond the Fringe* and then Peter Cook’s *Establishment Club*, not to mention *That Was the Week that Was*, contributed to a satire boom that repositioned the public’s relations to politicians and other public figures, and slowly led to a less formal

society. A series of high profile obscenity trials, such as the one surrounding the Penguin edition of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, the sex scandal engulfing John Profumo and the teenaged hysteria over the Beatles ushered in a new, permissive, society.

What was or is the British national identity, then? There is the sense of the past greatness, the Empire we had and lost, leading us to still feel that we are major players on the world stage. Our status as an island nation gives us a fierce sense of independence and community, which can verge on the xenophobic, an ‘us and them’ mentality best expressed in the newspaper headline FOG IN CHANNEL – CONTINENT CUT OFF FROM BRITAIN. Our small size and apparent international power contributes to a sense of pluckiness, of resourcefulness, but bringing with it a sense of fair play – we exported not only our system of

...we exported not only our system of government and law to our empire, but also God’s own game, cricket.

government and law to our empire, but also God's own game, cricket. Along with our resourcefulness came a stoicism, a stiff upper lip reserve that limited the expression of emotions and kept sex firmly out of sight. (This repression paved the way for the voyeuristic success of James Bond and *Alfie* [1966], whereas films which drew attention to the repression and voyeurism such as Powell's *Peeping Tom* [1960] were suppressed.) At the same time, these characteristics might actually turn out to be 'English' rather than British proper – and I am probably guilty here of conflating the two.

It is in this context that *Doctor Who* can be seen, in retrospect, as the perfect format. Its intent was to try to deliver a wider audience to the late Saturday afternoon, in particular extending the family viewing further forward in the day, but also setting out to entertain (through the action adventure and thriller format) and instruct (in science and, initially at least, in history). A craft that could travel in time and space allowed the creative teams to choose any time and place for their narratives, from the dawn of humanity to the end of time, whether on Earth or in some far-flung gravel pit on the far side of the galaxy. While they may not have thought in such terms, it gave them a generic flexibility which would constantly refresh the show, and allow them to creatively riff on (or steal from) all existing narratives. One adventure could be a travelogue accompanying Marco Polo, another could be political intrigue in high places. Evil dictators could be overthrown, entire races saved and young people helped to work with animals and for world peace. We could witness the fall of Atlantis (at least three times, as it happens) and penetrate the mysteries of the Yeti and the Loch Ness Monster (twice). We could take part in the fall of Troy, the shoot-out at the OK Corral and even wander around on a curiously still-light Saturday afternoon in late November 1963.

The Police call box, then a familiar piece of street furniture, was an inspired choice for a spaceship disguise, bringing with it the connotations of reassuring law and order, as well as the incongruity of a familiar shape in unfamiliar surroundings. In recent years the Police have tried to trademark the shape, but in truth it is BBC Enterprises who have kept the shape in the public eye. The fact that this high-tech ship can change shape to blend in with its surroundings is perhaps a triumph of British thinking – the fact that it has broken and no one has got around to fixing it for forty years is typical of British practices. (One of the government buildings in Croydon has had scaffolding around it for as long as anyone remembers, certainly for several decades. No one is entirely sure why the scaffolding is there, and whether it is in some sense supporting the building – and so no one is brave enough to dismantle it.) The faulty steering mechanism on the TARDIS is familiar from dozens of product recalls and to anyone who has tried to steer a supermarket shopping trolley.³ In the early days of year-round broadcasts rather than seasons, such unreliability could add to the suspense as to whether the team could get back to 1960s Britain, as well as the useful dumping of

them into one crisis after another.

It is curious that the interior of the TARDIS has not been more explored as a space for adventure. The two-episode 'Edge of Destruction' (aka 'Inside the Spaceship', broadcast 8 and 15 February 1964) took place entirely onboard, and we have had more than one control room, but it was not really until 'The Invasion of Time' (4 February–11 March 1978) that we ventured further than a few corridors into the ship's interior. It is clear that the craft is attuned in some way to the Doctor, and can help in the regeneration process, but mostly it remains a device to get the characters to a situation and then strand them there, rather than a narrative location in its own right.

The character of the Doctor was initially mysterious, and rather sinister. He kidnaps the two teachers who have discovered his and his granddaughter's secret, and later puts them all in danger by stranding them on Skaro. In William Hartnell, they were casting a mainstay of many classic British films – he's there as a gangster in *Brighton Rock* (1943), for example, and most disturbingly as an elderly talent scout somewhat interested in Richard Harris's body in the British New Wave classic *This Sporting Life* (1963). The Doctor's character is firm, dogmatic, patriarchal and moral, given to addressing people.

Some of the narrative interest came from how little we were told about his origins; we knew he was in exile but not why or where from, and we would not meet another member of his species until the Meddling Monk in 1965 – the species not being identified as Time Lords until 'The War Games' (19 April–21 June 1969), the planet not being referred to as Gallifrey even then. By the 1970s and 1980s renegade Time Lords were more common than sightings of Lord Lucan, but in the early days the Doctor and Susan (Carole Ann Ford) seemed alone in the universe, although they might one day return home.

Susan was ostensibly the Doctor's granddaughter, though we've never had a clear sense of the Time Lords' social patterns or their reproductive strategies. Whilst subsequent doctors have shown affection for their companions – such as perhaps for Jo Grant (Katy Manning), and let's draw a veil over the ninety-minute adventure with one of the McGanns – the Doctor seems to have taken a vow of chastity along with his exile. Susan was clearly there as a point of identification for the younger members of the audience, who presumably share her love of The Beatles and other classical music, and also as the first of the long line of damsels in distress and screamers who would be menaced, kidnapped, imprisoned and put in peril. Part way into the second year of the series she was abandoned by the Doctor in twenty-second century Earth, to help David (Peter Fraser) rebuild after the Dalek invasion. As far as I know it remains unexplored as to whether she could regenerate without a TARDIS nearby, or whether she simply died of old age.

The remaining two characters of the initial season were both teachers, who again the young audience could identify with. Barbara (Jacqueline Hill) was a bit of a maternal figure, and a teacher of history, which would

The character of the Doctor was initially mysterious, and rather sinister.

allow for information to be fed to the audience where necessary. Ian (William Russell), on the other hand, was a science teacher, and could be used to explain the science, or have the science explained to him. As the effective juvenile lead, he could be physical in a way that this incarnation of the Doctor was unable to be. The two characters lasted through to almost to the end of the second season, using a Dalek time machine to get home.

Through the first three seasons, the Doctor and his companions helped out in key points of Earth history, saved the world on several occasions and brought rapprochement to various alien races. They were a plucky crew, who became major world players – perhaps a metaphor for the way Britain saw itself in international politics. But almost as successful as them was the first alien menace they faced – the Daleks.

The concept of the Daleks was that of Terry Nation, who was at the time (briefly) writing material for another British institution whose shows united a nation, Tony Hancock. Nation's vision of the Dalek broke from the 'man in the rubber suit' alien which had plagued much television and film sf previously, and remains a problem even in these days of CGI. The scenario of the post-nuclear war mutant would be very much in people's minds in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis and an apparently unstoppable arms race. The demand was clearly there for them to return, which they did in the previously mentioned 'Dalek Invasion of Earth' (21 November-26 December 1964), which transferred Daleks from the alien metal cities of Skaro to Westminster Bridge. A third appearance marked the second season, 'The Chase' (22 May-26 June 1965) and a fourth and fifth the third ('Mission to the Unknown' [9 October 1965], and 'The Daleks' Master Plan' [13 November-29 January 1966]). Just as the Quatermass serials from the 1950s had been remade for the large screen, so were the first two Dalek serials, with Peter Cushing replacing William Hartnell as the Doctor, and Roy (Recordbreakers) Castle and Bernard Cribbins becoming comic relief companions in *Doctor Who and the Daleks* (1965) and *Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150AD* (1966) respectively.

The dropping of the eponymous 'Doctor' from the title of the second film may say something about the BBC's uneasy relationship with the film industry in this and subsequent decades. But on the other hand there was the marketability. The Daleks had guaranteed the continuance of the sf series, and brought it the Saturday evening ratings the BBC wished to steal from ITV, but it was the Daleks that dominated merchandising, with Terry Nation rightly exploiting his creation. Alongside Beatlemania there was now Dalekmania as schoolchildren in playgrounds across Britain began to imitate the deadly pepperpots. Toys, sweets, comics, wallpaper and so on featured Daleks, and even the BBC got in on the act as David Whitaker, the series script editor, wrote the first of the novelisations *Doctor Who in an Exciting Adventure with the Daleks*. One of the shared characteristics of the series is the *fort-da* experience of watching it from behind the sofa, or through

a hand half blocking the television. We were scared out of our wits by the series, but were compelled to watch.

Nation withdrew the rights to using the Daleks during the early Pertwee era, in an attempt to get a spin-off series off the ground in the United States, but this failed. By all accounts Pertwee was unimpressed by a nemesis which could be defeated by a flight of stairs. Eventually they returned, and then revisionism set in – in one of the darkest sequences of the entire run, 'Genesis of the Daleks' (8 March-12 April 1975) we discovered that the Daleks came from Kaleds not Dals, and the Doctor is sent by the Time Lords to intervene to prevent the creation of the Daleks by Davros (the Time Lords' non-intervention policy by then being as much observed as the *Star Trek* prime directive). The Doctor weighed up the pros of a genocide which would spare countless millions against the cons of alliance against the Daleks no longer happening to bring people together. Subsequent Dalek narratives were further weighed down by continuity, and the recurring figure of Davros who, as politically incorrect evil crippled geniuses go, seems pretty indestructible. How many protective forcefields does one paranoid megalomaniac need?

But this is to get ahead of ourselves. The increasing ill-health of Hartnell might have seen the end of the series, until a bright spark had the idea of regenerating the hero – or, rather, rejuvenating him – into Patrick Troughton (final episode of 'The Tenth Planet' [29 October 1966]). Troughton was a much more whimsical figure than the rather po-faced Hartnell version, and was described as a cosmic hobo, complete with recorder and Beatles haircut. This was British as jokester, never quite taking things seriously, and perhaps less in control. After 'The Highlanders' (17 December 1966-7 January 1967) provided

a new companion, Jamie (Frazer Hines), purely historical adventures were left behind and monsters took prominence – the Daleks, naturally, but also the Cybermen who had seen off the old Doctor, and new menaces such as the Ice Warriors (one of many species to inhabit Mars over the millennia) and the robotic Yeti. The second encounter with the Yeti, on and under the streets of contemporary London, saw the introduction of Lethbridge-Stewart (Nicholas Courtney) who would later command the United Nations

Intelligence Taskforce (UNIT) just in time to rescue Earth from a series of alien invasions.

When Troughton moved on, he was replaced by Jon Pertwee, man of a thousand voices and cast here as a dandy figure, in a series of frilly shirts and opera capes, and now in glorious colour. For most of his first three seasons (1970-1972), the Doctor was confined to Earth (exiled by those pesky non-interfering Time Lords), although not necessarily in the present. As scientific advisor to UNIT he saw off no end of alien invasions, and faced down but never entirely defeated an evil Time Lord, the Master (Roger Delgado), who was meddling in the affairs of Earth. Supposedly the series had a greater realism, its UNIT being perhaps a cousin of UNCLE and the money saved from building locations going into James Bond gadgets – a

...schoolchildren in playgrounds across Britain began to imitate the deadly pepperpots

souped-up vintage car, Bessie; gyrocoptors; the Whomobile – and Pertwee turning to action heroics (Venusian Aikido) perhaps closer to *The Avengers* than Bond, but clearly part of a British tradition of action fantasy.

Producer Barry Letts and script editor Terrance Dicks together oversaw all but the first of Pertwee's adventures (Dicks had been there for much of the final Troughton season) and celebrated the tenth season by bringing back Hartnell and Troughton for 'The Three Doctors' (30 December 1972-20 January 1973) – albeit Hartnell was limited in what he could do – and then got the Doctor back into space. The greater emphasis on the military during the whole era, as well as its contemporary setting, frequently brought the show into conflict with Mary Whitehouse of the National Viewers and Listeners Association, who condemned the series' violence. This was, after all, the era of the ultraviolent or horrific film – the era of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). With killer teddy bears in one episode and giant spiders in another, rather more domestic fears were being played on than exterminating peppercorns.

Tom Baker was brought in to replace Jon Pertwee in 1974, and largely continued this horror, albeit in a more gothic vein. In the context of the Troubles, the on-going industrial unrest and the oil crises of the first half of the decade, it was only natural to retreat into such fantasies. Where Pertwee had been 'English dandy', Baker was 'English eccentric' – although he brought a very non-English alienness to the rôle, with his piercing eyes. With his jelly babies, his broad brimmed hat, his long coat and his even longer scarf he was instantly recognisable and open to parody – indeed, in his later seasons, self-parody, as a hat could disable a Dalek or a scarf trip up an enemy.

His companions continued to reflect the strides made in feminism in the real world. Both Dr Liz Shaw (Caroline John) and Jo Grant had their moments of strength, but risked being patronised by the Doctor; Sarah Jane Smith (Elizabeth Sladen), who first appeared with Pertwee, continued into Baker's reign, and was a card-carrying feminist. She was even smart enough to bemoan the fact that she seemed to spend a lot of time crawling through ventilation ducts. In time she was replaced by Leela, speedy with the knife and very self-reliant, but also very much there to bring the dads and uncles and even the occasional grandfather in to watch the programme (my own certainly perked up when he saw her). No sooner had Leela decided to stay behind on Gallifrey, when the Doctor was provided with Romana (Mary Tamm), a Time Lady, to help him in his new mission, to track down the pieces of the Key to Time. Romana was much haughtier than previous companions, less willing to bow to his wishes and when she reincarnated (into Lalla Ward), she was more of an equal to the Doctor than someone who needed everything explaining.

But changes were afoot, in the wider world and in *Doctor Who*. After seven years Baker tired of the rôle and was replaced by an actor best known for being a hapless vet in *All Creatures Great and Small* and advertising all

manner of things on ITV, as well as being the presenter of *Button Moon*. Peter Davison was clearly a name who could boost the ratings – unlike Alexei Sayle who had lobbied for the job in the unlikely venue of *Foundation*, and had to be content with a rôle in a Colin Baker Dalek story. The ratings needed to be boosted, because the duopoly was about to be broken.

For the best part of twenty years the BBC and the various ITV franchises had divided the television airwaves between them. A new commercial, state-owned channel was set up, Channel 4, linked by a complicated formula involving advertising to the ITV companies, and with a remit (like BBC2) to offer broadcasting for minorities, especially ethnic minorities and the disabled, although it is difficult to see what minority audience is reached by *Friends* and *The Salon* today. They started broadcasting on 2 November 1982 with an episode of *Countdown*. The ground was also being cleared for satellite broadcasts and opening up the market to a multi-channel environment, although this did not actually happen until the 1980s. Under Thatcher everything was up for grabs, and that included the Royal Charter and the tv license – which the Peacock report suggested should be replaced with a pay-per-view system.

In the new marketplace a BBC that made programmes that people wanted to see would be accused of dumbing down, being too commercial and of using its position to compete unfairly, whereas a BBC that made programmes nobody watched would be accused of wasting the licence fee. It was still the favoured broadcaster in times of crisis – the BBC was the

channel to watch the Falklands War on, for example – or to watch at Christmas (and many a Christmas feels like a crisis) but it consistently lost out to ITV's *Coronation Street*. Eventually it hit back with Terry Wogan's thrice-weekly chat show and a new soap set in the East End of London, but in the mean time it experimented by showing *Doctor Who* twice a week – putting a end to the tradition of the Saturday night and undermining the suspense of the drama.

Peter Davison, playing again a very English doctor, with a love of cricket, in cricket whites (which looked like pyjamas) and sporting an inexplicable stick of celery (explicated in his final story as a plot device), promised to bring a new vulnerability to the part after the superhuman efforts of the late Baker years. This of course explained why he was able to float around in space with little more than an aqualung and use a cricket ball to bounce himself into moving in the direction he wanted. At the same time, some of the scripts were the best in years – Eric Saward's *The Visitation* (15 February-23 February 1982) and *Earthshock* (8 March-16 March 1982) being particularly fine, even if we did lose the sonic screwdriver and Adrie in the process. The Cybermen returned, the sea devils returned and the Daleks returned, although inexplicably the latter happened in a two-part adventure with fifty-minute episodes.

The series limped towards its twentieth anniversary and like ten years before there was an attempt to make an adventure which would bring all the previous doctors together. Hartnell, who had of course died, was replaced

Where Pertwee had been 'English dandy', Baker was 'English eccentric'

by Richard Hurndall and Tom Baker, still too close to the rôle, refused to be involved and so was represented by footage from the uncompleted 'Shada'. Alongside the eponymous five doctors were a variety of past companions, some still looking remarkably young, and past adversaries, but the overall problem was that it was so busy trying to shoe-horn everyone into the narrative that it did not do anything interesting in itself. The BBC helpfully pushed the showing back from the anniversary itself to 25 November 1983, which happened to coincide with the BBC Children in Need Appeal. Perhaps the feeling was that the public service broadcaster was delivering an audience to a worthy cause, but the drama was rather undercut by the display of a recurring phone number and scrolling appeals – this was in the days before permanently onscreen logos.

There was a growing sense that the BBC had lost faith in the programme. Other sf series were tried out, including two seasons of *The Tripods* in 1984 and 1985 which were given that all-important Saturday tea time slot where the sf narrative traditionally belonged. The Tripods were here to stay and replace the Daleks – although sooner or later they would have to leave the source books by John Christopher behind. This usurper never did get the ratings the BBC hoped for, and Michael Grade pulled the plug. In 1987 a series called *Star Cops* tried to combine sf and crime narratives, to mixed results and indifferent ratings. Only an sf sitcom, *Red Dwarf* (1988-), seemed to have the legs to get beyond a second season. If a series did not get the viewers immediately, then the plug was pulled.

Doctor Who was living on borrowed time; Davison was replaced by Colin Baker who had previously played a Time Lord (Maxil in 'Arc of Infinity' [3 January-12 January 1983]), and brought what I felt was a refreshing contrast to Davison's earnestness: the self-centredness and pomposity which occasionally rose to the surface in the Doctor's character was given full rein and this was a Doctor who wanted you to know how often he saved the world. After his first complete season in 1985, Baker found the series he was in suspended thanks to Michael Grade's axe. When the series returned after an eighteen month hiatus, it was to a fourteen-episode story arc consisting of a number of narratives told at the Doctor's trial by the Time Lords. The first story was one of the last to be written by Robert Holmes, one of the series' best writers, but this was not one of his finer hours; in contrast, parts of the final two episodes, which echoed Dickens by way of Franz Kafka, were among the very best things he had written. Unfortunately the season made no sense, and the recruitment of Bonnie Langford as a new companion was a sign of worse things to come.

I confess I have a prejudice against Sylvester McCoy, who replaced the sacked Baker, after seeing him in *Buster*, one of the worst plays ever. I drifted away from the series, especially as Bonnie Langford was replaced by Ace, a yoofful tomboy who was a dab hand with the dynamite and who seemed to fly in the face of the series' stance on violence. Richard Briers was in one episode, Ken Dodd in another and even Nicholas Parsons (although he acquitted

himself admirably). In one serial the villain even appeared to be Bertie Bassett, although I must have dreamt that, surely. If there was a sofa to hide behind, it was from fear for quality, not the quality of fear. It was also perhaps odd to see a quintessentially British character (which in this case probably means English) having a Scottish accent. The BBC's patience finally ran out in 1989 about three years after mine; in the multi-channel world, the audience was much too fragmented to waste time on a series as much concerned with its own past as reaching new audiences.

Doctor Who from then on would be a product, allowed occasional repeats (but the BBC even messed around with those, pulling them from the schedule, interrupting them for sport) on terrestrial channels, and a mainstay of repeat channels on satellite. The series could be exploited on video, and in time on DVD, and books could be licensed, although at times the BBC decided that they would much rather do them themselves. What there would not be was a new series.

Let's face it, *Doctor Who* was always ramshackle in its writing, acting, sets and effects, and always worked within a limited budget. And yet working within the budget produced a remarkably good, and intriguing series which rang changes on many classic ideas of the genre. It was a typical British triumph in adversity, succeeding against all odds.

After years of rumours the worst thing happened: the BBC entered into a co-production with Universal to make a ninety-minute pilot (broadcast 27 May 1996 – entirely inappropriate for a programme that belongs to dark, early evenings). In a sense this could never have worked. There is something about the rhythm of *Doctor Who* that requires a cliff-hanger after twenty-five minutes or so, and the forty-five and fifty minute episodes had just felt wrong, as indeed had the ninety minutes of 'The Five Doctors'. *Doctor Who* never shared the glibness of *Star Trek* which could save the world in forty-five minutes (plus advert breaks). Casting Paul McGann from *Withnail and I* (1986) was an interesting touch, although casting Withnail (Richard E. Grant) rather than I would have been better. And just to annoy us they starting playing unfair with things we thought we knew – suddenly the Doctor was half-human.

Britain has changed much in forty years, of course. It is much more ethnically diverse, it is much more open to non-British influences, and strides have been made towards gender equality. We are no longer so deferential to politicians. We are much more cynical. But also, we spend less time as family units watching television together – event tv is limited to the occasional state funeral and finals of *Big Brother* or *Pop Idol*, and some episodes of soaps. TVs in bedrooms, videos allowing us to time shift, up to five terrestrial channels, hundreds of cable, satellite or digital channels, and the internet have fragmented the viewing figures so there is no longer the sense that everyone is watching a particular programme. The BBC lost the rights to many of the sports it could show unchallenged in the 1960s, first to ITV and then to Sky. Parkinson is a

the recruitment of Bonnie Langford as a new companion was a sign of worse things to come.

spent cultural force. In other words, the Saturday that *Doctor Who* was part of no longer exists. We cannot go back.

Of course, in the unlikely event that the BBC do manage a fortieth anniversary special or, ten years from now, a fiftieth anniversary one, I would be tempted to watch it. But I'm not holding out much hope. *Queer as Folk* might have made *Doctor Who* cool again, and Russell T. Davies has written sf, but that moment, too, has passed. One day, perhaps, the BBC will find an sf format as interesting as *Doctor Who* was for two decades – but it won't and it can't be the same. Because we have also changed.

Postscript

I've left the previous paragraph unchanged, but in the period since I wrote it, the BBC announced a revamp of *Doctor Who* under the supervision of Russell T. Davies, although it will be 2005 before we are likely to see anything. The name being bandied around to play the Doctor is Bill Nighy, so the female Doctor seems not about to happen. Nighy is an excellent choice – I was first aware of him in Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*, but I suspect he was the William Nighy who played Sam in the classic Radio 4 adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. He was excellent in the film of *I Capture the Castle* (2003), and he does come from Croydon, which is qualification enough. Predictably, given Davies's record, the media are suggesting a camp *Doctor Who*, but let's wait and see.

Like Chris Hill (see his article), I am sceptical of it happening, and hope to see it in a double bill with Terry Gilliam's *Good Omens*, something else which several have assured me will most definitely happen, oh yes. Just as I could not be the same child who watched *Star Wars* (1977) when *The Phantom Menace* (1999) was released, so I cannot hide behind the sofa anymore (even if the space

weren't taken up by books and videos). The children, the teenagers, who watched the last regular series are old enough to have their own children, but the dynamics of family viewing have changed. In a post-*Buffy*, *Roswell High*, *Dawson's Creek* world we are much more used to see the kind of cross-over programme that *Doctor Who* has always been, but with teenagers (albeit eighteen going on thirty in its choice of actors) at the centre, and adults more peripheral. These programmes are also more sexual than *Doctor Who* ever was. An alternate model might be *The X-Files*, which was able to maintain a non-sexual relationship at its heart for many years. And there are the models of *Jonathan Creek*, *Strange* and the remakes of *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)* to consider.

It could happen, of course, but the best we can hope for is either pastiche, or a transformation into something else.

Notes

1. Monroe Price, 'Loyalty and Identity'. In *Television, the Public Sphere and National Identity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 6.
2. Ibid.
3. Of course the supermarket trolley is a time machine in Pratchett's Johnny Maxwell trilogy, especially *Johnny and the Bomb* (1996).

I am also indebted to Mark Campbell, *Doctor Who*, Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2000 for broadcast dates.

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Andrew M. Butler's latest two books are *Postmodernism (with Bob Ford, Pocket Essentials)* and *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod (edited with Farah Mendlesohn, Science Fiction Foundation)* — Eds.

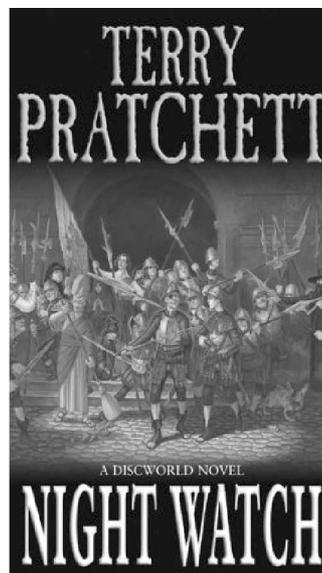
The People's Republic Of Treacle Mine Road Betrayed: Terry Pratchett's *Night Watch* by John Newsinger

The relentless onward march of the publishing phenomenon continues unchecked. His particular brand of 'Third Way' fantasy seems irresistible, sweeping aside all critical obstacles, as it ruthlessly colonises the fantasy shelves of the country's bookshops. His many fans (generally known as 'prats' and notoriously lacking in a sense of humour) seem to have an insatiable desire for more of the same, and, of course, more of the same is what they get. Many of these unfortunates are beyond help. What hope is there for someone who thinks 'Cut My Own Throat' Dibbler is a side-splittingly funny name in this, the twenty-seventh Discworld novel? A humane death seems a positive kindness for such individuals. And, of course, only recently, Pratchett has been the subject of a collection of critical essays, *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of*

Terry Pratchett Literature (2000), edited by Andrew M. Butler, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. A more accurate title would have been a simple *Terry Pratchett: Guilty* but there you go.

In the *Terry Pratchett: Guilty* collection, Edward James has an interesting essay discussing the City Watch novels. Here he makes the important point that Pratchett's readers "in all their millions have, whether they realise it or not, been given serious lessons in politics, civics and ethics". Let us explore this insight with reference to *Night Watch*.

Night Watch sees Sam Vimes (by now Sir Samuel Vimes, Duke of Ankh) in pursuit of a murderer. A magical anomaly transports the two of them back in time to when Ankh-Morpork was ruled by the mad tyrant, Lord Winder. The young Sam Vimes has just joined the city watch and his older self substitutes



himself for his mentor, John Keel. Vimes has returned to dangerously interesting times with the city on the edge of revolution. How does Pratchett deal with the issues this crisis in the city's history raises? What are the "serious lessons – in politics, civics and ethics" that he has to offer?

It is the contention of this article that one of the concerns of Pratchett's Discworld novels has always been the maintenance of social order. The extent to which this theme pushes itself to the front varies from novel to novel, but it is always there. Whereas in the early novels the tendency was to focus on characters negotiating their way through a mad world, increasingly the focus is on sustaining that world, on preserving the social order. This concern is absolutely central to *Night Watch*.

Vimes confronts a tyrannical ruler kept in power by a secret police force, the Unmentionables, that have imposed a reign of terror throughout the city. This is serious stuff and in Findthree Swing, the head of the secret police, Pratchett has created a suitably malign character. This régime has to be overthrown. There is no alternative. Pratchett, however, abhors the very idea of revolution, this is after all 'Third Way' fantasy, and he has to come up with a revolution that is not really a revolution at all. As Vimes muses, it is "a kind of revolution. That wasn't really the word for what it was". Indeed, Vimes has much to say about revolution in the course of the novel.

Real revolutions, he insists on one occasion, just involve the rich and powerful reorganising the government for their own benefit so that "All that stuff in the streets is just froth". And again: "Don't put your trust in revolutions. They always come round again. That's why they're called revolutions. People die and nothing changes". And what about the revolutionaries:

There were plotters, there was no doubt about it. Some had been ordinary people who'd had enough. Some were very young people with no money who objected to the fact that the world was run by old people who were rich. Some were in it for the girls. And some had been idiots as mad as Swing, with a view of the world just as rigid and unreal, who were on the side of what they called "the people".

This leads Vimes into a seriously reactionary discussion of the people that would delight a sub-editor at the *Sun*:

People on the side of the People always ended up disappointed... They found that the People tended not to be grateful or appreciative or forward-thinking or obedient. The People tended to be small-minded and conservative and not very clever and were even distrustful of cleverness. And so the children of the revolution were faced with the age-old problem: it wasn't that you had the wrong kind of government, which was obvious, but that you had the wrong kind of people.

This is really very cleverly done because what you have here is

a quite blatant display of contempt for the common people that nevertheless successfully masquerades as a defence of the common people against those who don't regard them with contempt. The *Sun* does this every day but not nearly so well. What we have here is a quite a reactionary opinion trying to pass itself off as common-sense. Let me hasten to add that this pseudo-populism is certainly not Pratchett's only voice, merely the one that he increasingly resorts to when the social order is threatened. Indeed, even Vimes has a moment of radical temptation when he considers turning the revolution into a real revolution, but inevitably a cynical worldliness prevails.

Vimes, somewhat reluctantly, finds himself leading the night watch of Treacle Mine Road in revolt against Winder's tyranny, storming the Unmentionables headquarters, organising the innovative moving barricades and defeating all attempts by the military at restoring order. The common people rally to the People's Republic of Treacle Mine Road, precipitating Winder's downfall, although he is replaced by someone exactly the same, although not quite so mad, Lord Snapcase. The barricades came down and life, although not without more bloodshed, returns to normal. Vimes, his job done, returns to his proper place in time.

What we have with *Night Watch* is probably Pratchett's greatest joke ever: a revolution that is actually carried out by the police! This is obviously the only safe sort of revolution. Tyranny can be overthrown, but the revolution won't go too far because the police will be able to protect private property.

None of this left-wing socialism rubbish in Ankh-Morpork. Indeed, the attempt by Reg Shoe, Ankh-Morpork's 'Wolfie Smith', to inject some radicalism into the proceedings are the subject of considerable ridicule. No one could be more out of touch. His heart is in the right place, but he needs a reality check. None of this, of course, has any relation to the actual sociology of revolutions which involve a process of popular radicalisation, but, to be fair, this is a work of fiction set on a flat world resting on the back of a giant turtle, swimming through space.

But why write a novel with these particular concerns? My own view is that when you look at the development of the Discworld novels the concern with social order has grown as Pratchett himself has prospered. Whereas the concerns of the young Pratchett were given expression through the experiences of someone like Rincewind, for the older Pratchett Sir Samuel Vimes, the Duke of Ankh, a man who came from the common people, but is now weighted down with honours and wealth, is more appropriate. Vimes sometimes feels "like a class traitor", but with his new position comes responsibility. Terry Pratchett OBE finds himself in the same position.

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John Newsinger is the author of Dredd Phenomenon: Comics and Contemporary Society and has reviewed for both Foundation and Vector, among other places. Night Watch is published by Corgi in paperback — Ed.





First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger

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

Ashok K. Banker – *The Siege of Mithila* [📖]

Orbit, London, 2003, 531pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-198-5

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

This is the second of a projected sequence of seven novels narrating the Indian epic, *The Ramayana*, in an imaginatively interpretative style aimed to make it accessible to Western minds. The action in the first volume, *Prince of Ayodhya* (reviewed in *Vector* 229), took place chiefly in two centres, the court of the dying maharaja Desaratha at Ayodhya, and the ashram (and its surrounding forests) of the brahmarishi Vishwamitra whom Rama and Lakshman, the princely sons of Desaratha, had been requisitioned to protect against the intrusion of assuran (demonic) forces. Agents of these forces had also insidiously infiltrated Ayodhya, and the present volume continues as a two-centred narrative, the action ultimately moving towards a third centre, the holy city of Mithila, which Ravana, king of the assuras, purposes to take before proceeding to Ayodhya with the intention of so destroying the whole Arya civilisation. In

the course of all this, Ravana has deviously, but legalistically, claimed the hand of Sita, princess of Mithila, but the claim's fulfilment is thwarted by her suitor, Rama.



The switch of the often cliff-hanging action between chapters, sometimes within a chapter, mixes anticipation with frustration in following this compelling story, but the dichotomy nevertheless aspects a single scenario. The language of its telling flows naturally, though not without a few well-intentioned but slightly jarring anachronisms: 'chauvinism', particularly when applied sexually, is a very modern word and concept, as is 'macho', while definition of India as 'the subcontinent' is out of key historically. Ashok Banker's feel for, and understanding of, the Indian landscape, its forests, rivers and beasts, comes through strongly. There is, for example, a graphic appreciation of elephant nature and behaviour in his

account of the ashram party on the move towards Mithila: "The mahouts urged their bigfoot on with words of praise and shouts of encouragement. The bigfoot, happy to be mobile after eight days of inactivity, complied enthusiastically, putting their enormous wrinkled heads down and traipsing as smartly as horses on a marching field." He also appreciates the hill-forest black bears and his picturing of the first night-time sighting of the sacred River Ganga (Ganges) is memorable, "dark and resplendent as a rope of black velvet".

While giving his narrative a spin towards modern novelistic acceptability, Banker does not fail to impress on his readers the deep metaphysical dimensions of the epic –

the concept of dhama and of "the wheel of time, the great samay chakra that governs all our lives, gods and mortals and asura alike". Sanskrit words are used frequently, but a ten-page, small-print, alphabetical glossary assists readers to become easily acquainted with them. In fact, to browse through that compilation, with its extended explanations at crucial points, is an education in itself. The cast of characters is large and their names/identities take some sorting out. A glossary of these would have been helpful, though the personalities, roles and destinies of the leading proponents do establish themselves effectively as kaand (section) succeeds kaand and volume succeeds volume.

James Barclay – *Shadowheart*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 421pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07331-4

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

James Barclay's latest novel is another in his ongoing series, titled *Legends of the Raven*, and picks up after events in his previous book, *Elfsorrow*.

The remnants of The Raven are mourning the loss of Ilkar, but events are moving too quickly for them to mourn properly. Having observed the Raven's code of honouring their dead, The Unknown Warrior, Hired Coldheart, Thraun, Denser and Erienne, along with the Lysternan General Darrick (now a member of The Raven) arrive at Lystern for Darrick's court martial for desertion. The outcome of this is that Darrick has to be rescued from execution by the rest of The Raven, rendering themselves public enemy number one in both Lystern and Dordova (who have joined forces against Xetesk).

Meanwhile, Xetesk is under siege by the forces of Lystern and Dordova, and the Elven TaiGethen and Al-Arynaar are assisting in order to retrieve their sacred texts, stolen by Xetesk in *Elfsorrow*. The Xeteskians, however, are planning to use those texts, once translated, to make a break and decisively destroy the other college's resistance, thus paving the way for Xetesk to ultimately rule Balaia.

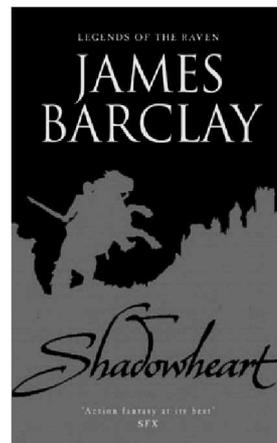
Dordova's magic is failing, and The Heart, the seat of Dordovan power, must be raised again in order to maintain the college equilibrium. The Raven must assist with this as it was the dying wish of Ilkar, and The Raven never welch

on their promises.

So, all in all, The Raven have a pretty busy book ahead – they've got to keep Lystern and Dordova from catching and executing Darrick. They have to help the Elves retrieve their stolen sacred texts; help Dordova raise The Heart and they still have to get the dragon Sha-Kaan back to his own dimension, release the 'Protectors' from Xeteskian control and protect Erienne, who is wanted by every mage in the land because she now is the single living repository of the 'One Magic'. Then there are the Wesmen, who unfortunately have noticed that now might be a good time to take Balaia for their own whilst everyone else is busy slaughtering each other.

As with all of Barclay's books on The Raven to date, this one is bursting at the seams with action. In fact, there are times when the reader is simply overwhelmed by all that is actually going on. Like *The Raven*, this reader is physically and mentally drained after all the action and is glad of the few months' rest before the next instalment.

I hope fantasy fans will not be put off by the publishers' strange decision to re-design the covers of Barclay's books and colour the ends of the pages. They may look like awful 60's imported American fiction, or even vaguely pornographic, but the contents are still the very best of today's heroic fantasy. Not to be missed.



Stephen Baxter – *Coalescent*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 473pp, £17.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-575-07423

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

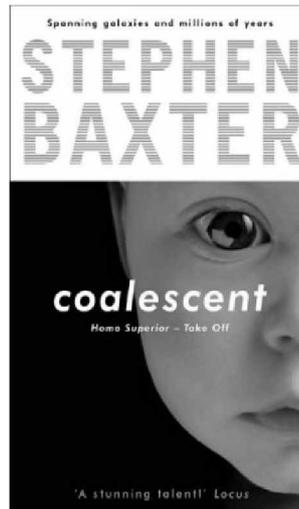
We are so used to Stephen Baxter working on the grandest of scales that it comes as a surprise to find *Coalescent – Destiny's Children Book One* beginning in the most mundane manner imaginable, with disaffected middle-aged software tester George Poole dealing with the aftermath of his father's death. The characterisation is stronger than anything I have read from Baxter before, the tone more intimately contemporary and introspective. George becomes reacquainted with Peter, an old school colleague

who had cared for his father and is now a web-designer with the gift of seeing patterns which may link into conspiracies, or simply into unacknowledged cosmological histories. While Poole finds he may have a sister he never knew about, Peter is concerned with an anomaly beyond the solar system, an enigma involving dark matter and evidence for war among the stars. A quest to reconnect with his family takes George to Florida, allowing the plot to take in such Baxter favourites as NASA and a space shuttle

launch, before moving on to Rome.

As I mentioned in my review of *Phase Space*, Baxter constantly references sf itself, and here the references come in the form of much discussion of the *TV21* comic (about which Baxter wrote in-depth in *Vector 224*) as well as to H.G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon*. There is another implicit rather than explicit reference: Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* books. For while Poole eventually arrives in Rome, alternate chapters follow Regina, who may be one of George's ancestors, and who was born in Britain in the last years of the Roman occupation. Her odyssey will lead her from near Dorchester to Hadrian's Wall, and on to Rome where she establishes her equivalent of a 'foundation' to protect her family far into the future.

Coalescent is divided into three long sections with a brief fourth making a coda. The first part of the book is gripping and intriguing; a more literary and personal odyssey than anything Baxter has attempted before. Unfortunately the tale sags a little in the middle, the result not just of a little too much info-dumping and one too many history lessons, but also due to the disappearance of George. Indeed, Poole vanishes from the narrative for 160 pages while Baxter alternates Regina's saga with the life of 15 year-old Luca, a member of the very strange Puissant Order of Holy Mary Queen of Virgins. It's all increasingly bleak, an Ira Levin nightmare somewhere between the bio-sexual corruption of *The Stepford Wives* and *Rosemary's Baby*.



Meanwhile, the initially sympathetic Regina becomes increasingly monstrous, so much so that one sticking point in the plot has to be the question of why her daughter, Brica, continues to go along with Regina's vile demands. It is a relief when George returns to the book and the final sections develop some real tension and dramatic impetus.

There's a lot to commend here. The unfolding history of Rome, secret and otherwise, is fascinating, and Baxter fills his story with intriguing detail, imaginative ideas and twists, resulting in an ending which, if not exactly thrilling, is satisfyingly complete, yet offers plenty of threads for later volumes. There are interesting resonances with the fall of the Roman Empire and the end of the British Empire – which fell apart as the author was growing up, just as Roman Britain ended during Regina's youth. The far-future coda – something we have come to expect from Baxter – is chillingly effective; though be warned, along with some extremely savage imagery, the whole book is at times very dark. Elsewhere, while giving rise to an interesting spin on freedom versus the destiny of the title, some of the biological notions seriously stretch credibility, and parts of the plot depend on the Hollywood notion that a 17 year-old with a laptop can hack any data necessary. Even so *Coalescent* is an absorbing start to a new series, though at almost 500 pages

somewhat on the stolid side (and I do hope the deeply frustrating errors of chronology and continuity which plague the first section of the proof copy have been corrected by the time the book reaches the shops).

Ray Bradbury – *One More for the Road*

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

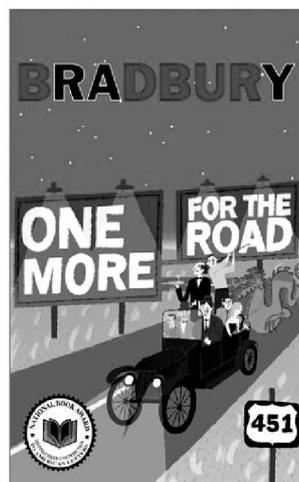
Earthlight, London, 2003, 290pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-7434-4074-9.

A new Bradbury collection is a celebration, a July 4th rocket, bare feet in the dew on a crisp autumn morning, a childhood you can never leave behind. I remember being curled up in a sleeping bag on the settee (my grandmother had my room for some reason) and watching *The Martian Chronicles*, having just bought both that and *Stranger in a Strange Land* from the new school bookshop. I remember finding *The Halloween Tree* in a glorious hardback illustrated edition in the village library, losing it to other borrowers and then, miraculously, buying it when the library disposed of it. Hunting out battered paperbacks of the Granada and Grafton collections, disdaining the easy (but misleading) route of the two-volumed collected stories. The shiny new Earthlight editions never quite felt right, nor, paradoxically, do the new collections (*Quicker Than the Eye*, for one), but now Earthlight is gone and we mourn and we think about what was. Nostalgia is infectious.

Bradbury found his voice in the 1940s, aided by Leigh

Brackett amongst others, and it has served him well for the last (good grief) sixty decades. It would be tempting to ask if we'd have missed anything if the river had been dammed in 1960 – or 1962, to include *Something Wicked this Way Comes* – and the answer is little, aside perhaps from the novel *Death is a Lonely Business* (1985). To be honest, we've simply had more of the same. His poetry has always seemed more prosaic than his prose (too much Walt Whitman), and few of the TV adaptations have quite caught the flavour, but the short stories continue much as before. Reading the twenty-five stories collected here – only seven of which are reprints – I thought perhaps the language was less rich than I remembered, the dialogue more extensive, but this is as true of the story here from the 1940s as those from the 1960s and 1980s. We revisit Green Town, the haunted cities of California, Mexico and Paris, we meet Hemingway, Melville, Laurel and Hardy, again.

It is striking that so little has happened since the 1930s – Bradbury's aesthetic was formed not only by the great



American writers but also by Lon Chaney and the black and white gothic films prior to sound. It is a world of horror as well as sentiment – but I think it is a world which hasn't seen Hitchcock, let alone Tobe Hooper or Wes Craven. Several of the stories here involve revisiting the 1930s, in memory, in dreams, via a time machine, or re-encountering friends and acquaintances last seen in the 1930s, or meeting people who, by supernatural or medical means, still think they are in the 1930s. And what has happened since? One character, still reading 1938 newspapers, doesn't want to know what happened to Hoover – J. Edgar rather than Herbert, I presume, but I'm not certain.

The Second World War has happened, of course, and was important, and Korea and Vietnam merit passing mentions, but no Watergate, no Reagan, no Gulf conflict, no HIV... There are computers, occasionally, as a tool for writers, and the internet merits a disparaging mention – but these seem jarring, at odds, almost science-fictional. It would be easy to dismiss all of this as simple nostalgia and sentiment, were it not for the sense of the lives of quiet desperation which are being illustrated here. In "My Son, Max", a writer with an ability to lip-read listens in on a conversation between two parents and their adult son, several months after the son had come out. The father,

devastated by the news, now has devastating news of his own, which shocks his family, but in fact the father is performing to shock the eavesdropper. There's no consolation though. There's the gifted writer who lost it in drink ('Quid Pro Quo') who might be given a second chance, but will blow it, and the drunken projectionist who created avant garde art ('The Dragon Danced at Midnight') who sobers up and leaves his colleagues plying drinks to the cinema community in hope of recapturing it. Hemingway will still shoot himself.

In an afterword Bradbury briefly overturns the old cliché about where authors get their ideas from and ponders why so many seek him out. In his eighties, this old master can put together a collection with eighteen unpublished stories. Why haven't they been published before? It's not clear when these stories were written, although some of them seem to date from the last few years. Are there not enough short story markets to take him? Or has he gone out of fashion? That would be a shame, because Bradbury does what Bradbury does very well and this is a collection to be savoured.

Kristen Britain – *First Rider's Call*

Earthlight, London, 2003, 639pp, £10.99, t/b, ISBN 0-7434-6113-4

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

This novel is the second in a series concerning the life and times of Karigan G'ladheon, daughter of a cloth merchant who, in the first volume (*Green Rider*, reviewed in *Vector* 206), became a king's messenger by accident, and for a short time only. However, her plans to return home and carry on with the family business are thwarted when the spirit of the First Rider comes to her in her sleep and tells her to go and take up her calling – which she eventually does.

One year later, she is on a mission for her King as part of a delegation to contact the residents of Eletia, who have been seen in Sacordia (Karigan's home nation) and to find out their intentions. During the course of their explorations, they come across a magically-warded clearing, a place that Karigan's magical abilities tell her feels "wrong", but she cannot explain any further.

At the same time, something is stirring in Blackveil Forest – an ancient sentience that has been trapped there for years – and its attempts to escape are prevented by a wall built to keep it in. However, there is a weak section in the wall, and the sentience's call for help penetrates the wall, entering into Sacordia.

When Karigan's delegation is attacked by groundmites – bred in the distant past to be ferocious killers – one outcome is that the cairn in the warded clearing is broken open, and its occupant freed to roam the world. The

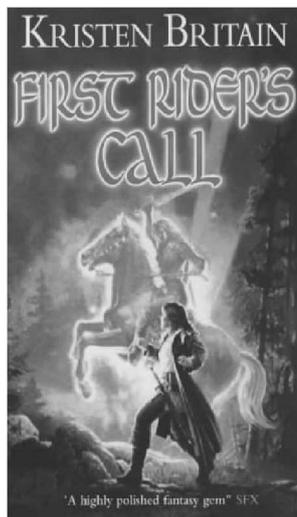
Eletians give her a message for her king: that dark powers are awakening.

In addition to this, there are things going wrong in Sacor City: the magic abilities that the Riders possess are failing at crucial moments, most notably when their Captain's ability to tell when someone is speaking the truth fails, which leads to the ill-treatment of refugees by one Lord going unchecked. Also, there is a secret faction at work, determined to overthrow the King and bring back the original Empire. Karigan, caught up in the middle of this, has to face the truth about her own heritage and defeat the enemy residing in the heart of Blackveil.

I have mixed feelings about this novel: the author has created, in the Green Riders, a group of people akin to Mercedes Lackey's Heralds or Anne McCaffrey's Dragonriders, sworn to defend their realm and their King, to the best of their ability. They are not unrealistic characters with all their faults and weaknesses, far from it, but the problem is that, at times, they become subservient to their magical abilities. For example, Karigan

travels in time on numerous occasions, most of which serve as history lessons from the distant past. In addition, the journal extracts scattered throughout the novel, useful as they are to fill in Sacordia's past, were, I felt, a slight distraction.

Having said that, the novel concludes on a positive note, with most of its loose ends tied up, and with scope for a further novel, which I would enjoy reading.



Keith Brooke & Nick Gevers (eds) – *Infinity Plus Two*

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2003, 282pp, £45.00, h/b, ISBN 1 902880 58 7

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

There are many arcane reasons for the particular selection of stories that appear in a reprint anthology. They might represent some measure of 'best', explore some specific theme, be stories rescued from obscurity, or display the individual taste of the editor(s). What they usually do not do is represent the taste of the contributors. But that is the premise of the *Infinity Plus* anthologies. A bunch of regular contributors to the infinity plus website have been asked to choose one of their stories for the anthology. The result is eccentric to say the least. There are stories here that are clearly long-time favourites – Vonda McIntyre's 'The Genius Freaks' was first published 30 years ago, in the glory days of Damon Knight's *Orbit* series, while Lucius Shepard's 'The Arcevoalo' is nearly 20 years old and I refuse to believe it hasn't been collected before now. Other contributors, however, seem to have gone pretty much for their most recent story, or for something from relatively small circulation sources. The variation in quality, therefore, is marked.

Paul Park's 'Untitled 4', for instance (first published in *Fence* in 2000), is a confused and confusing mishmash of ideas in which a writer imprisoned by a peculiar form of totalitarian state edits a couple of stories by the student who betrayed him, and in them finds an account of the real crime he committed. If this is what Park has chosen to represent himself, one can only assume he hasn't been producing much of real rigour lately. Adam Roberts, on the other hand, probably doesn't have much in the way of short fiction to choose from, but this still feels like a poor representation of his work. In an alternate Victorian England where the lands discovered by Lemuel Gulliver were real and Lilliputians are used as slaves, a story that starts off being about slavery and industrial exploitation, turns into a story about guilt and betrayal, and ends up as a straightforward tale of invasion, without satisfactorily tying together or concluding any of these strands. Michael Moorcock probably does think that 'Cheering for the Rockets' is a good representation of his work, since it brings back Jerry Cornelius and others from the familiar repertory company, though what they do doesn't actually make much sense and Moorcock seems to believe that using the name Jerry is all that is required in the way of characterisation.

But if these are the weaker stories, there are others which are much stronger. Stephen Baxter, indulging yet again his recent obsession with the mammoth, is not quite at his best with 'Behold Now Behemoth': the story of the possible survival of a mammoth as a family pet in Cornwall really needs a better resolution than it is given, but it deals interestingly with a subject that is already becoming over-familiar. Much the same can be said of Brian Stableford's 'Emptiness', which takes him back to the theme of vampirism. This is a small-scale piece about a poor, poorly-educated woman in a run-down inner city who, for a few weeks, adopts a vampire baby. It is beautifully observed, but again feels like the story simply ends rather than being resolved.

Both Charles Stress, in 'Bear Trap', and Eric Brown, in 'Dark Calvary', offer stories that are bursting with ideas and with life. Perhaps too much so; it is hard to keep track of all the novelties that fizz and sparkle in the Stress story, so that in the end you're not entirely sure whether everything ties together or not. While Brown's tale of fevered religiosity in a fevered jungle setting builds to an horrific climax that still feels rather a let-down after all the invention that has gone before.

It also does Brown's stories no favours to place it immediately before Terry Bisson's 'The Old Rugged Cross', which takes the same idea of crucifixion and makes it both funnier and crueller, and more politically telling; and only two stories after 'Dark Calvary' is 'The Arcevoalo', written by Lucius Shepard when he was capturing the sweaty, foetid, garish romance of the jungle with almost ridiculous ease. These two stories together bring the collection to a powerful, vibrant conclusion.

I have to say that perhaps the best story gathered here is 'The Rift' by Paul J. McAuley, which is also set in the Amazon jungle, where a disparate (not to say dysfunctional) group of climbers are descending a strange canyon and, in an inversion of Conan Doyle's *Lost World*, meet their ancestors. Here is one story that really does know how to resolve itself, even if it does so, appropriately enough, with a cliffhanger.

[Available from www.pspublishing.co.uk]

Paul Di Filippo – *Fuzzy Dice*

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2003, 296pp, £35, h/b, ISBN 1-902880-66-8 (also deluxe slipcased edition, £60.00, ISBN 1-902880-65-X)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The picaresque is not a mode that science fiction tends to use that often these days. Whereas fantasists are all too happy to send their protagonists off on long journeys that entail a host of discrete encounters along the way, science fiction writers, constrained presumably by the need to make their creation real, or at least convincing, prefer to explore a limited number of scenarios in greater depths. Paul Di Filippo displays none of that restraint in his latest novel; instead his bored and anti-social protagonist, a

would-be writer and bookstore clerk called Paul, is despatched to a dizzying array of weird and wacky universes in his search for the solution to the 'Ontological Pickle', otherwise known as the meaning of life, the universe and everything.

A creature called Hans that resembles a metal broom with an infinite number of bristles – we are told that Hans represents one form of posthumanity in a parallel universe – appears to Paul one morning and gives him a yo-yo and a

pez dispenser with the head of Richard Nixon. This, it appears, is the means to travel between universes as the spirit takes him. And the spirit takes him to some very strange places: the birth of a universe, the hippy days of the 1970s, a primitive computer game, a feminist utopia, a world in which chaos has run wild, a world of group personalities, a world in which morphic resonance is made concrete, another where personality traits are contagious, one based on black and white television shows, and the monoculture at the end of time. These various scenarios explore some pretty deep themes – among the authors and scientists who are specifically invoked are Italo Calvino, Robert Sheckley, Rupert Sheldrake and Marvin Minsky – and they do so in the classic manner of science fiction satire, exaggerating their most obvious characteristics to the point of ludicrousness. But if the ideas are deep (and it must be admitted that Di Filippo often does no more than skate over them), the treatment is light.

The writing is hip, which means it is replete with puns, word-play, hidden and not so hidden references to popular songs, jargon and sex. This catches the eye and keeps you reading, but there is an urge to jokiness that undermines the occasional scenes that could (should) be darker and more serious. It doesn't help that Di Filippo has imposed an artificial structure upon his book. Picking up on the notion

of God playing dice with the universe, he has divided the novel like a pair of dice into two sets of six 'faces', each of which is further subdivided into 12 chapters. 144 chapters in a work of less than 300 pages guarantees that none are long and some are very short indeed. But more than that they constrain each adventure to follow much the same pattern: the arrival, the initial attempt to understand the salient but immediately incomprehensible characteristic of the world, the getting into trouble (usually congruent with the discovery of some deeper truth about the world), the getting out of trouble, and finally the escape to the next world. So much has to be devoted to the 'action' of the tale that many of the scenes don't get the development that they would repay; and the need to come up with the necessary number of scenarios has left us with a couple of worlds (the hippies and the black and white TV shows) that play no greater part in the playful consideration of the universe and the 'Ontological Pickle'. It's a fun book, but a little more time and a little less structure might have made it a much better one.

[Available from www.pspublishing.co.uk]

Jude Fisher – *Wild Magic*

Earthlight, London, 2003, 565pp, £10.99, p/b, ISBN 0-743-61228-2

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Wild Magic is the second volume of a fantasy series, *Fool's Gold*. It may take the reader a while to get into the several already developed plotlines and sort out the numerous characters whose paths have crossed in the first volume, but once underway, the book proves to be very readable. A useful prologue tells how the story began at the Allfair where the peoples of the north and south of the world of Elda, long in conflict, meet every year.

Amongst those visiting the fair were Virelai, an apprentice magician, who, having cast his Master into a magical sleep, stole from him the woman known as the Rose of the World and a cat called Bete, both of whom have remarkable powers. Given that Elda has three deities who made the world, the Man, Woman and Beast, it is not hard for the reader to make an intelligent guess as to who they might be, even although the Rosa Eldi has no idea of her own true identity. Having captivated and married the northern King Ravn, the Rosa Eldi is finding life in the royal court, with her growing awareness of human emotion and her inability to provide an heir for the throne, difficult to the point of being incomprehensible.

Fearing his Master's vengeance, Virelai has spread rumours of incredible riches to be found in the far north at the price of

killing one old man. Aran Aransen, head of the northern Rockfall clan, becomes obsessed with seeking this treasure, kidnaps the King's Shipmaker to build an icebreaker that will sail the frozen northern seas, and fires other men with his enthusiasm so that they are eager to join his voyage, much to the dismay of the women left behind.

A great part of the novel focuses on Aran's daughter Katla, a swordsmith, who takes her brother's place on the voyage to fetch the King's Shipmaker, and who has every intention of sailing north. A further plotline concerns events in the south, where Saro, youngest scion of the Vingo clan, is despised by his family for his inability to match up to his warlike elder brother (who is actually a psychopath). The mysterious moodstone that Saro acquired at the Allfair is revealed as a weapon that could destroy the world.

Unusually for a second volume of what may be a trilogy, the story does advance in this book. There is also a colourful cast of well-realised minor characters, such as the Viking-like northerners, sell-swords, mummers and nomads. The various plotlines are tied together by the idea of the return of magic to the world with the Rosa Eldi, and I look forward to the next volume.



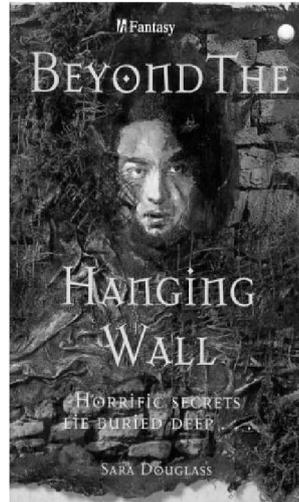
Sara Douglass – *Beyond The Hanging Wall*

Tor, New York, 2003, 348pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30449-X

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

This novel is a quest story with a radical difference, beginning as it does with the disappearance of the heir to the throne of Escator during a hunting expedition. A search ensues, but to no avail, and two years later, his parents have died of grief. A distant cousin is now king, as there were no other children. By chance, a woodsman finds human bones in the forest, adorned by a royal ring, and this he keeps.

Fifteen years on from this event, we meet Joseph Baxtor and his son Garth, healers who have an almost magical gift for helping to cure ailments by simply touching people and channelling their innate power, along with the use of medicinal herbs. Garth is sixteen, and has been his father's apprentice for four years. The arrival of a letter from Ruen, Escator's capital, brings the annual summons for Joseph to carry out his service in the Veins, ministering to the prisoners who are sentenced to work there until they die, and Garth persuades his father to let him also attend. In addition, Joseph has to minister to the King, whose tattoo of the family emblem, a supposedly mythical creature, has been infected since it was applied.



In the Veins, where gloam – a rock used as fuel – is mined, deep down and far out under the sea, Garth has a chance meeting with the supposedly dead heir to the kingdom, and decides to get him out of there and on the throne. This is far from easy, as the heir has long since lost all concept of his true identity and has no great desire to be freed from captivity, since for him the Veins are his entire world. Despite this, Garth perseveres, and receives help from some unexpected quarters: a monk who is not all he seems, and a girl who lives in the marshes near to Garth's home, who possesses exceptional powers.

The story is played out against a fully-developed background of a realm with a history rich in tradition and legends, with characters that you can believe in and empathise with: even those ranged against Garth and his allies have motives that you can understand. The outcome is in doubt until the very last minute, and there is a twist

at the end which this reviewer did not foresee.

I have no hesitation in recommending this thoroughly enjoyable novel.

Jeffrey Ford – *The Portrait of Mrs Charbuque*

Tor UK, London, 2003, 310pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 1-4050-0659-5

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger



'The first lesson is that every portrait is in some sense a self-portrait, as every self-portrait is a portrait.'

What is the truth of a person? Is it how they look, what they tell you about

themselves, what they've done, or is it something beyond that? How many times have you talked with someone on the phone and conceived a vivid picture of them, or been surprised to see the face that matches a familiar voice from the radio?

Piero Piambo is an artist in late nineteenth century New York. He compromises his talent by painting portraits of those who have more money than taste, until he receives a commission that he hopes will rescue him from the lies he is required to paint and reawaken his artistic ambition. The commission is for another portrait, but the conditions make this no ordinary task: his subject, Mrs Charbuque, sits behind an ornate screen and Piambo is not allowed to look upon her. She will talk to him at great length about her life, her childhood, her dreams and it is on that basis that Piambo is to see her clearly enough to execute her likeness in oils.

'Each picture then became a manual on how to achieve a certain effect, how to employ a certain technique. At

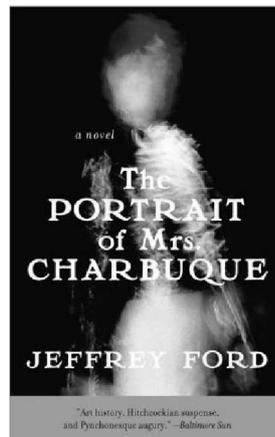
times I could see so deeply into the confluence of colour, texture and canvas that I caught a glimpse of the artist staring back.'

Convinced that he is equal to the task, and that it will be the making of him, Piambo becomes increasingly obsessed

with Mrs Charbuque and the need to verify the stories she tells him. He is determined to succeed and is prepared to break the terms of their contract by searching for clues and possible images of the woman. The deeper he is drawn into the affair, the more baroque the situation becomes. It is impossible for Piambo or the reader to determine the truth about Mrs Charbuque, to decide what is real and what elaborate masquerade.

As Piambo's health and sanity falter, the city around him is also under threat: a number of young women die in an alarming way, and it seems that there is a serial murderer about. Piambo is drawn into this too.

Ford creates a fantastic world, full of mystery and terror, and a powerfully evocative New York, in a work that resonates with both William Hjortsberg's *Nevermore* and Alan Moore's *From Hell*. It is a book that repays rereading, revealing – like Mrs Charbuque – its truths a little at a time. This is one of the most powerful books I have read all year.



Paul Levinson – *The Pixel Eye*

Tor, New York, 2003, 334pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30556-9

Reviewed by Colin Bird

This is the third near-future novel featuring Levinson's forensic detective Phil D'Amato, who previously appeared in *The Consciousness Plague* and *The Silk Code*. Levinson has also written extensively in the field of media studies, including a book on Marshal McLuhan.

The story has a distinct post 9/11 flavour, as D'Amato goes about his business in New York against a background of terrorist threats and civil liberty protests. D'Amato is called in when the mortality rate of squirrels seems to have sharply increased in Central Park. His investigations show the animals have been tranquillised by a chemical used at a laboratory in Cold Spring. A visit to the lab finds the scientists researching how hamsters respond to rock music. Trust me: it's not as whimsical as it sounds. The author is tapping into the vague possibility of using animals' brainwaves as tape recorders, both for audio and visual signals.

When labs start to mysteriously burn down, various shadowy government officials begin to interfere with the investigation. To confuse matters further, D'Amato meets



his own holographic reproduction and has a conversation with him/it. Who is manipulating animals and holograms and to what purpose?

The book encapsulates well a feeling of a hermetically sealed New York, reacting to the echoes of 9/11. However, for me, the rest of this novel is far too meandering, with the protagonist being drip-fed titbits of information whenever the narrative needs to roll forward. The authorial hand is too obviously leading him on. The carefully detailed use of animals as mobile cameras and bombs just doesn't convince. Would you really trust a squirrel with a bomb in its skull to go where it's supposed to, at the time you

want?

The Pixel Eye has some nice observations about the next stages of various gadgets and Levinson clearly knows his technological trends. His writing style is readable and the story certainly covers different ground from the usual gritty near-future tales. But the characterisation is dull and the book never attains the kind of committed tone a story with such wacky ideas requires to convince.

Ian R. MacLeod – *The Light Ages*

Earthlight, London, 2003, 456pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 0-7434-6242-4

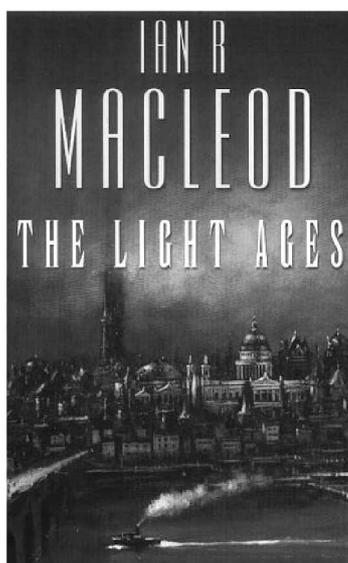
Reviewed by Claire Brialey



It seems inevitable that a book which questions what it's like to live at the dawning of a new age is so engaged with the spirit of its own. *The Light Ages* is a novel set in a time of change that should

interest all those who've read China Miéville, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, and Ken MacLeod, although with a different perspective. This book is set in England; and not only in London, but rooted and partly resolved in the heartland of industry in the north of the country. Many characters and settings seem Dickensian. For all the publisher's assertion that it should be 'filed under Fantasy' this is a work of speculative fiction, a social science fiction which looks at how the world changes, and how people do not, in a world that's different in only one material respect from ours.

But what a material it is. Imagine an industrial revolution fuelled by aether, an effectively magical element drawn from the earth and used to power great engines, to provide heat and light, to change the world. Imagine the impact on society when it begins to fail, and what the governing and profiting classes will do to conceal the decline. Even before that, imagine



the human cost, where overexposure leads not to the shamefully familiar physical effects of coal dust or asbestos in the lungs, limbs crushed or muscles severed in construction sites or power plants or livestock yards, radiation sickness or cancer; but to *changing*. You become

Other, turn into something less than human, are considered a danger to the rest of the community and are taken away to an institution where you have no rights and your community therefore absolves itself of all responsibilities towards you.

If you think about it even for a minute, the analogy with the working classes of manufacturing industry and the associated underclass is so obvious it seems clumsy. You are meant to notice. But the depiction of the changelings (commonly known as 'trolls') in this novel is more than a metaphor, and they are more than one part of our society. In their Otherness, they are also something miraculous, desirable but ultimately unattainable. And yet they are still deprived of the options open to normal people, whether they 'pass' amongst the rest of humanity or are

allowed to cut themselves off from it. Like Shakespearean fairies, they do seem – as Antonia Forest once put it – almost immortal but less than human.

Robert Borrows, the protagonist of the novel, almost recognises the dilemma. In his fascination with the changelings – extensively explored through his quasi-romantic fascination with his childhood contemporary Annalise – he experiences both envy and pity: a longing to be like them and a longing for them to be more like us. As the ultimate observer, his feelings are repeated during his exposure to the aristocracy, and draws him both towards the movements for social revolution and into an almost conventional socially mobile career path. Like the changelings, he is neither one thing nor the other; and he can never quite belong. But that doesn't mean that they will accept him either. This society all too easily makes people outsiders, but some people choose to be outside society themselves; and only a few among either group seize the chance to actively work to change it.

But is this a novel about society, seen through the stories of individuals caught up in – or attempting to provoke – a moment of historical change? Is it a novel about economic and social orders and their resilience, or about the contrasted pettiness and greatness of the human

condition? Or is it a series of connected personal stories set against a backdrop of a world in upheaval which mirrors the turbulence of people's lives?

The former suggests a 'Great Men of History' viewpoint, seemingly set up to be knocked down by showing how many of the Great Men have either a coincidental or a detrimental impact on the cause they espouse. (The women may be greater, usually showing more purpose and self-awareness, but in both ages they have to acknowledge the limits of their power.) A 'revolution as biography' reading reveals even more tropes: poor boy made good, adolescent rites of passage, unrequited lover oblivious to the greater world around him, accidental hero.

There is a lot in this novel to discover and decide. And for all its turmoil, for all the pain and hopelessness experienced by many of the viewpoint characters, for all that we suspect the cycle will go round again and nothing has really changed, it hints at a moment of hope and choice for the wider community. Will the new age be a false dawn? Maybe this could have been written at another time, but it should be read now.

Steve Lockley & Paul Lewis – *King of All the Dead*

Telos, Tolworth, 2003, 128pp, £8.00, p/b, ISBN 1-903889-61-8

Reviewed by Simon Morden

Widowed Lisa Morgan continually dwells on the car crash that killed her beloved husband David and seriously injured her. She goes through the motions of life, working as a hospice nurse, living in the isolated cottage that she and David shared, but her sister Alison is worried.

As they talk and walk through the local woods, they discover a van. The engine is running, a length of hosepipe connects the exhaust with the cab, and someone is inside. The moment of rescuing Ben turns out to be pivotal, because the King of All the Dead has been cheated of what is his by right. He'll stop at nothing to get it back.

King of All the Dead sees Lockley and Lewis take on the fine balance between life and death, and turn it into a zombie-fest for two-thirds of this Telos novella. Lisa and Ben are confronted with a series of visceral undead scenarios that have them running from a hospital A&E recently overflowing with casualties, battling with roadkill, and escaping from her house pursued by whatever rotting corpses the King can send after them.

The set-up is good: the characters are defined, and the initial shocker is abrupt and startling. So far, so good. The zombie chases are full of vivid description, and would be gripping stuff if it was something that we hadn't seen

before. Too much *Night of the Living Dead*, too much *Herbert West – Reanimator*. What should be scary has grown passé with over-familiarity.

Where Lockley and Lewis score very highly indeed is the way they handle what goes on in Lisa's head. Her dreams and her waking thoughts hold the story together through the slime and gore. The last third of the book, which contains a magnificently constructed plot twist, is deep, thoughtful and compelling. Metaphysics and the World Beyond come into play as the King lays his complaint and demands restitution – but the contrast between this part and the previous shenanigans is great.

This shift in gear shows that the authors really can deliver the goods. Horror ought to be able to both scare the reader and make them think. This novella does both, but for the middle stretch it does neither – where it's still a good read while doing nothing original.

Lockley and Lewis hold out the promise of being able to pull off something astonishing. This is not it, not yet, not quite.

[Available from www.telos.co.uk]

Ken MacLeod – *Engine City*

Orbit, London, 2003, 369pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1 84149 203 5

Reviewed by Peter Young

Of the handful of British sf writers lucky enough to be writing full-time, Ken MacLeod has become something of a national treasure to us and, as with his *Fall Revolution* series, what remains in the memory more than anything is the experimental left-wingery with which he peppers his books, and which always provides the essential background to the story itself. As a final volume in what has

sometimes been a mystifying trilogy, *Engine City* delivers what you never quite knew you were hoping for.

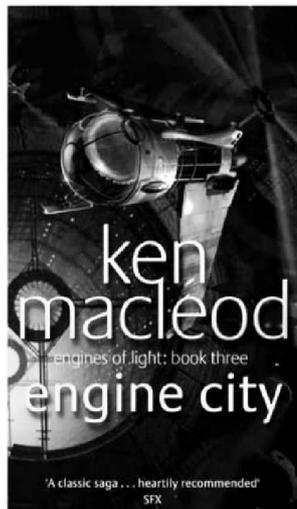
Engines of Light has not been a trilogy easily read when spread out over the volumes, each published a year apart. Ken MacLeod is perhaps aware of this, as this final book effectively begins with not one but two different re-caps of the story so far (which saved me from a quick re-read of the

previous volume, a tactic I required before diving into *Dark Light*) and both of which will thankfully bring any reader immediately up to speed. Though this time the ride itself is a much easier one – one can almost detect an unwritten sense of coasting towards home – and MacLeod's writing is as solid (and as occasionally experimental) as ever.

Engine City is essentially Grigory Volkov's last stand. After his failed revolution on Croatan he is on the loose again, arriving on Nova Babylon and hoping once again to profoundly revolutionise a planet's entire society, this time to prepare it for the alien invasion of the Second Sphere that he knows is on the way. But meanwhile, on Mingulay, some discoveries are made and questions asked about the true nature of the incoming aliens: are they really the all-assimilating bug-eyed monsters he is warning everyone to expect, or are they something far more benign? And what of the gods, those microbial, planet-scale overseers who manipulate societies to keep them

subjugated: are they possibly behind this impending conflict that threatens to engulf a multitude of worlds?

All the previous loose ends are tied up and much that has gone before becomes clear: MacLeod sets up the question of what happens when a society intolerant of diversity encounters its equal but tolerant counterpart. You don't need a degree in politics to see where the analogy is drawn from, and likely enough it says plenty about MacLeod's current political stance. As with much commentary on modern society that masquerades as space opera – in which from 'up there' you can get a better view of what's going on 'down here' – MacLeod has clearly enjoyed taking us to the other side of the galaxy to tell what is essentially a Cold War story. And the latter half of the book is a real delight, finding MacLeod riffing both on a Jungian approach to UFO paranoia as well as treating us to a novel variation of the whole Men-in-Black conspiracy. This is lively stuff, and ultimately worth the wait.



William Meikle – *Watchers: The Coming of the King*

Black Death Books, Effort, 2002, 235pp, \$16.00, p/b, ISBN 0-9679220-4-6

Reviewed by Simon Morden

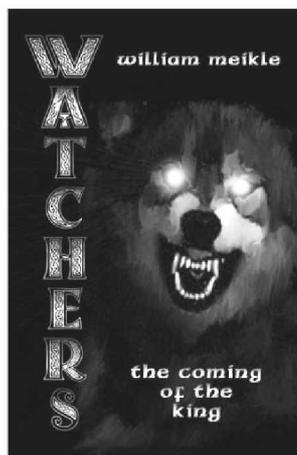
The year is 1649, and the English Civil War is finally over: the Protector of England drives a stake through the undead heart of Charles Stuart. The country can sleep easy at night, knowing that the Watchers on the refortified Hadrian's Wall will keep the remnants of the king's vampire army at bay.

Flash forward to 1745, and the outpost of Milecastle: home to the Thane and the Warden, guardians of the Watchers. Two young men, Martin and Sean, rescue Highland clansman Campbell and his bewitched daughter from beyond the wall. Campbell brings dire news – the Boy King, son of Charles I, has returned to claim his throne, and has raised a mighty army of vampires in Edinburgh. Martin and Sean are thereafter caught up in the events that precede the war.

This is the first part of a fantasy/horror trilogy from Scottish writer Willie Meikle, a conflation of alternate history novel and grand guignol that works most effectively as a ripping yarn of derring-do, in the style of John Buchan and Robert Louis Stevenson. There are buckets of blood, obscene rituals and the quaffing of much ale as our heroes attempt to stem the evil hordes: Meikle's declared intent is to emulate a Hammer film, and for the most part he succeeds.

The fact that he does is also a weakness. The concept of an invasion by an army of undead should be more terrifying, more dark, more reading-with-the-lights-on than

what it is here. Bits don't fall off the heroes. They are not consumed with dread, nor do they balk at their impossible task. While thankfully steering clear of the frilly-shirted nonsense exhibited by recent incarnations of the vampire story, *The Coming of the King* doesn't have the nail-gnawing intensity of say, *Ultraviolet*. But like *Ultraviolet*, which managed an entire series on C4 without uttering the 'V' word, Meikle calls his creatures Others, which does grate after a while.



Plot tokenism is also high on the agenda: by the end of the book, valuable allies have been gained, enemies made, and artefacts gifted that will clearly be prominent as the rest of the story unfolds. An exploration of the ecology and sociology of a vampire-infested land would have made a fascinating backdrop, but these matters are eschewed in favour of action.

The story is at its best when it explores the more human – and inhuman – motivations and schemes. Campbell recounting his story is genuinely chilling, and Martin's prophetic dreams are vividly described. The character interactions have a tendency to be superficial, but there are moments of real emotion. It's not a demanding read. It aims for pure entertainment and hits the mark.

[Available from www.khpindustries.com]

Garth Nix – *Mister Monday*

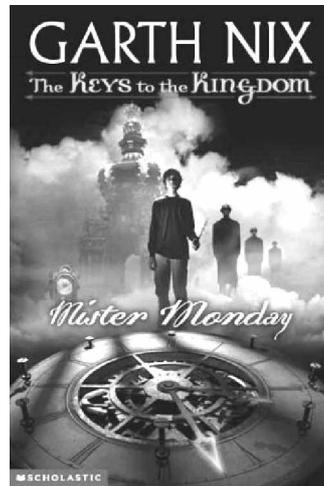
Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger

Scholastic Inc, New York, 2003, 361pp, \$5.99, p/b, ISBN 0-439-55123-4

This is the first part of a series, *The Keys to the Kingdom*, the second part of which, *Grim Tuesday*, won't be published, even in the US, until next year. Were I a resident of Sydney where Garth Nix lives, I would be knocking on his door demanding he write faster.

As in his earlier series, starting with *Sabriel*, Nix demonstrates that he is familiar with all the usual patterns and structures of myth and fantasy. Here we have a principal protagonist named Arthur Penhaligon, who is an outsider, having only just arrived in a new town at a new school; he is given, almost by accident, a vitally important and magical key that brings with it a task – a destiny – whether Arthur wants it or not. But what Nix also repeatedly demonstrates is that he can take these familiar starting points and launch the reader into a world that is utterly new and different.

The prologue is breathtaking (an appropriate adjective, given Arthur's crippling asthma), sketching a world of cosmic forces and supernatural beings who plot against each other and manipulate time and space to achieve power. There are resonances here of Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics*, and delightfully playful Biblical references: this is a world in which the order of the universe should be



dictated by the Will and in which the word may indeed be made flesh. It is also a world in which Arthur finds himself chased by 'dog-faced men' who sniff him out, but can only stand and watch until invited in; and one in which he encounters a chained giant whose eyes are removed each night, and hopeless souls, in a dark underworld, performing pointless, never-ending tasks.

This exuberant mix of characters and images is woven together against a Victorianesque backdrop and given a coherent and thrilling plot. The setting echoes a current British trend – Mieville, Wooding, MacLeod – suggesting once again that Australians are culturally closer to Britain than are the Americans (though Jeffery Ford's novel *The Portrait of Mrs Charbuque* [reviewed in this issue of *Vector*], is set in 1893 New York and shares the dark *fin de siècle* atmosphere).

It comes as no surprise to find that Nix lists amongst his favourite authors Ursula Le Guin, Diana Wynne Jones, Alan Garner, Tove Jansson, Joan Aiken, Rosemary Sutcliff and Robert Graves. He has clearly learned from the best and proved that he belongs in the same class.

This book is published in the UK by Collins in January 2004 – put a note in your diary.

Daniel O'Mahony – *The Cabinet of Light*

Telos, Tolworth, 2003, 128pp, £25, deluxe h/b, ISBN 1-903889-19-7 (£10.00, standard h/b, ISBN 1-903889-18-9)

Reviewed by Chris Hill

It is London, 1949, and a black American ex-soldier, Honoré Lechasseur, is working as a 'fixer', buying and selling still-rationed goods on the black market. One day he is hired by the mysterious Mrs Emily Blandish to trace her vanished husband, a man known only as 'the Doctor'. Lechasseur suspects that she is not telling the entire truth, but has little inkling of how bizarre and dangerous the situation really is. Who is the mysterious 'Doctor'? Why are several shady figures interested in him? What is his connection with the Girl in Pink Pyjamas who appears out of the fog with no memory of her own identity, and what is the Cabinet of Light?

You will gather from the above description that we are firmly in *noir* country in O'Mahony's imaginative re-examination of the *Doctor Who* mythos. O'Mahony uses the conventions of the genre well and the ending can only be interpreted as a homage to that most frightening and complex of films noir, *Kiss me Deadly*.

You never really find out why the Doctor came to London in the first place; nor do you discover much about the people who are hunting him. The story is not really about the Doctor himself, in fact the Time Lord is hardly present at all. *The Cabinet of Light* is more about the spaces the Doctor leaves when he is not around, and about the

people who pick up the pieces when he is done with his business. The story also examines how the Doctor's interference in the past might come to the present through myth and legend.

From the Doctor's point of view, Lechasseur is a bit-player in the adventure, the person who turns up in episode three of a story, contributes a small part to the Doctor's plans and then goes on to live a life changed by his knowledge of the Doctor's existence. It is fairly clear that this is a later Doctor than any we have met, although his actions have the feel of the manipulative 'Time's Champion' of the Virgin '7th Doctor' novels.

This review copy is the deluxe edition of the book, signed by the contributors and with a painted frontispiece by John Higgins and an introduction by Chaz Brenchley, and is the first of the Telos *Doctor Who* novellas I have read. It certainly makes an entertaining and thought-provoking read but, alas, the cost of such a short book, however beautifully produced, puts it out of the range of all but the most enthusiastic (and affluent) fan. Fortunately a standard hardback is also available.

[Available from www.telos.co.uk]

Stephen Palmer – Flowercrash

Cosmos Books, Holicong, 2002, 346pp, \$19.95, t/p, ISBN 1-58715-449-8

Reviewed by Penny Hill

Initially I found the ideas of flowerpunk that permeate this novel interesting and intriguing, but this couldn't be sustained in the face of the overall flaws. The flower-based technology forms a background to three contrasting societies, all of which prove to be no more than straw men ideologies emphasising the mind/body split. The men-only society ('followers of the Green Man') is merely the extremist version of the female-dominated Shrine of the Crone, both of which choose intellect over emotion.

The separatist Sea-Clerics emphasise the right to both mind and heart but do so schizophrenically rather than by integrating both. Eventually Manserphine, our very smug heroine who is never wrong, makes the startlingly novel discovery that the best way to be is to integrate mind and body, happily breaking her long-held vows of celibacy with her ex-gigolo lover.

It is not clear whether we are supposed to see just what pure reflections of each other the followers of The Green Man and The Shrine of the Crone are. The male version is more overtly aggressive – violence, bullying, and use of authority rather than reason seem fairly commonplace. The viewpoint character of this society, Nuiy, is a repulsive character whose feats of memory and emotional constipation make him very unsympathetic. Quite frankly I was cheering for the bullies in the dorm.

Sadly, by rejecting flowers as feminine and choosing trees as masculine, these bright intellects of the future seem to miss the fact that all their favourite trees (e.g. oak) have flowers. For a society that allegedly depends on plant-based

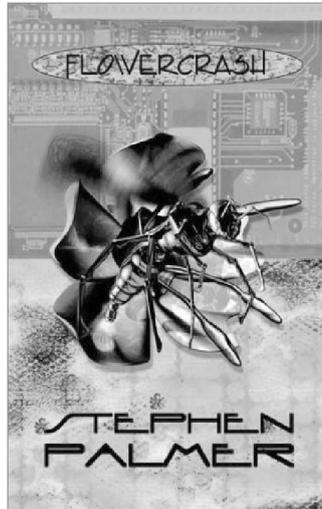
technologies, these people are remarkably unobservant – or was this irony?

Unfortunately the same lack of realism permeated the Sea-Clerics who appeared to be marine-based vegetarians, a life-style I'm not sure is sustainable in the world described (or indeed this one).

The Sea-Clerics are personified in Enfayrq, their spokesperson, whose irritating allusive language is translated for us and the other characters by Manserphine. Here I fear Stephen Palmer strove too far for something alien. I found I couldn't see the connections between her statements and the 'translations'. As these were always given, I learned quickly to disregard Enfayrq's statements. Perhaps it would have been more successful if her statements were less allusive and were left untranslated?

The society of the Shrine of the Crone oppresses men just as heavily as the followers of The Green Man reject women. However, instead of violence, they merely patronise and disenfranchise them from public life (not that anyone seems to have anything so archaic as an actual vote). Manserphine's inability to see what danger she can be in alone against a group of men strikes me as implausible.

Having found this promising to start with, I was disappointed with the rather mundane way in which the ideas developed. I wanted to like this book, but sadly I won't be looking out for any more novels by this author.



Terry Pratchett – Monstrous Regiment

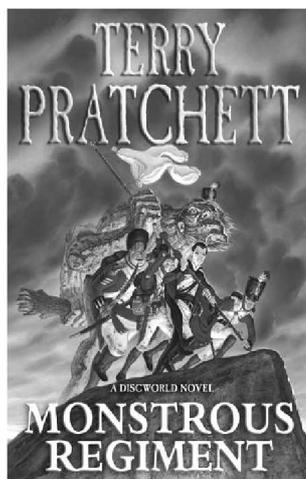
Doubleday, London, 2003, 352pp, £17.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-385-60340-1

Reviewed by Sue Thomason



Okay, it's the umpteenth *Discworld* novel, set in the previously-unheard-of tiny mountainous patriotic country of Borogravia, and starring Polly Perks, whom we meet in Scene One doing the archetypal folk-song thing and cutting her hair, changing her skirts for trousers, and running away to join the regiment. (Pratchett may *disapprove* of folksingers, but he certainly knows the songs. All of them.) There follows a typical Pratchett patented Ethical Romp, a mixture of 50% anarchic but deadpan-logical humour (this one is *much* funnier if you know the songs), and 50% deadly serious ethical dilemmas, which have a nasty habit of sneaking up behind you and biting you in the crotch.

In my opinion, Pratchett's genius starts with a positively



the Emperor has no clothes on. But there are negative as well as positive values in the book. Pratchett is wary of

Shakespearean talent for plot-lifting. He mounts a series of hit-and-run raids on Culture high and low, throws the stereotypes in the blender along with the archetypes, and glues them together with empathy. He proceeds with a thorough and logical extrapolation of the starting premise, with a charming tendency to take the plot on a relentless great-circle course around the narrative universe where no, er, sentient being has gone before. And he finishes by loving his characters, and allowing us to understand and love them too. There's a particular character facet that Pratchett can't resist, the cultural outsider who has a compulsion to speak the truth as they perceive it, the child who points out that

authority figures and the corrupting influence of Power, he abhors cruelty in all its forms, but what he really, *really* hates is hypocrisy, the kind of wilful self-deception that lets the people with the big sticks *believe* that this is going to hurt them more than it hurts you (but not enough to stop them enjoying it). I admire and support his values and I cheer him on.

Oh, you want to know what the book's *about*? Sorry; it's about a girl who dresses up as a boy and runs away to join the Army and search for her brother, an innocent who

never should have been allowed to join up, and who she believes is probably dead (though she can't help but hope that he might have survived...). It's about War. It's about surviving as a woman in a man's world (and, of course, surviving as a man in a man's world, too.) It's about patriotism, bombast, and what it's really like to be a vampire with a lust for coffee, or Joan of Arc, or absolutely the best, most archetypal sergeant ever. Read it. It's a life-affirming experience, trust me on this, okay?

Sue Rann – *Looking for Mr Nobody*

No Exit Press, Harpenden, 2003, 254pp, £9.99, t/b, ISBN 1-84243-0661

Reviewed by Paul N. Billinger

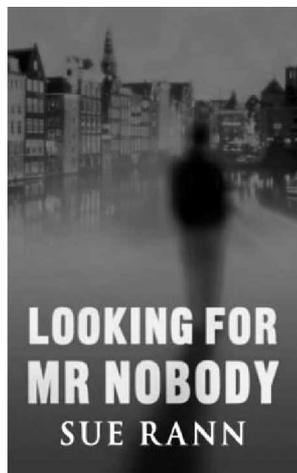
In near-future Amsterdam people are going missing; but not people anyone will ever notice or care about, just some vagrants off the street. Jan Wolf notices, but he has problems of his own; living rough in various city squats, he is recovering from a serious gunshot wound. Not only can he not remember it happening, he can't remember anything before the injury either, not his identity or even his real name. His past is important, however, to someone, since mysterious officials are searching the city for him.

Interwoven with Wolf's story is that of Robin Carlson, part-time martial arts instructor and bouncer at some of the less respectable city night spots, who has fled from America and from her father, a US general. Returning from work early one morning she finds that a sometime friend of hers, Cary Bowman, has broken into her flat to ask for help; he hired a Private Investigator to look into a "spot of bother" for him, and now the PI is missing, and has been for five months. Despite her unease Robin agrees to make some enquires, with both her search and Wolf's spiralling around each other as they delve into the underworld of the city.

Using two narrative strands like this can be a powerful technique, for example in Tricia Sullivan's *Maul* (reviewed in this issue of *Vector*) the subtle interaction between the strands resonates to inform and enhance them both, but here the balance between them feels uneven, with both

pulling away from, rather than complementing, each other. The first-person narrative of Robin works better than Wolf's third-person, probably because although this is ostensibly a science fiction thriller, the sf elements – designer drugs, virtual reality environments, computer hackers – are minimal compared to the thriller element, and the first person feels the natural style for this crime fiction. Although the ambition of using the mix of first/third person is applauded, concentrating on Robin's story would probably have been more successful. Some of the plotting similarly feels uneven, particularly when (unsurprisingly) Wolf's and Robin's searches interact. I suspect that this would have been a stronger book with greater control – and probably less – of the sf trappings.

The book does have some strong positive points: characterisation is generally good, with Robin making a believable heroine and the secondary characters being well sketched out, although the villains are straight from central casting. When the writing works it's very good indeed; the midnight chase across the frozen canals and industrial barges is excellent, truly thrilling with great atmosphere. If only there was more of this quality. Sad to say, all the good work – and despite the comments above it is a genuinely interesting book – is seriously let down by an unbelievable conclusion with some basic plot holes and a *deus ex machina*; the idea is good, it's the method that disappoints.



Adam Roberts – *Polystom*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 294pp, £10.99, t/p (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-575-07179-6

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

Is it too late to demand originality of our authors? Adam Roberts has been building himself a twin reputation, as academic and fiction writer, as someone who (like Ian McDonald) writes with the ghosts of others before him. Clearly author X is always going to be reminiscent of author Y or in the tradition of author Z, but for authors Y and Z the feeling can be a little disturbing. Earlier books by Roberts have been compared to works by Frank Herbert and Ursula Le Guin, so he is at last in good company. Here the jumping-off point (albeit in a different direction) is Bob

Shaw's *Ragged Astronauts*, Moorcockian aristocratic decadence, Edgar Allan Poe (especially 'Hans Pfall', here quoted as an epigraph) and post-Lem/Dick/Egan metaphysical speculation.

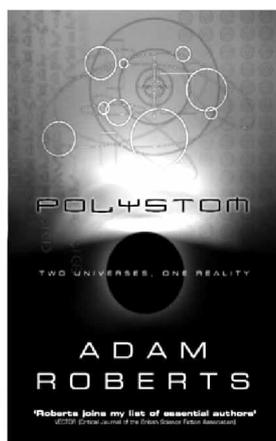
Polystom lives in a world where he can sail through the atmosphere to nearby planets, whilst avoiding the mysterious skywhals who circle through space. After the death of Polystom's father (also called Polystom) and on the advice of an aunt, Polystom (the son) marries Beeswing. Beeswing proves less than a happy wife and in a replay of

various Victorian melodramas, Polystom tries to mould her to his will. There follows a scene worthy of the Bad Sex Awards, an inevitable tragedy, and the first section of the novel, subtitled 'A Love Story', ends. I hope Roberts is being ironic here, as I cannot see any love here at all, and I found myself supporting Beeswing throughout whilst never knowing her motivations. In the remaining two sections, 'A Murder Story' and 'A Ghost Story', Polystom continues to be dislikeable, although he feels dislikeable in a different way and starts being more of a coward.

The sense that we're not being told the whole story is emphasised by Roberts's conceit of this being a found manuscript, incomplete, partly corrupted, and in translation. I'm not clear that this really adds anything, although it helps with the

metafictional games Roberts plays towards the end of the book. The designated gaps appear random, which is realistic if not exactly meaningful. I think the editorial apparatus should have been considerably greater than it is or not used at all.

In the end I'm left unclear as to what Roberts was trying to do – what he is saying about sexual politics, what the secret of the skywhals was, or what precise trajectory Polystom undergoes. The death of Polystom's father precipitates his marriage to Beeswing, the murder of his uncle Cleonides precipitates his journey to the mudworld and the hell of war. The deaths in themselves remain mysterious. There's nothing wrong with being playful – as I think Roberts is trying to be here – but I'm not sure which rules he is playing by.



Joel Rosenberg – Not Really The Prisoner Of Zenda

Tor, New York, 2003, 383pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30046-X

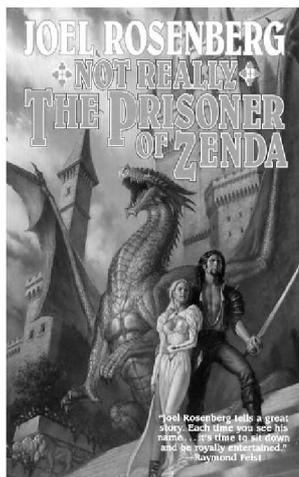
Reviewed by Pamela Stuart

This is the third adventure in the *Guardians of the Flame* series, and a must for Fantasy readers. It could almost start "Once upon a time..." as it has everything!

There are three friends who have been companions in arms for a long time. While loyal to their Lord, Jason Cullinane (who should really be Emperor but refused the post), they glean their savings by stealing from thieves and bandits. Their ambition is to retire and keep an inn together, but as time passes it seems less and less likely that it will ever happen.

One of the friends, Erenor, is a wizard; or is he? He seems to be studying it, but is rather into 'Alternative magic'. Oh, yes, there are two sets of rival medical wizards, who seem able to heal any battle-wound if called in time, and the more well-to-do officers carry magic healing potions instead of field-dressings. Erenor is rather sparing with his spells, but no-one is quite sure if this is because he is unwilling, or unable to produce the result demanded. After all, he admits that he is still studying.

Kethol, our hero, has been altered by one set of magic medics to look exactly like Baron Forinel, whom he must replace in order to save his country from the disaster of a wicked half-brother led by an evil step-mother.



Unfortunately they were not able to alter his mind to match, so he has difficulty 'remembering' things that happened in the past. Luckily Forinel's fiancée understands the political necessity of the masquerade and manages to field the most difficult questions and the fact that she will have to marry Kethol to keep up the pretence. There is even a dragon, who can read people's thoughts in true dragon-fashion, and the Emperor's mother is no pale background figure; she fully understands that some potential enemies just have to be removed. Permanently.

The story has battles and plots, counterplots, revolutions and political intrigues enough for a much longer book. Though where the philosopher came from is unclear (unlike his comments). As the book is published in the USA, the reader is almost certain that good must triumph over evil in the end, but maybe they have relaxed the rules over there? Surely a hero can't be killed? The last chapters are nail-bitingly tense.

It leaves only two questions. Is there another on the way? And if so, when will it be published? Highly recommended holiday reading, that inevitable wet day at the camp-site will pass unnoticed.

Richard Paul Russo – Unto Leviathan

Orbit, London, 2003, 442pp, £6.99, p/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-84149-270-1

Review by Peter Young

Richard Paul Russo's impressive 2001 Philip K. Dick Award winner *Ship Of Fools*, now rechristened *Unto Leviathan*, has taken two years to cross the Atlantic, and, thankfully, is arriving with Bruce Jensen's cover illustration intact. Russo is still largely unknown on this side of the pond, though hopefully this new UK edition of his most popular novel

will change that.

With some engagingly patient storytelling we are given the tale of the *Argonos*, a massive generation starship cut adrift in space with a large and increasingly restless crew looking for a home among older human colony worlds – a journey seen through the eyes of Bartolomeo Aguilara, the

ineffective Captain's disabled adviser. With a didactic Christian bishop deciding most of the *Argonos's* moves, they finally make planetfall on an ideal but seemingly abandoned world they name Antioch, only to discover a cavernous chamber neatly filled with rows and rows of skeletons, each one hanging from its own hook. After second thoughts, the *Argonos* leaves Antioch, but only to encounter further out in space the likely protagonist of the genocide: an even larger – and mysteriously silent – labyrinthine alien vessel. As this is their first encounter with extraterrestrial life, how far do the crew wish to go to meet this dangerous unknown face to face?

One expects a novel of this nature to have a suitably dark and moody atmosphere that progressively hints at more and more horrors just around the corner. We are treated to that, for certain, though there is much more going on here as well. There are some surprising turns and some spiritual depths explored, including a robust exploration of how Christians can each respond differently to the singular mystery of God. This Christian subtext also serves as allegory for the mysteries to be found in outer space – much in this book is kept dark, oblique and hidden, with nearly all the characters having to deal with a variety of unknowns in their personal lives, such as the spiritual uncertainties of the

ship's priesthood, as well as their reactions to the possible reasons for the alien encounter itself. As a result, conclusions are often never reached and facts are never fully uncovered; even knowledge of the *Argonos's* own origins are lost and shrouded in mystery, hidden from the crew by a seemingly religious necessity. All this actually works very much in *Unto Leviathan's* favour; combine this with some startling visual imagery, both religious and horrific, and we have a work that will remain long in a reader's imagination. Bartolomeo leads us around the *Argonos*, going from character to character, exploring their psyches while they collectively and individually work out just what to do with this dangerous, and very likely evil, alien enigma. Russo also has an explanation – simplistic but engaging – for why God no longer physically interacts with the universe he created, portraying Him in step with the theme of this book: remote and unknowable.

While this novel adds to the body of science fiction that explores specifically religious themes, Russo does not employ the theological directness of other writers, but what he does do – entertain, shock, and question – he does very well indeed. *Unto Leviathan* should win Russo plenty of new



fans.

Stanley Schmidt – *Argonaut*

Reviewed by Mark Greener

Tor, New York, 2003, 333pp, \$15.95, p/b, ISBN 0-312-87727-7

Argonaut begins 'with a bug in a garden'. It's no ordinary insect. Most people wouldn't have noticed, but Lester Ordway – who'd long had a dream to discover a new species – recognised that the bug was unique. Even Lester, however, didn't realise how different, until a sting pulls 'everything from the depths of his mind'. He collapses. And when medics attempt to remove the bug from his tightly closed hand it generates a swarm of offspring that sting the ER staff.

Soon Ordway – working with the medical technician that tried to remove the insect and an entomologist – begins to realise that the bug is just that: advanced alien technology to eavesdrop on the human race. Despite the authorities' initial scepticism, the government believes that the bugs could herald an alien invasion. But there could be another explanation. Perhaps we're being studied, in just the same way that Earth's anthropologists and sociologists study other 'more primitive' societies ...

Science, according to one definition, aims to reach a consensus about external, objective reality. Yet literature's domain is often subjective. So hard sf writers use the external – an alien or an android, for example – to counterpoint and illuminate aspects of human behaviour, sociology or psychology. In contrast, soft sf and other forms of literature can address such aspects

more directly.

Argonaut, a novel of first contact, falls within this hard sf tradition to deliver a message about scientists' responsibility and attitudes. I won't go into any more detail to avoid spoiling the book, but, by God, Schmidt makes sure that you hear his message loud and clear. Although as a biologist and full-time science writer I agree wholeheartedly, I found the unsubtle didactic a tad irritating. Critics cited on the blurb compare *Argonaut* to a Golden Age novel. Such a lack of subtlety might have been appropriate in the more naïve 1950s or in a book aimed at young adults, but today's adult sf community is more sophisticated, and I think Schmidt (who is *Analog's* editor by day) could have delivered his message more effectively if he'd used a little more finesse.

Schmidt set *Argonaut* some thirty years hence. Yet this future setting is, I felt, largely superfluous. A contemporary setting would make identification with the protagonists and the sociology 'hyper-text' easier. *Argonaut* addresses issues that matter today.

Setting the book in the future, I felt, weakened the story's socio-political impact and ironically diluted his message.

On the other hand, the book's strengths outweigh these weaknesses, which are, perhaps, more a matter of my prejudices and preferences than any fault in the novel per



se. It's intelligently written, eloquent and compelling. The characters are well developed and drawn with a psychological depth that you wouldn't expect in many Golden Age novels. The pace never flags: it's a real page-turner.

Argonaut, Schmidt's first book for sixteen years, is

certainly well worth reading. As SFRevu.com noted, it's "good solid sf", but I felt that the lack of subtlety made it a good novel rather than a great book. Nevertheless, I certainly hope it's not another sixteen years before Schmidt's next novel.

Tricia Sullivan – *Maul*

Orbit, London, 2003, 355pp, £9.99, t/b, ISBN 1-84149-312-0

Reviewed by Paul N. Billinger

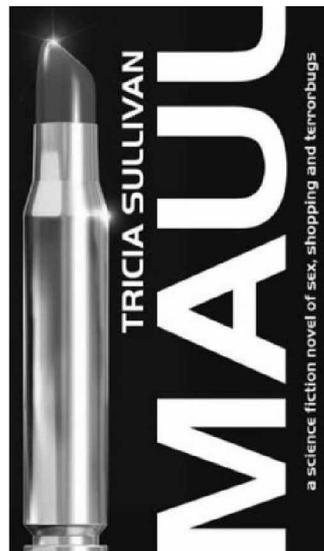


Tricia Sullivan's last novel, *Dreaming in Smoke*, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1999 and since then: nothing. To be fair, she has published three fantasy novels, under the pseudonym Valery Leith, but this, her fourth sf novel, has been a long time

coming (she is reported as having been working on it since 1992). With such a long gestation period one might expect the novel to feel leaden and dated, but happily *Maul* is spontaneous, exhilarating, thought-provoking and just possibly quite, quite brilliant.

In one strand *Maul* tells the story of teenager Sun and her two friends, Suk Hee and Keri, as they go on what turns out to be a very different shopping trip to the local mall. In Sun's reality, about now or a few minutes into the future, a showdown at the mall with another female gang, the Bugaboos, gets horribly out of hand, partly because even teenage girls carry firearms (for reassurance and comfort, not to do any real harm). A very strange siege situation results, all monitored and recorded by 10Esha, an enigmatic Bugaboo. Although Sun sees events in a strangely literal way, Suk Hee's obsession with an antique video game causes everything, and everyone, to be questioned.

Jumping forward to sometime later in the twenty-first century, a second strand is interwoven with Sun's story, centred around a clone male, Meniscus, and his researcher/jailer, Madeleine Baldino. The rare fertile males in this society are closeted in castellations – part stud farm, part concentration camp – competing in a bizarre popularity contest, to win the right to provide sperm to those women eligible to reproduce. Meniscus is a Y-autistic lab-rat, used to test the effects of various strains of microbes. Through unexpected external stimuli, including the introduction of a violent and uncouth 'real' male known as Starry Eyes, Meniscus' world view (and possibly the world) is changed



for ever, as are the bugs colonising his epidermis.

The relationship between these strands appears at first to comply with the expected pattern, rigidly alternating chapters ultimately leading to a joining conclusion, as found in Ken MacLeod's *Cosmonaut Keep*, one of the best recent examples of this type. Here, however, the relationship between the strands is much more complex, with each influencing and changing the other. What the 'real' relationship is, and whether the narratives are happening in the way they appear, is never explicitly stated, rather, the narratives are seeded with clues for the reader to decide what reality is; or, as Sun puts it: "Scratch 'n' sniff, scratch 'n' sniff, peel the onion... will you ever get down to the reality of what this place is all about?"

Of the themes within the narratives the most obvious, and the strongest, is a discourse on the nature of gender: from Sun's (slightly) rebellious geek girl independence to

Starry Eye's macho, testosterone-fuelled arrogance and the effects these have on the different controlling genders around them; but this is exploration not polemic. The pace, complex structure, violence and use of young characters (and a proliferation of designer labels) brings the novel closer to Jon Courtenay Grimwood territory than a traditional sf novel on gender and microbiology, an approach that is wholly successful.

For all the weighty themes and subtle structural interaction one thing should not be forgotten: the book is fun! The writing has such a fluid, natural style that the text just zips along, racing towards joint climaxes, with both strands containing some of the wittiest, funniest lines around.

Some people may find the novel, and its use of sexuality and sexual honesty, shocking, but don't be put off. This is one of the standout novels of the year, with perhaps the strongest, most eloquent, depiction of the microbiological world you will find. This book is much more than it first appears.

Jeff VanderMeer – *Veniss Underground*

Tor UK, London, 2003, 177pp, £10.99, p/b, ISBN 1 4050 3268 5

Reviewed by Stuart Carter



For such a very dark and, at times, frankly horrific book, *Veniss Underground* seems in some ways imbued with a paradoxical sense of playfulness in the warp and weft of its pages. Jeff VanderMeer's far-future vision

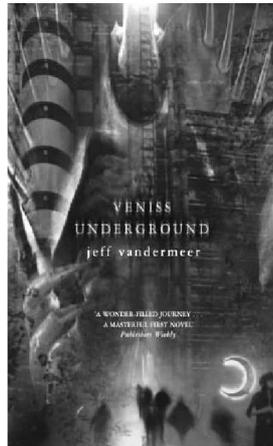
('vision' in a very Blake-ian sense) reveals an advanced but slowly, imperceptibly retreating human civilisation living an isolated existence within mighty walled cities protected from an irredeemably polluted Earth. Despite the many sights and wonders of such a twilight existence, this is the

familiar old humanity, caught up in the day-to-day act of living, rather than an epic struggle against decadence and decay. The struggle to make art or just to put food on the table occupies a more central position than civilisation's entropy. Imagine someone were narrating your life today, in all its science fictional wonder, to a reader from two hundred years ago. How amazed might they be, and how horrified, and yet how blasé you are about it.

Three characters at various points look for the mysterious Quin, a Dr Moreau-style genius and vital producer of the city's enhanced animal servants. Nicholas is a failing artist and slang-jockey (imagine a kind of far future fashion victim). His twin sister Nicola is a successful but unfulfilled programmer who once loved the book's third character, Shadrach, a sometime employee of Quin's and former denizen of the city's awful underworld.

Nicholas, destitute and desperate, visits Shadrach for help and advice in finding Quin, and gets it – along with a warning. Visiting the underworld to find Quin, he disappears. Nicola, wracked with guilt, sets out in turn to find him, also visiting Shadrach for help and advice. When she in turn disappears Shadrach returns to the underworld he grew up in to try to rescue the woman he still tragically loves.

Veniss Underground has echoes of Jack Vance,



Hieronymous Bosch and George A. Romero, and VanderMeer at his best can match China Miéville for industrial-strength descriptions of awful strangeness any day. Where's the fun in this? Well, for a start the highest intelligences in the city may well be Quin's meerkats, engineered servants (or are they...?) of rich humans.

I also liked the narration of the book's three sections (Nicholas's, Nicola's and Shadrach's) in the first, second and third person, respectively. Quite apart from neatness, these viewpoints also help to define the characters: Nicholas's (first person) self-centredness, Nicola's (second person) detachment and Shadrach's (third person) alienation. Shadrach's adventures down below (one might almost say *in the furnace...*) are, as I've said, really quite horrific; the city above, initially so real and familiar to us through Nicholas and Nicola, who narrate the first and second sections, comes to seem almost a layer of froth upon an ocean of suffering. It's ironic that only with the third person do we become aware of the reality beneath the world, metaphorically escaping from the others' heads to see the outside.

Veniss Underground is frighteningly well-written and carries far more than would ever seem possible within just 177 pages.

Jack Williamson – *Darker Than You Think*

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

Gollancz, London, 2003, 266pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07546-5

Not so long ago Jack Williamson was still winning awards for science fiction (novel *Terraforming Earth* and the novella 'The Ultimate Earth'), hardly bad for someone who's rapidly approaching a century. Now Gollancz have reissued one of his earlier novels showing that he had conquered the horror genre over fifty years ago with this tale of lycanthropy.

It begins with journalist Will Barbee meeting a rival reporter, April Bell, at the airport while waiting for the arrival of Dr Lamarck Mondrick, who has spent two years in the Gobi desert. Mondrick returns with a large green box and gives a public announcement of his findings, claiming that an ancient evil is afoot and the Child of Night will soon appear. Before revealing more, however, Mondrick mysteriously collapses and dies, and afterwards Barbee finds April Bell's kitten killed with a hatpin through the heart. Later Barbee and April meet. April confesses to Barbee that she is a witch and that night Barbee dreams of being a wolf, running and hunting with a white wolf-bitch, in search of Mondrick's strange green box. The following day Barbee finds out one of Mondrick's colleagues has been brutally killed. He is only the first of many. Are these coincidences? Who is April Bell? Why is Mondrick's blind wife now so scared of Barbee? What's being protected in Mondrick's green box? And who – or what – is the Child of Night?

Given that some of the issues of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Masterworks series seem to be reissues of poor

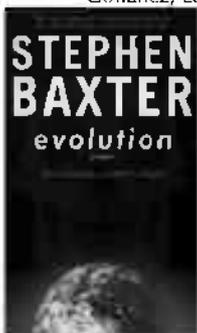
quality fiction, I was becoming cynical towards Gollancz's marketing venture. I suppose the series covers such a range of work nothing could be to everyone's tastes, even mine. However, I was more than pleased to find that the number thirty-eight of the Fantasy Masterworks is a jewel of a novel in the series' finery. I had been thinking that perhaps newer authors were a bit more sophisticated than the earlier pioneers, but *Darker Than You Think* shows that many current writers still have a lot to learn from the old masters like Williamson. Today, a writer would require at least twice the space resulting in less than half the effect. Jack Williamson spins a tale you think you should recognise, but ultimately don't. You only think of the poor quality imitations that have swamped us since the fifties B-movies up until *Buffy*-esque piss-takes. Here Jack Williamson shows us how horror should be written, but rarely is. *Darker Than You Think* is thought to be one of the seminal novels of lycanthropy and it's not hard to see why as Williamson weaves some of the most realistic descriptions of shape changing I've ever read (not that I'm claiming expertise in this area, you understand). Like Richard Matheson in *I Am Legend* explaining vampirism, Williamson gives the subject depth by postulating a scientific – admittedly now outdated – rationale for lycanthropy. But best of all he spins a gripping tale with a satisfying ending leaving this reviewer, like *Oliver Twist*, wanting more.



THESE ARE SOME OF THE OTHER BOOKS WE HAVE SEEN RECENTLY. A MENTION HERE DOES NOT NECESSARILY PRECLUDE A FULL REVIEW IN A LATER ISSUE OF VECTOR.

Stephen Baxter – *Evolution*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 762pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07409-4

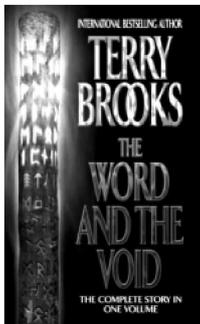


Epic in scale (and size) and telling no less than the story of the human race: from the time of the dinosaurs we follow the passage through history of one stream of DNA into the future and to the end of earth itself as the sun expands. This could have been heavy going but when reviewed in *Vector* 228, by Claire Brialey, she found that the novel contained as much imagination as research and that, despite Baxter's view

that humanity has few chances left, life does endure. Stephen Baxter's new novel, *Coalescent*, is reviewed earlier in this issue.

Terry Brooks – *The Word and the Void*

Orbit, London, 2003, 872pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 1-84149-266-3

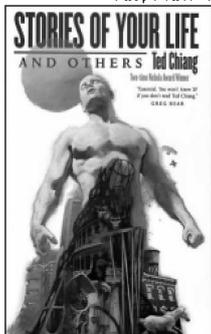


Collected edition of the three *Word and Void* novels comprising *Running with the Demon*, *A Knight of the Word* and *Angel Fire East*. All feature John Ross, a Knight of the Word and his battles against demons from the Void. The first two were reviewed in *Vector* 203 with book one found to be an 'engrossing and generally unpredictable tale' but the second novel was disappointing. Try

them all together and see if the third redeems the series.

Ted Chiang – *Stories of Your Life and Others*

Tor, New York, 2003, 336pp, \$14.95, t/b, ISBN 0-765-30419-8

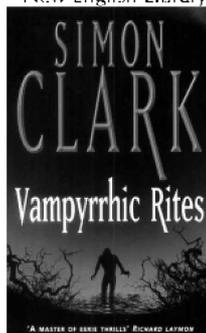


Paperback edition of one of the best and most important short story collections published in recent years. Despite never having published a novel, and only having written a limited number of short stories (seven since 1992, all collected here, plus an eighth original to the collection), Ted Chiang has become one of the most acclaimed writers in the field. Reviewed in *Vector* 225, Steve Jeffrey was very clear that

this is one of the landmark collections in sf, described as an 'exceptional and essential collection'. If you need more convincing then read the whole of Steve's review, but this is one collection that simply you *must* have.

Simon Clark – *Vampyrhic Rites*

New English Library, London, 2003, 504 pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-340-81941-3

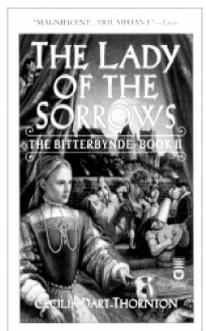


The sequel to *Vampyrhic* sees the team from the first reunited to investigate a missing teenager, who returns from Lazarus Deep on the North Yorkshire Moors strangely changed... Mark Greener was disappointed (see *Vector* 231) finding a horror novel in the grand pulp tradition that only works in parts, for example in the diary left by one of the vampire's victims. The rest is too long, with the use of an ensemble cast

dissipating much of the tension.

Cecelia Dart-Thornton – *The Lady of Sorrows*

Tor UK, London, 2003, 625 pp, £7.99, ISBN 0-330-48956-9



The second in the *Bitterbynde* trilogy continues the story of Imrhien, the heroine of the first volume *The Ill-made Mute*, as she takes vital news to the King-Emperor and searches for the itinerant knight she has fallen in love with, hampered by her memory being clouded by sorcery. What appears to be a traditional fantasy was found by K.V. Bailey (in *Vector* 228) to be an

enjoyable read and more complex than it appears, with the author starting to juggle timescales and identities. The book does have some of the familiar problems found in middle volumes, such as an uncertainty of direction, but Bailey expects that this will undoubtedly be resolved in the final volume.

Philip K. Dick – *Eye in the Sky*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 243pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07456-6

Philip K. Dick – *Solar Lottery*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 188pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07455-8

Philip K. Dick – *The World Jones Made*

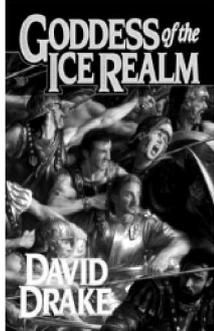
Gollancz, London, 2003, 199pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07457-4

Further reprints from one of the most important sf writers of all time. These are three of Dick's earlier novels (*Solar* 1953, *Jones* 1954 and *Eye* 1955) but all are worth checking out. The excellent *Pocket Essential Guide to Philip K. Dick* by Andrew M. Butler gives the following verdicts on the novels: *Solar Lottery* 'never much more than the sum of its parts. 2/5'. *The World Jones Made* 'the three threads of mutants, relativism and drifters don't quite hang together –

but the use of heroin in 1954? Wow. 3/5'. *Eye in the Sky* 'Dick finds his voice: politics, religion and strange imagined worlds. 4/5'. Gollancz should be applauded for their continuing commitment to bring the works of Dick back into print.

David Drake – *Goddess of the Ice Realm*

Tor Books, New York, 2003, 496pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-87388-3

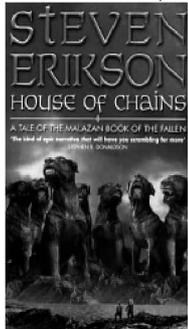


Fifth volume in the *Lord of the Isles* series (the others being *Lord of the Isles*, *Queen of Demons*, *Servants of the Dragon* and *Mistress of the Catacombs*) this is traditional heroic fantasy. In this volume the Kingdom of the Isles is wracked by rebellion and wizardry and our heroes must undertake a perilous journey and triumph over evil before a shattering climax. That'll be very traditional

heroic fantasy then.

Steven Erikson – *House of Chains*

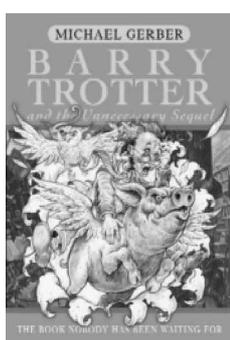
Bantam, London, 2003, 1033pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-553-81313-7



Fourth volume of this massive fantasy series *The Malazan Book of the Fallen* (and no, that is not a misprint above; it is over a thousand pages) that will eventually be a ten-book series (but will it weigh more than Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series?). Tavore, the new Adjunct to the Empress, has arrived in the last remaining Malazan stronghold. Threatened by Sha'ik's Whirlwind she must defend the city with only raw recruits and a handful of veterans of Coltane's march (recounted in earlier volumes).

Michael Gerber – *Barry Trotter and the Unnecessary Sequel*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 328pp, £6.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07558-9



Why? It could be questioned if the world really needs more 'real' Harry Potter, let alone this spoof sequel to *Barry Trotter and the Shameless Parody*. Never has a title more accurately summed up a book. This tries so hard to be funny and witty that it just makes you cringe. If you like humorous fantasy, parodies etc you may like this. I don't. At all. I didn't even like *Bored of the Rings* when it was around first time so you

should consider me somewhat biased here. Buy the Ted Chiang collection, not this.

Harry Harrison – *A Stainless Steel Trio*

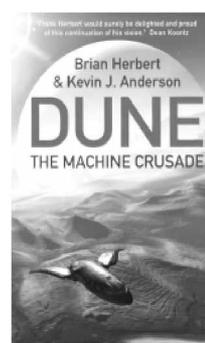
Tor, New York, 2003, 496pp, \$17.95, t/p, ISBN 0-765-30278-0

This volume collects together the three prequels (*A Stainless Steel Rat is Born*, *The Stainless Steel Rat Gets Drafted* and *The Stainless Steel Rat Sings the Blues*). These tell the early life of our 'hero' James DiGriz, later to become Slippery Jim DiGriz, the Stainless Steel Rat. In the

first Jim ends up in prison to get professional criminal training, in the second he joins the army and finds prison preferable and in the last he just avoids execution and becomes a rock 'n' roll singer to recover a missing alien artifact.

Brian Herbert & Kevin J. Anderson – *Dune: The Machine Crusade*

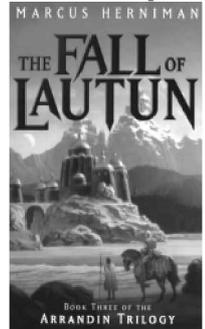
Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2003, 664pp, h/b, £18.99, ISBN 0-340-82333-X



Second volume of the *Legends of Dune* series, following *The Butlerian Jihad* and to be concluded by *The Battle of Corrin*. Following a campaign to free humanity from machine rulers, the Earth is now a radioactive ruin. Four of the remaining machine intelligences – Titans – still seek to challenge humanity, which has gained an unlikely ally: the near-legendary free Titan, Hecate.

Marcus Herniman – *The Fall of Lautun*

Earthlight, London, 2003, 493pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-7434-1512-4

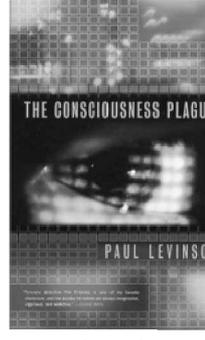


Third and final volume in the *Arrandin Trilogy*, with more problems for the Lautun Empire as another attack comes from the East, compounded by conflict in the Council of Magi between the factions following the old gods quarreling with those of the new. The first volume was reviewed by K. V. Bailey (Vector 207) but he was not impressed, finding it very difficult to engage with, due to large amounts of

information dumping (which did attempt to provide a fully formed background) and some cartoon-like violence. Perhaps by now the style will be more relaxed.

Paul Levinson – *The Consciousness Plague*

Tor, New York, 2003, 320pp, \$15.95, t/p, ISBN 0-765-30754-4



This is the second novel featuring the New York City forensic detective Dr. Phil D'Amato, the first being *The Silk Code* (the third, *The Pixel Eye*, is reviewed earlier in this issue). People, including Dr. D'Amato, are losing their memories bit by bit with our hero detective having to find the answer as well as solving a series of brutal murders. Chris Hill found, in Vector

224, that this worked better as a detective novel with sf elements than as an sf novel with a detective plot, and though an enjoyable read, it falls between the genres and is likely to disappoint readers of either (a failing in which it is not alone, see for example the review of *Looking for Mr Nobody*, earlier in this edition).

Jane Lindskold – *The Dragon of Despair*

Tor Books, New York, 2003, 670pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30259-4
Sequel to *Through Wolf's Eyes* and *Wolf's Head*, *Wolf's Heart* and again featuring Firekeeper who was raised by language-using wolves. Her nemesis from the earlier

