3 Editorial: The View from the Serendip Foundation
   by Andrew Butler

3 BSFA Reviewer’s Poll 2003
   A look at the books compiled by Paul N. Billinger

17 Films of the Year
   Colin Odell & Mitch Le Blanc view the screen media

22 An Interview with Ray Harryhausen
   by Colin Odell & Mitch Le Blanc

23 First Impressions
   Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger

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The View from the Serendip Foundation

In the autumn of 2003 it became clear that the Arthur C. Clarke Award was facing a crisis. It's survived on a largely ad hoc basis, run by a series of administrators, a nebulous entity located somewhere between the BSFA, the Science Fiction Foundation and the International Science Policy Foundation who all supplied judges, and latterly between the BSFA and the SFF, with the Science Museum supplying a fifth judge.

The award has gone both to popular choices, and to controversial ones, but the event itself has increasingly acted as a focal point for fans, critics, academics, writers, publishers and the rest of the British science fiction community. The location in one of the world's leading museums, and the moves within that from wood-panelled lecture theatre, to the Wellcome Wing, to the IMAX auditorium have reflected the growth of the event.

But last autumn Rocket Publications – effectively Arthur C. Clarke's corporate existence in Britain – announced that it would no longer give the same financial support to the award as it had for the last decade. Paul Kincaid, current administrator of the award, gathered a few people together to discuss the way forward, and to begin planning the fund-raising necessary to make up any shortfall. The first concrete step was to set up a company, the Serendip Foundation, to give the award a legal existence, complete with both BSFA and Science Fiction Foundation officials or ex-officials as directors or officials: Paul Kincaid and Maureen Kincaid Speller as co-organisers of the award, Paul and Elizabeth Billinger, Simon Bradshaw and myself representing the BSFA or SFF and Angie Edwards as a link to Rocket Publications.

Then came a second blow: the Science Museum raised the amount that they were charging for the hire of the auditorium, citing their own funding crisis. This left us with more money to raise, and the realisation that the Science Museum is unfortunately out of our league. The search for sources of money continues, as does a search for a suitable venue. A few places are already being looked at, and grant applications have been made.

Clearly the continuation of the Arthur C. Clarke Award as an event is dependent on the goodwill of the science fiction community, whether it is in the form of donations or suggestions for sponsors and other sources of money. If you have any ideas or can offer any help – and we have had much advice already – then please contact me and I will pass it on to the rest of the Serendip Foundation.

Meanwhile, back at Vector, this is my fifteenth issue of the magazine (if you count the reviews supplement that went with 188, it's Tony Cullen's fifty-first), and this issue is bulging at the seams with a look back at 2003. This has meant that I've had to hold the letters over to the next issue, but keep them coming.

by Andrew M. Butler, Canterbury, Spring 2004

The BSFA Reviewers' Poll: 2003

compiled by Paul N. Billinger

Introduction

This should be a straightforward task: Vector reviewers, BSFA committee members, staff on Matrix and Focus and so on are asked to choose their favourite five books of the year and explain why. So far so good; but this is not the best sf/fantasy books of the year, it's the five best of any books read during the year, including novels, anthologies, graphic novels and non-fiction. And they don't even have to have been published in 2003, just read during the year. And having made your selection you still have to justify your choice in relatively few words. There was a lot of agonising going on all over the country.

Given this wide remit it should come as no surprise to see the range of books mentioned, with a total of 138 different books selected by thirty-six people. This is similar to previous years in the number of books/people but there is a marked difference in distribution between this year and last, with this year's poll being flatter and wider. In 2002, eighteen books gained more than one vote; M. John Harrison's Light came top with nine votes and only seven books attracted three or more votes. This year a total of twenty-two books got more than one vote; the top selection, Jon Courtenay Grimwood's Falseheer (which entirely deserves this recognition), gained six votes but there were other books very close behind. All of this suggests that there is less consensus as to the "best" book of 2003 than in some previous years. The selection to choose from was even wider: a good sign for the strength of genre fiction being published, with the often talked about current 'British boom' in sf publishing being well represented in the list. Comparing the Reviewers' Poll with the award shortlist shows good correlation with the BSFA Novel Award shortlist (unsurprisingly, as the selection for both came from BSFA members) but less so with the Clarke Award shortlist, with one book from that list, Greg Bear's Darwin's Children, not being selected by anyone in the Reviewers' Poll. There are, however, two novels common to all three lists, Gwyneth Jones's Midnight Lamp and Tricia Sullivan's Maul. For me the one surprise is Justin Robson's Natural History not appearing on the Clarke Award shortlist, confounding one of the few predictions I made concerning the shortlist (time to give up my career as a pundit, then).

The Reviewers' Poll rarely has any consensus wider than genre novels but this year has proved an exception with both a mainstream and a non-fiction book gathering a significant number of votes. The mainstream one is Mark Haddon's award winning The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, brilliantly telling of a teenager with Asperger's Syndrome hunting for the murderer of his neighbour's dog. The non-fiction selection is Francis Spufford's The Backroom Boys, an inspirational account of the often-hidden influence of British scientists in recent world-effecting events. Spufford's book appears in the poll despite having only having been published in November, and I suspect that it may feature prominently in next year's poll too. Both are strongly recommended. The poll also shows that Light and Christopher Priest's The Separation continue to impress and with the republication of Priest's book by Gollancz (see reviews section) this is likely to gain continued support during 2004. Also of note, and similar to previous years, is the large number of books on the list which are classed as 'young adult' with almost half of the reviewers selecting at least one (though Harry Potter is curiously absent): but why are 'adults' choosing books for 'children' over serious grown-up ones [discuss?]
K. V. BAILEY

My favoured five are chosen because, as well as being enjoyable reads, they have either added to an inheritance or have opened new doors. Some have done both. Alan Garner's microcosm is the Pennine valley of Thurstibish (Harvill Press, 2003). From there the eighteenth-century clockmaker Jack Turner, crosses the hills, mediating the outer world, and in his shaman-like aspect transacts within his village universal and age-old rituals. Time-fused with this are the geological/archaeological explorations of, and meditations on, Thurstibish as a Jesus and a scientist, both enduring twenty-first century angst. The synchronic factor perpetuates concepts of such earlier novels as Red Shift, while Jack's ultimate and holistic starry vision transcends them.

In The Other Wind (Orion Children's, 2002) Ursula Le Guin builds on her Earthsea inheritance, now more than ever in an adult vein. She overtly reprises that mythic complex of a deliverance from an Underworld as it appeared in The Tombs of Atuan. There it had hints of Persephone: here it has more the colouring of the Orphic myth, as the sorcerer Alder seeks counsel from the retired sage Spanorhawk on bringing back his witch-wife from the walled citadel of death. This motif interweaves with that of the now territorially aggressive winged dragons, whose mode of being and whose flight on the 'Other Wind' marks their separation from the human path. They eventually assist in demolishing the wall, and their subsequent homeward flight resolves the plot's many ambiguities.

Gawain the White Hank (George Mann, 2003) consists of four verse retellings of two Gawain legends: those of the Green Knight and the Lean Lady. In them Marilyn Batchelor gives poetic emphasis to the relationship between what is virtually ritualistic drama and the changing, dying and renewed seasons through which the action passes. Adding several pages of notes, she traces the survival of pre-Christian motifs and personae. Her verse is vigorous, its turns sparkling and sombre. It affected me much as it did Kevin Crossley-Holland, who, in a foreword, writes: 'I read [the poems] with great joy, yet sometimes close to tears.'

The Reliquary Ring (Macmillan, 2003) is itself a stream-line token of power in Cherith Baldry's novel set in an alternative Venus. It is pleasing for its realistic evocation of that wonderful city and remarkable for its adroitness with which it incorporates historic traditions and rituals of our actual Venus into the plot manoeuvres of the alternative one. That plot, however, seems to have overreached its science-fictional substance where it concerns the attaining of equality and freedom for the 'genics', a manufactured, subservient, but essentially human species. The 'Ferged' of Justina Robson's Natural History (Macmillan, 2003) have something in common with those Venetian genics, but their urge is to the stars and for separation from 'Old Monkey' man in his solar milieu. This results in contact with a fresh and disturbing evolutionary horizon. I loved the convincing realisation that Old Monkey politicians and civil servants still walked their dogs in a futuristic version of St. James's Park. The Merlin Conspiracy (Collins, 2003). A welcome return for her to children's fiction, which in my view she does so much better than writing for adults. It's not one of her absolute best, but still very good indeed, with a variety of imagination and humour, but serious issues underlying it as well.

Diana Wynne Jones, The Merlyn Conspiracy (Collins, 2003). The next episode in the Bold as Love universe. I love this world and the people who inhabit it. Although this is set in the US, and so loses the characteristic Englishness of the two previous books, it's still a compelling read, and takes the central relationship to a new stage. It is also a finely imagined portrait of near-future America.

Ursula Le Guin, The Other Wind (Orion Children's, 2002). A new Earthsea book is bound to be an event. This - as was Tehanu - is aimed at an older audience than the original trilogy, and looks at the world in new ways. It didn't quite live up to my expectations, but it is still powerfully and elegantly written.

Terry Pratchett, Monstrous Regiment (Doublade, 2003). Not as powerful as the previous year's Night Watch, but still well worth reading. Fascinating character interactions and commentary on war.

PAUL BATEMAN

The first two are works of non-fiction. The endlessly fascinating Emergence (Penguin, 2001) by Steven Johnson (no, not the disappointing novel by Ray Hammond) is a thought-provoking account of how changes occur from the bottom up, such that enough individual changes will and organise themselves into a collective intelligence without a distinct director. This phenomenon occurs at every level of existence: such as how ant hills arise, how neighbourhoods form, how Internet communities appear, how media faxes occur and how a brain can be conscious even though no single neuron. Emergence even offers a solution to the travelling salesman problem.

The second is Stupid White Men (HarperCollins, 2002) by Michael Moore. Perhaps a bit unbalanced, perhaps a bit over the top, but I found it to be refreshingly frank. Moore argues that nearly everything wrong in the world is because of the actions of the stupid white men in charge. No one is safe from them. Not even stupid white men like Moore whose book was originally published weeks before the events of 11 September 2001 occurred and subsequently suppressed until the publishers gave in to public demand. This is a book to make your blood boil at what's wrong in the world. Science fiction has often warned about social injustices and exploitation. Michael Moore gives these warnings their true names and more. The world could do with more books like this.

In a world where books for younger readers are finally receiving...
the status they deserve compared to books for their older counterparts, my next two reads of the year are children’s books.

**Across the Nightingale Floor** (Macmillan, 2002) by Lian Hearn is the first part of a trilogy recounting the life of a boy orphaned during a massacre. A 13-year-old to the Samurai who murdered the boy’s mother, adopts the boy, who in turn plots his revenge, learning many skills and also about his true inheritance and lineage. This is probably the best story immersed in Japanese folklore and culture involving Samurai, ninja assassins, war, honour, loyalty and love I’ve read since James Clavell’s *Shogun*. I look forward to the next parts of the trilogy.

**Noughts and Crosses** (Doubleday, 2001) by Malorie Blackman is the second children’s book on my list. Sephry is a Cross, born into a high-class family. Callum is a Nought born into the lower working class. Can they be friends when Callum’s father is arrested for acts of terrorism? With *Noughts and Crosses*, Malorie Blackman has created a book discussing racial issues to rival *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Cry, the Beloved Country*, but the racial divide is cleverly made more explicit as the roles of black and white are reversed.

Finally, the Big Read didn’t escape my notice and I was surprised to find myself agreeing with others that Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (Virago, 2003) had every right to be on that list. Usually I’m disappointed with either my mother’s or my wife’s recommendations, but *Rebecca* came as a complete surprise. Combining elements of mystery, suspense and even hints of the supernatural, this is without doubt one of the most deftly crafted thrillers I’ve ever read. The book is even more “Hitchcock” than the Hitchcock adaptation. Few modern authors can compete with Rebecca, but many have a lot to learn from this classic.

**Elizabeth A. Billinger**

The most compelling thing for me about both Jeffrey Ford’s *The Portrait of Mrs Charboneau*. (Tar UK, 2003), and Jon Courtenay Grimwood’s *Felaheen* (Earthlight, 2003) is the skill with which the authors portray an imagined world that is rooted in reality. Ford creates a dark, baroque New York of the late nineteenth century, a place of mysteries and murders, disguises and dissembling, the capture of snowflakes and the divination of truth in chamber pots, all revolving around an artist who accepts a commission to paint the portrait of a woman he can never look upon. Grimwood’s alternative North Africa is hotter than Ford’s New York but no less dangerous or convincing. The food, the smells, the architectural descriptions and cleverly sketched cultural details support the tantalising convolutions of the narrative. Both novels ask questions about identity: Ford’s protagonist attempts to know someone who wishes to remain concealed, to divine a true image from a voice and the stories it tells. Grimwood’s protagonist is caught up in a search for his own identity, and perhaps his soul, as he and the reader unravel his past, the past of his country and try to discover what is real.

Victoria Finlay’s journey is through a European rainbow, in her uncategorisable book *Colour* (Sceptre, 2002). Finlay presents a history of the principal pigment colours, but her journey is literal, taking her all around the world on some remarkable adventures, as she seeks out the original sources. That the best ochre comes from sacred and secret Aboriginal sites in Australia, that the indigo plant has all but disappeared from Bengal, that it is no longer economic to grow soffon in La Mancha are all things that Finlay investigates. Her book is part fascinating history, part travel memoir, and part a very personal account of what these pigments mean to the author. Charming and informative, with a surprisingly emotional edge, this book made a difference to the way I look at the world.

Kelly Link looks differently at the world in *stranger Things Happen* (Small Beer Press, 2001). This collection of stories feels as though it has not a single misplaced or unnecessary word; the stripped down prose displays the anatomy of the writing, leaving the reader swept away by the story and breathtakingly admiring the skill with which it was executed. Link is fanciful, funny, and horrific; she plays joyfully with language and fairy tales, and always offers an unexpected view that is both challenging and exhilarating.

‘We went to the moon to have fun, but the moon turned out to completely suck’ is the irresistible opening line of *Feed* (Walker Books, 2003) by M.T. Anderson. It’s a novel about teenagers, marketed to the teen reader. What happens to language and expression in a world where everyone has an imprint—a feed—which delivers carefully tailored advertising and will offer an encyclopaedic definition wherever the individual encounters an unknown word or concept? A conspiracy is investigated against a background of diminishing language, limited choices, and a declining desire for free will.

**Paul N. Billinger**

Given the nature of the author’s work, it’s apt to start my selections with an ending. Jon Courtenay Grimwood’s *Felaheen* (Earthlight, 2003) with its curved, interlocking non-linear narrative. The stunning conclusion to his Arabesk series, set in the near future of an alternate North Africa where the Ottoman Empire still exists, *Felaheen* finds our very modern hero, Astrid Bey, transported into investigating an assassination attempt on the Emir of Tunis, who may, or may not, be his father. This is a more personal book than the preceding volumes and all the stronger for it, focusing on three generations of Ra’s family. Rarely has a concluding volume been as satisfying as this, making the series one you must not miss.

Justin Robson’s *Natural History* (Macmillan, 2003) pushes space opera into an even more extreme form, with a far future Earth populated by both normal humans and the Forged, a mix of human and animal genes melded with advanced technology. The discovery in deepest space of a lump of strange grey stuff appears to present miraculous and unlimited possibilities—or to precipitate the simmering conflict between Forged and humans. Each word is carefully considered to produce an intricate, dense novel with a rich vein of humour and wit. Tricia Sullivan’s *Mockingbird* (Orbit, 2003) was a surprise, not least because it has a cover that shirked ‘read me!’ With an apparently conventional twin narrative, one a trip to the shopping mall that gets very out of hand, the other set in the near future where the rare fertile males are closeted in castellations, part stud farm, part concentration camp, an unworldly real male threatens the society’s stability. The best just zips along, racing towards joint climaxes, with both strands containing some of the wittiest, funniest, lines around.

Garth Nix has been writing some of the best current Young Adult fantasy and *Mister Monday* (Scholastic Inc, 2003), the first of his new series, shows him just getting better. Arthur Penhaligon is saved from certain death by a bizarre key and creatures from another reality. But this has consequences: Arthur must protect the key and our world, which is threatened by an unidentified plague, by investigating a sinister old house—the gate to another world. The prologue alone should win awards, read it in a bookshop, recover breath, buy book. Nothing could be simpler.

My final choice is Anthony Bourdain’s *Kitchen Confidential* (Bloomsbury, 2000) which has little connection with sf, being the autobiography of a chef, albeit one who has run some of the top restaurants in Tokyo, Paris and New York. From his first experience of real food—vichyssoise on an ocean liner—through the diners of New York, Bourdain gives us his own view of both haute cuisine and the
restaurant business and his often painful journey through both. Both frighteningly honest and screamingly funny, written with a style and pace that most novelists would envy. Read this and find out when it's safe to eat fish in the best restaurants.

COLIN BIRD
As usual my reading horizon lags by at least a year behind the rest of the sf world partly due to waiting for paperback publication and partly because I've been interspersing my reading with various great works of literature which are now easily available on the internet (and at no cost, which helps). My meagre sample of genre fiction last year precludes me from any overall summary of current trends but any of top five in no order consists of:

China Miéville, *The Scar* (Macmillan, 2002). It's getting harder to resist Miéville's richly layered stories full of a real sense of wonder contrasted with gritty realism. Has anybody sent these novels to Peter Jackson? Melfinks they are just as 'unfilmable' as they said Lord of the Rings was.

David Brin, *Ali's People* (Orbit, 2002). The title promises something strange and funny and this novel delivers entertainment aplenty. Full of notable invention from an author normally associated with more ponderous fare.

Greg Bear, *Vitals* (Voyager, 2002). Far more convincing than anything by Mr Crichton. This novel is laced with fascinating science and a narrative which gradually becomes more unhinged (and enjoyable) as it races to a sad ending. Bear seems to have successfully reinvented himself as an author of biotech thrillers and this one is his best so far.

Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Years of Rice and Salt* (Voyager, 2002). Probably the least fun to read of Robinson's books (maybe in a tie with Antarctica). I have mixed feelings about this one from my favourite modern sf author. It's full of powerful writing but structurally awkward and with characters that are hard to get to grips with but then it is describing concepts which are rarely tackled in western fiction. A novel that demands further exploration and intense concentration.

Alastair Reynolds, *Redemption Ark* (Gollancz, 2002). A return to form after the messy *Chasm City*. More unfathomable aliens, huge spaceships and bizarre weapons built for planet-stomping. It's not breaking any new ground but is well written and fills the increasingly long gaps between Banks' Culture novels.

LYNNE BISPAM
In first place has to be *Castles Made of Sand* (Gollancz, 2002) by Cwayneh Jones, the follow-up to *Bodas as Love*, which made my list of 2002 Books of the Year. I approached this sequel with some trepidation. So often the second book in a series is disappointing, but in this book (as always) Cwayneh Jones delivers a remarkable piece of writing, with strong characters inhabiting a highly original milieu, which is Britain, but not as we know it. This book could be described as science fiction, fantasy or both. Absolutely brilliant and highly recommended. And fortunately the next volume in the series is already published.

Two fantasies that particularly impressed me this year, in no particular order, were *Juliet, I'm Not Mad* (Orbit, 2003) and *Sarah Ash's Lord of Snow and Shadows* (Bantam, 2003). *Southern Fire* is book one of The Aldabranian Compass. Yes, it is the first volume in yet another fantasy series, but it is superior fantasy, is extremely well written, and is set in a particularly rich and colourful world. Lord of Snow and Shadows, book one of The Years of Antarken, is set in a world that has echoes of our own in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and yet manages to portray a fully convincing scenario in which magic is used to win battles or communicate over vast distances. The old tale of an ordinary person who is unexpectedly informed that they are actually royalty is given a new slant when the main character discovers the true and abhorrent nature of his inheritance. Again well-drawn characters, originality, stylish descriptions and a strong sense of place make this book stand out from the crowd.

Manda Scott's *Boudica, Dreaming the Eagle* (Bantam Press, 2003) purports to be a historical novel describing the formative years of the warrior queen but it reads like a fantasy. As a child, the heroine wins renown by killing an enemy warrior. Later, she is sent to be trained in the Isle of the Dreamers (aka Druids). So little is actually known of Boudica's early life that the author has been able to give her imagination full rein. Great stuff.

Finally, one book that really can be classified as a historical novel, despite one character being able to see into the future, is *Emperor, the Gates of Rome* (HarperCollins, 2003) by Conn Iggulden, which describes the early life of Julius Caesar. If you like your fantasy with swords and battles, you may well like this book.

CLAIRE BRALEY
As ever, the choice of five books is so difficult that this might not be the five I'd have picked yesterday or would pick tomorrow. But I can't help noticing that this particular selection each contain a sense that the world is not as it should be - but that change is possible and sometimes worth the risk.

Finally, two more. *Saudade* by Margaret Heistone's *Hy Brasil* (Cannongate, 2002) is a fantasy set on a fictitious archipelago in the Atlantic which is the first assignment for a budding travel writer who won it on the basis of a fabricated application. The macro-politics of the islands' strategic importance have become entangled with the politics of personality within the community; their history is thus a series of family sagas from which the current inhabitants struggle to escape, while trying to avoid the incursions of Reality - and the weapons with which they are matched by the seismic instability of the geography. The entry into this community of an outsider with a remit to discover its true nature is the spur for love, death, mystery, explosions, the onset of free and fair elections.

*Faelafen* (Earthlight, 2003) was a strong conclusion to Jon Courtenay Grimwood's Arabesk sequence. As ever, I was entranced by the vision of future local and global society, the intimacy of the alternating first-person, the exquisite personal touch of the characterisation, the exceptionally deft depictions of sex and gender relations, the anger accentuated by humour and the elegant plotting of brutal events which marks out Grimwood's work. Oh, and the food. *Faelafen* contains some conclusions, some new perspectives on familiar characters, and some intriguing new questions which make me desperately impatient for the next novel.

*Death and the Penguin* (Harvill Press, 2003) by Andrei Korkov is a compelling short novel set in post-Soviet Ukraine. The family surreal nature of daily life is satirically accepted as quite normal for this new society as the viewpoint character contends with the joys and strains of new friendships, potential romance, domestic problems, professional fulfillment, unwitting involvement in organised crime - and the daily needs of a pet penguin cast adrift from the zoo. To my great joy I've recently discovered a sequel is due out this year.

*The Light Ages* (Earthlight, 2003) by Ian R. MacLeod is 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 - albeit fantastic - respect from ours. But, after the nature of fantastic materials, it twists so that its difficult to pin down what else it is a novel about society, seen through the stories of individuals caught up in - or attempting to provoke - a moment of
historical change, a narrative about economic and social orders and their resilience, or about the contrasted pettiness and greatness of the human condition; a series of connected personal stories set against a backdrop of a world in upheaval which mirrors the turbulence of people's lives or of all of these, and more.

Finally, Tricia Sullivan's *Maul* (Orbit, 2003) is the most thought-provoking book I read all year. Its dual narrative strands feature young girls struggling to preserve life, dignity, and fashion credibility — and to work out which is more important — in the urban battlefield of a shopping mall, while women and men take sides over freedom and fertility in a future society that's gone more badly wrong. One is imagining the other, and yet, as the White King dreams of Alice in the looking-glass world, nothing is that straightforward.

There could be more. There could be others. But these are all books that made me think and kept me reading.

**TANYA BROWN**

I've been waiting for *Midnight Lamp* (Gollancz, 2003), the third novel in Gwyneth Jones's near-future rock 'n' roll science fantasy series, ever since I read *Castles Made of Sand* in the summer of 2002. The promise of the novel is quite different from its predecessors: *Midnight Lamp* is set in California, and the redoubtable trio at the heart of the series — Sage, Ax and Fransina — seem considerably less epic when they're away from the once and future England in which they played out mythic roles.

Diana Wynne Jones's *The Merlin Conspiracy* (Collins, 2003) is a delight: all the frivolity and invention of her books for children, bound up in a more subtle and complex magical setting. I'm particularly taken with her personifications of cities — especially Old Sarum, all bitter and flautabitten, a fallen borough through and through.

Franny Billing's *The Folk Troll* (Bloomsbury, 2003) was a chance find — I've been less adventurous than usual with unfamiliar authors, but I was lured by the blend of mundane and magical promised in the blurb. This is a charming book, though the romantic elements may alienate its intended juvenile readership. Key moment here: the narrator's sensation of 'turning inside out' as the tide turns. Definitely an author to watch, and one who has a good feel for British folklore.

M. John Harrison's *Light* (Gollancz, 2002) was probably the single most traditional sf novel that I read and enjoyed. There's something about Harrison's prose that makes him a joy to read, and I loved the playfulness with which he subverted the whole space-opera genre. Proper science, too.

Last but not least, I was pleasantly surprised by Lois McMaster Bujold's *The Curse of Chalion* (Voyager, 2002). I've enjoyed almost all her science-fiction novels, but for some reason (the cover! the blurb! the odour of formulaic fantasy?) I didn't bother to look at this until I read an extended free preview in e-book format. I was hooked by the complex, likable characters, the dry humour and the well-paced, multi-layered plot: really, none of this should have surprised me in a novel by the author of the Vorkosigan saga.

**ANDREW M. BUTLER**

2002 seems to have been a stronger year than 2003, and Christopher Priest's *The Separation* (Simon & Schuster, 2002) (rightly) won the Clarke Award amidst tough competition. It is a novel which demands reading to decode precisely what was going on in the hall of mirrors of alternate history — when the Second World War really ended and what Rudolf Hess was up to when he flew to Britain from Germany.

Children's fiction, especially within the fantasy and sf genres, continued to flourish in 2003. Indeed, for professional reasons, most of what I read this year was children's fiction and non-fiction about children's fiction. It's hard to narrow down the field, but from 2003, S.F. Said's *Vargjag* (David Fickling Books, 2002) was the brilliant and sinister tale of a family of cats and the secret marital arts of the cat kingdom. From a couple of years ago I can recommend Louis Sachar's *Holes* (Bloomsbury, 2000). This is a series of interlinking narratives, centred on Stanley Yelnats, wrongly sentenced to a prison camp on the edge of a dried-up lake in Texas and forced with the other inmates to dig a hole every day in the harsh climate. Stanley is there because of events a century or more ago (in the old country) when his ancestor failed to carry out his side of a bargain with a wise woman. And then there's the legend of the outlaw kissing Kate who was last seen on the lake shore a century back. A fairy tale for the twenty-first century. The film was far better than we could have dreamed possible, being adapted by Sachar — whereas Sachar's other novels seem less interesting.

Finally, from the crime genre, two private eye novels, with twists: Malcolm Pryce's *Aberystwyth Mon Amour* (Bloomsbury, 2001) and Eric Garcia's *Anonymous Rex: A Detective Story* (HarperCollins, 2001). In the former Louie Knight is a private eye in this Welsh coastal town which finds itself in the grip of a crimewave: some of our schoolboys are missing. Knight refuses to be employed by Myfanwy, a dancer at the local night club, to search for the missing Evans the Boot but someone clearly thinks he knows more than he does because his office is ransacked and before long someone makes him an offer he cannot refuse, and a donkey's head appears in his bed. Can he solve the crime, get the girl and stay alive? In the latter novel, there is a sense of familiarity in the setup: a humdrum private eye is down on his luck and gets too deep into a case that has to do with his dead partner. What recurs the story from cliché is that the dinosaurs did not actually die out, but have just lain low over the centuries and evolved a bit so they can pass among humans in suitable disguises. The central character is a dinosaur, cut off for now from his order. Pryce's novel has a sequel, and Garcia's is the first of a series, and I'm certainly looking out for them.

**STUART CARTER**

Francis Sparfod, *The Beakroom Boys* (Falber, 2003). Non-fiction that was occasionally so bizarre you wouldn't have been surprised to find it filed under 'Alternative History': British space programs, computerised universes, scientists fighting global hegemony — and all in dear old Blighty. Sparfod's deeply affectionate look back at some of the less well-known mad scientists from recent history highlights what's best about Britain and British people: a wonderful, heart-warming book to surely instil a bit of national pride in even the flintiest of anarchist hearts!

Richard Morgan, *Broken Angels* (Gollancz, 2003). A worthy follow-up to my favourite book of last year: hard-hitting, widescreen and again boiling with the kind of real violence never normally seen in 'violent' books. Broken Angels tooks Takeda Kovacs, the protagonist of *Altered Carbon*, out into the wider universe. If you thought twenty-sixth century San Francisco was a nasty place then think again — the galaxy is much, much worse. Much as I cling to the hope that humanity is better than this, a quick look around the world in 2003 often seemed to give lie to that hope. Nobody in my experience wishes quite like Richard Morgan, with a quick touch and a dash of paper, that simultaneously thrilling and revolting you. It's enough to put you off becoming an intergalactic mercenary for hire!

Duncan Hunter, *A Martian Poet in Siberia* (1st Books, 2002). About as far away as it's possible to get from one of Richard Morgan's...
books while still using paper and ink. A self-published debut that drew easily from orient and accident to create a restrained, intelligent tale that ranks alongside Kim Stanley Robinson both in terms of style and attitude (if not sheer page count). This book arrived without fanfare on the Realms of Adventures shelf, and stayed there for a while, an ugly duckling to judge from the outer cover, but inside, I can assure you, lies an elegant and beautiful swan of a book about love, survival, and, well, everything really.

Graham Joyce, *The Facts of Life* (Gollancz, 2002). My first foray into Joyce-land had me kicking myself that I’d never been there before. Warm, funny, eye-widening and occasionally even eye-opening. The Facts of Life could so easily have been a dreadfully formulaic and twee Catherine Cockson-style novel... but isn’t. In fact, it’s so stuffed full of a healthy love for life that surely only a corpse could put it down!

Christopher Priest, *The Separation* (Simon & Schuster, 2002). Barely fit at all (hell, even Mrs C. read and enjoyed it), barely even released at all (boo Simon & Schuster), the Separation still managed (and deservedly so) to take the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2003. This was one of those books where I had literally no idea what was going to happen — and for all the right reasons. I wasn’t a Priest fan before the latest got too many of the ‘wrong’ kind of ‘good’ reviews for me but in this his writing just slides off the page like butter from a hot potato, and tastes just as good.

GARY DALKIN

Dan Simmons, *Ilium* (Gollancz, 2003). In this, the first half of a duo, Simmons returns to epic space opera. The approach is essentially the same as in the author’s Hyperion Cantos: a fusion of high-tech adventures spaceships with literature’s greatest hits: Homer, Shakespeare, Proust, H.G. Wells. Much post-modern fun is to be had, and some of the invention is sheer delight; though the yarn goes one bizarre wonder too far. *Ilium* seems much more simply an ingenious and boldly conceived entertainment than Hyperion, whereas the narrative and literary structure were woven together with more serious intent and poetic ambition. Nevertheless the book is a political romp filled with set-pieces which span the gulf between breathing and banal. Final conclusions will have to remain until the publication of the follow-up, *Olympus*.

Stephen King, *Wolves of the Calla* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2003). It’s been a long road for King’s Roland on his way to The Dark Tower, inspired by Robert Browning’s Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came. When he gets there will he find it already occupied by Dan Simmons’ latest literature-plundering characters? This is the least exciting and action-packed of The Dark Tower novels, yet it succeeds in deepening and enriching the saga in diverse and endlessly intriguing ways. King has long been weaving these books into the fabric of his entire body of work and the way he binds the latest tale to Salem’s Lot is ingenious, suggesting we will soon have to go back and re-read King’s entire output as one vast interlocked epic. A startling imaginative achievement which makes me greatly anticipate the final two volumes, both due this year.

Stephen Baxter, *Coalescent* (Gollancz, 2003). First volume of a new epic space opera series following two books set after the middle-aged Englishman searching for the sister he didn’t remember he had and ranging from NASA to Rome, the other an adventure from the withdrawal of the Roman Legions from Britain to a strange new underground society in Rome. Of course the two plots become one and there are added hints of war in the heart of the galaxy and a chilling far-future coda. Parts of this book contain Baxter’s most intimately human and personal writing, while others are more detached and offer plot threads which seem credible. Nevertheless, the mix of Roman history, bizarre horror in the tradition of *The Stephford Wives*, *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Omen* though sinuous and without the satanic elements and Starship Troopers’ future war is intriguing and promises much for future volumes.

Charles Chaillot, *My Autobiography* (Bedley Head, 1964). A compelling account of Chaplin’s family life, early poverty, music hall days, silent cinema triumphs and political persecution. There’s not much about the making of his films and his first marriage is swiftly buried under the carpet, but this is engagingly written and very winning. It does though need to be balanced by a more objective volume which takes the less savoury aspects of the great man’s life into account.


ALAN FRASER

Robin Hobbi, *Fool’s Fate* (Voyager, 2003). The conclusion to the second series about Fitz and Chivalry in which not only the latest plotline — the quest to kill a dragon who definitely should not be killed — but also the issues left at the end of the first series are finally resolved. I complained in my review of *Assassin’s Quest* that Fitz got a ‘proper’ deal: he saved the world but didn’t get the girl or happiness for his efforts. This book sets things right, as well as finally sorting out all the loose ends, including some you didn’t know were loose! My other complaint at the ending of *Assassin’s Quest* was that the ending was too rushed, a mistake that Robin Hobbi didn’t make at the end of *The Liveship Traders* and one she doesn’t make here.

M. John Harrison, *Light* (Gollancz, 2002). Light is Harrison’s first sf book since *The Centauri Device* in 1975, and well worth the wait. It combines a space opera set in 2400 with a 1999 story in which two physicists struggle with personal problems and at the limits of quantum physics to create the basis for interstellar flight. Light even has an unusual ending for Harrison — if not happy, then at least hopeful.

James Lovegrove, *United Kingdom* (Gollancz, 2003). I’d not read anything by James Lovegrove before, but this is a good one, an interesting update on those 1950s British disaster novels by John Wyndham and John Christopher. It’s set in the near future after the United Kingdom has fallen apart — hence the title. With the country’s infrastructure gone, isolated communities such as the village of Downbourne have resurrected ancient traditions and myths to help them survive. A London-based gang raid the village and kidnap several women, including Moira, the wife of the schoolmaster Fen Morris. Even though his marriage was failing, Morris feels bound to try to rescue her and sets off on a quest to get her back which takes him through the ruins of England, showing us how ordinary people find the strength to carry on.

Stephen King, *Wolves of the Calla* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2003). I’m not a fan of Stephen King’s horror work, but I have followed with interest his Dark Tower series, set in a parallel Wild West that has links to our own world. King notes in his introduction to this book
that if you haven't read the previous volumes this isn't the place to begin. He's right. Continuing the story of the gunslinger Roland of Gilead and his motley bunch of followers from our world, this book is not only a homage to The Magnificent Seven, but also packed full of references to virtually every popular novel or film in recent history, and even includes a character from King's own Salem's Lot. It doesn't advance the story as much as you'd perhaps like, but it's still a fascinating read.

Peter Crowther (ed.), Cities (Gollancz, 2003). Cities is the fourth of Peter Crowther's series of Fourlight anthologies, each of which includes four novellas on a related topic. This volume has four stories on the theme of cities, from four big names in what I'd describe as 'more challenging' fantasy: Paul di Filippo, 'A Year in the Linear City', Michael Moorcock, 'Filing the Cathedral' (a Jerry Cornelius story), China Miéville, 'The Tain' (set in the world of New Crobuzon), and Geoff Ryman, 'V.A.O.' (Victim Activated Ordinance). Not every tale will appeal to all, but it's still far above the usual bookshop shelf-filling fare.

MARK GREENER

I distilled the best of novels I read in 2003 to Brian Aldiss's Super-State (Orbit, 2002) and James Lovegrove's United Kingdom (Gollancz, 2003). For what's it worth, I consider Super-State to be a classic in the making: an intellectual, philosophical and serious novel. And because of its topical relevance to the EU's squabbles and the Iraq quagmire I think Super-State is probably the best book of the year. A good half of my fiction reading comes from the so-called 'literary' end of the mainstream: Amis, McEwan, Eco, and so on. Even against this benchmark, Super-State remains impressive. United Kingdom is a close second. It's a hugely enjoyable yarn reminiscent of Wyndham at his best.

Chris Bunch's Storm of Wings (Orbit, 2002) and its sequel Kingdom of the Dragon (Orbit, 2003) were easily the best fantasy books I came across in the last twelve months. Indeed, they're really one book chopped more or less in half. Taken as a single book, the novels offer a compelling story of the development of character forged by war. This might sound un-PC, but these aren't books that glorify war. Indeed, the martial verismilitude sets the novels apart from the usual sword and sorcery escapism. In many ways, the novels represent the fantasy equivalent of The Forever War. But I suspect publication in two parts may dilute its impact.

There were two contenders for the best short story collection - both from Elastic Press: Marion Armati's Sleepwalkers (Elastic Press, 2003) and Milo & I, by Antony Mann. This was a really tough choice. Sleepwalkers won by a nose. It's more to my weaker, melancholic, almost misanthropist taste than the cynical, worldly humour of Milo & I. But both are marvellous books that should be known to a much wider audience than just fans of slipstream, dark fantasy or crime.

For best horror book, I was tempted to suggest Fast Food Nation. A truly disturbing horror story - all the more so because it's real - that I have you reaching for a sick bag. This aside, the best horror book was Mark West's collection Strange Tales (Rainfall Books, 2003). Overall, it's not as strong in a literary sense as Armati's and Mann's collections. Nevertheless, it's still a cracking collection of stories for late night reading that tears at the envelope with savage, gore-encrusted claws. But only read Strange Tales the title could perhaps have been better if you don't shock easily. You have been warned.

NIALL HARRISON

2003 was a good year for sf, if perhaps not quite up to the stellar standards of 2002. The new Golden Age continues.

The best novel I read in 2003 was Ian R. Macleod's industrial fantasy, The Light Ages (Earthlight, 2003). Macleod's alternate fantasy is a land in thrall to albino, a powerful and magical material that has fuelled the rise of great Guilds, encouraging social, economic and technological stagnation. The story concerns a coming of age and the turning of an Age, as Robert Barrows travels from rags to riches and towards the dreamer's revolution that might lie in his future. For the cynical reader, the novel offers an obvious and damning criticism of the notion that characterises as many tales of the fantastic. But on a more immediate level it is simply a wonderful, vivid, absorbing book.

That said, my favourite novel of the year was Paul di Filippo's madcap cosmological adventure, Fuzzy Dice (PS Publishing, 2003). Down and nearly out Paul Girad careers through a succession of increasingly bizarre universes in search of the answer to the Ontological Piddle: Why is there something instead of nothing? The book comes on like pop-science infused with triple-strength acid, and is a masterpiece of concise worldbuilding. Girad's destinations run from a universe of cellular automata to a universe where the butterfly effect is devastatingly observable, and many more.

On a more sober tack, Stephen Baxter's Coalescent (Gollancz, 2003) spins out some of the ideas from Evolution into a more traditional sf form. The first book of a new series, Coalescent is nevertheless a more-or-less standalone work looking at how our social order is determined by our biology... and offering, in some of the year's most disturbingly memorable scenes, an alternative. Less extravagantly widescreen than the Manifold novels, in terms of tone and structure this is still one of Baxter's most fully realised works to date.

Polystom (Gollancz, 2003) was Adam Roberts' fourth novel. Set in a solar system where a breathable atmosphere extends between worlds and the sun burns oxygen, where interplanetary flight is impossible in more than a biplane and society is still very much divided by class, it turned out to be probably his strongest book so far. The familiarly nasty characters, the fascination with war, and the smoothly elegant prose are all far for the course here, but Polystom concludes by delivering a philosophical kick to the head that would not disgrace Greg Egan or Philip K. Dick.

A different type of mind-bending is to be found in Justin Robson's Natural History (Macmillan, 2003). The Borzoi characters in her story have engineered personalities to go with their engineered bodies, and as you might expect are consequently not the healthiest group of minds you'll ever meet. I've one or two plausibility issues with how they ever got created, but as a pure thought-experiment it's a fascinating concept that is well-mined by the story. The novel is also rich in wonder, written with an often-wicked sense of humour, and probably the best space opera of the year.

LESLEY HATCH

Cecilia Dart-Thornton's The Ill-Made Mute (Macmillan, 2001) is the favourite of my chosen five. It's the first in The Bitterbye Trilogy, and in it we get introduced to the main protagonist, who has no memory and forms a blank canvas on which the events in his life and the world take place. While it's a bit much to compare the hero to Tolkein, it's a promising start.

Sara Douglass's The Nameless Day (Voyager, 2001) is the first in The Crucible Trilogy, it is set in an alternative medieval Europe, and is

March/April 2004 • Vector 234
primarily centred around a priest's fight against supernatural evil, but this does not detract from the story in any way.

And now for another alternate world, in Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Pashazade* (Earthlight, 2001). In this novel, Germany won World War One. Into El Iskandryia comes Ashraf Bey, whose aunt arranged his release from prison; she is later murdered, and events take a few unexpected twists.

Tim Earshaw's *Helium* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1997) is my fourth choice, and chronicles the intrigues of story of Gary Wilder, who finds himself becoming lighter in weight, quite literally, at the most awkward times, and then gaining back in weight, equally unexpectedly. It's not science fiction, but has an element of it.

Joan Aiken's *The Cockatrice Boys* (Flutein, 1998) is my final selection. The cockatrices in question are monsters that decimate Britain and its population, and the Cockatrice Corps is created to combat them. Although it's classed as a young adult book, it's still one to be read and enjoyed by adults, no matter how old they are.

**CHRIS HILL**

Deborah Moggach, *Tulip Fever* (Hemmemann, 1999). Set at a time when trading in tulips was the way to make your fortune. A beautifully written moral fable that unfolds like a series of Hogarth paintings. My token non-genre book for this year.

Jeff Smith, *Bone Saga* (Cartoon Books, 1996). A slight cheat as this is a series of eight graphic novels with one more to go. Essentially an epic fantasy, but with great characters and beautiful crisp drawings. It is also extremely funny and one volume has one of the best visual payoffs for a long-running joke I have ever seen.

Robert Holdstock, *Celtika* (Earthlight, 2003). The first volume of the Merlin Codex, dealing with Merlin's involvement with the quest for the Golden Fleece and what happens afterwards. A lot more straightforward than the Mythsago books, but beautifully written and very compelling.

Richard Paul Russo, *Ship of Fools* (Orbit, 2003). In this Generation Starship story, the inhabitants know that they are on a ship but have no idea why. An investigation of a distress signal leads to a crisis. A mixture of straightforward and theological considerations this is Russo's best novel so far. Recently published as *Unto Leviathan* in the UK.

Neal Asher, *Gridlinked* (Pan, 2001). In a society in which people travel by a form of matter transport, a special agent investigates the destruction of a world caused by sabotage of the local gate. I selected this one purely for entertainment value, one of the most important reasons for choosing a book. The most enjoyable piece of Space Opera I have read in a long time.

**PENNY HILL**

Mark Dunn's *Ella Minnow Pea* (Methuen, 2002) is great fun. It's a linguistic delight as the inhabitants of an imaginary island pass laws preventing the use of certain letters of the alphabet. As they attempt to keep communicating despite the ever stricter laws, their letters to one another get more and more cryptic. The only solution: to find a sentence containing all the letters of the alphabet that is shorter than the famous 'The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.' Not strict fantasy, but recommended for anyone who loves words.

Joanne Harris' *Holy Fools* (Doubleday, 2003) has an incredible battle of wills amid elements of magic - but is it real or just legendarium? Set in a medieval convent, it has a flimsy sensibility (which the acknowledgements page bears out) without anything you could conclusively point to as fantastical. A fascinating and absorbing read. Joanne Harris' novels are always worth reading and this is one of the better ones.

Elizabeth Moon's *Speed of Dark* (Orbit, 2002) is a book that lingered in the mind after I'd read it. Much more than just an updating of *Flowers for Algernon*, it explores whether we should always assume a "normal" person is better off than one who is "disabled" and what the benefits and drawbacks are of "curing" mental imbalances, without being simplistic. Thought-provoking and liable to make you notice your own mental quirks.

**L.J. HURST**

Not wanting to leave the house empty the weekend after it had been burgled I stayed in and rewarded myself by reading J.G. Ballard's *Millennium People* (Flamingo, 2003). Within a few pages I was laughing out loud, and it was not hysterical laughter. As Millennium People, Ballard's latest, is his 'terrorism' novel this might seem a surprising response, but I am sure it is what he intended. Some critics have objected that it does not deal with Islamic fundamentalism, but neither does it deal with professional burglar like those who visited me and more all on the same night, and they are just as much a criminal feature of today as Al Qaeda. There is a lot about London life in *Millennium People* that I hadn't thought Ballard would be up-to-date with, but contemporary life in the metropolis is something else recently focused on me and I have discovered that he is. The guy knows the way things are going.

Henry Holthouse's *Seed of Change* (Pan, 2002) was first published as *Five Plants that Changed the World* and has gone through various editions - the 2002 Pan edition that I finally read in 2003 is now *Six Plants* (Holthouse has added *Coca to Cotton, Sugar, Tea, Quinine*, and the *Potato*.) I may not agree with all his interpretations but Holthouse's approach (he doesn't see Ballard's own-time instruction 'see yourself in a wider context', but it is relevant), is, I feel increasingly, the only one that anyone trying to understand the world can take.

**EDWARD JAMES**

Last year I taught a course at Rutgers in New Jersey called "Medievalism in Fantasy and Science Fiction". I was reading quite a lot of bad science fiction, and some even worse fantasy, and for relaxation dozens of mysteries (I don't have to take notes on those). I reread some historical mysteries, for instance (the complete Lindsey Davies, and Steven Saylor, and Peter Lovesey, and some Robert van Gulik); all good books, but none of them individually outstanding, and none of them being of obvious interest to readers of Vector. Nor were any of the medieval history books I read in partial fulfilment of my contract of employment. But as it happens even the ones I have chosen are more or less peripheral to science fiction.

The first is Francis Spufford's *The Backroom Boys* (Faber, 2003) which explores (among other things) the ways in which British science fiction readers - or those of them who became scientists - helped bring Britain a little nearer to the future presented to fans of Dan Dare in the 1950s. It's good history, and it's told in a really engaging way.

The second is Suzy McKee Charnas's book *My Father's Ghost* (Penguin Putnam, 2000). The humour may be a surprise to some readers of her *Motherlode* of books, but the sometimes brutal honesty won't be. It's an autobiographical account of her last years with her father. Robin McKee was a highly intelligent and deeply asocial painter and bum, who moved from Greenwich Village to live with
Suzy and Steve in New Mexico, and there remained for fifteen years. Suzy's sister thought of her as a saint for putting up with this terrible self-centred man; but the levels of hatred and guilt which Suzy experienced showed that she was anything but. Suzy wrote on the title page of the copy I read: 'Now you'll know more about me than you ever wanted to'; but I would be happy to know more.

Mark Haddon's The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (David Fickling, 2003) has had a lot of publicity, and deservedly; and there's something very science-fictional about this first-person account of a strange alien world which operates according to rules which the narrator cannot understand; but, of course, that's because the narrator is an autistic boy, who sets off on a Holmesian quest to discover why someone put a garden fork through his neighbour's dog. The reader can pick the clues out rather quickly than the narrator; after all, we live in the world that is so alien to him.

Another book I was very impressed by, and moved by, was an old Peter Straub, Mystery (HarperCollins, 1990): I have only just started reading the various Straubs that I have missed over recent years. I loved his creation of a Caribbean island, with its mixed Anglo-German culture; and the characters are beautifully drawn. The whole book lurks in the memory months after I finished it.

None of these books would work without skilled use of the comma and the apostrophe; which is why I have set up a Web site for my students devoted to these splendid creatures, and why, as a fully paid-up pedant, I must choose Lynn Truss's Eats, Shoots and Leave (Pilot Books, 2003) as my fifth book. It's amazing that a book on punctuation should become a runaway bestseller before Christmas, but, then, it's amazing too that a book on punctuation should be so funny. I wish I could get all my students to buy it, and learn from it.

BEN JENES
Lee Weatherly, Child X (Corgi, 2003). Jules is a normal, only slightly snotty, suburban teenage girl, whose life goes to hell overnight as interesting aspects of her parents' marriage hit the tabloid headlines. Suddenly Jules is Child X in all the papers. Paparazzi lurk in every bush, and her picture appears in every red-top tabloid with a tasteless headline over her eyes. Everyone knows who she is but no one can say it: worse, everyone knows what's going on except her. Of interest to Vector readers might be that during the story Jules audits for, and gets, the role of Lyra in a youth theatre production of Philip Pullman's Northern Lights. The role gives her insights into coping with her real life situation. The author gives special thanks to Pullman for letting her use her character, and she obviously knows and loves Northern Lights herself.

Ian Hearn, Across the Nightingale Floor (Macmillan, 2002). Once we learn that young Takeo comes from a tribe of hereditary assassins, and once we learn that the evil Lord Iida is protected in his apartments by a nightingale floor, we can put two and two together and work out that Takeo will one day cross that floor and confront Iida. As indeed he does, only when he gets there, everything is completely different to how we expected it because of the twists and turns the plot has taken. Every time it is proceeding nicely towards a logical conclusion, Hearn takes some matter that arises naturally from the story so far and feeds it back in, thus sending the plot in a completely new direction towards another apparently obvious conclusion, until... and so on. Masterfully done and compulsive reading.

Mark Haddon, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (David Fickling, 2003). A detective story, kinda. Fifteen-year-old Christopher has Asperger's Syndrome and only thinks he's investigating a case. In fact he's just digging deep into a pile of very dirty parental laundry and innocently bringing sensid secret after sensid secret into plain view. Christopher is essentially an alien: his values, mindset and thought processes only intersect with ours by coincidence rather than universal law. Any sf writer who wants to construct an alien that readers will still understand could do a lot worse than start here.

Orson Scott Card, First Meetings (Subterranean Press, 2002). This collection of three novellas is probably just one for Card completists, but I mention it anyway. The Polish Boy is an insightful description of the boyhood of Endor's father and how he specifically didn't make it to Battle School. Endor's Game is the original novella, which all Card fans will have read anyway. But worth the whole price of admission is Investment Counsellor. It shows how Endor first meets the prickly Asta. It's an exciting novella and I think shows the whole premise of pensions, investment trusts and annuities might be handled in a universe with slower-handlight relativistic interstellar travel.

Terry Pratchett, Night Watch (Doubleday, 2002). When Pratchett was writing this book, you wonder why he thought the points he makes about human rights, the undesirability of secret police etc., needed making. Then history got in the way and we got the world we live in now. A standout scene is where Vimes refuses to hand over some prisoners to the dreaded Unmentionables without a receipt. In just a few short paragraphs, Pratchett says more about the necessity of habeas corpus than my history teacher ever did.

STEVE JEFFERY
Christopher Priest, The Separation (Simon & Schuster, 2002). This novel, which escaped being one of my best books of 2002, I finished it in January 2003 and then re-read it during March for the Eastercon 'Not the Clarke Award' panel. It's an absorbing, complex and challenging alternate history novel based around the roles of the twin Sawyer brothers, Joe and Jack, in the Second World War, in which the reader needs to pay careful attention to fact, fiction and point of view. Magnificent.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Felaheen (Gollancz, 2003). Concluding Grimwood's first Arabesk trilogy in which Raif (Ashraf Bey) resolves (sort of) the mystery of his parentage, and his troubled relationships with both one-time fiancée Zara and his frighteningly bright and precocious nine-year-old niece Hani. This is a vote as much for the whole Arabesk sequence as the concluding novel. Felaheen was one of my choices from last year. It's the acute and sympathetic observation of the complex familial relationships that makes this special, and dispenses the charge that sf writers don't/can't do real people.

Edward Carey, Alva and Iria: The Twins Who Saved a City (Picador, 2003). This is something of a left-field entry but—like Steven Sherrill's odd, haunting The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break—quickly became one of my favourite books of the year, about which I would, over subsequent months, stop one in three to enthuse about it. This is Carey's second novel (after the darker, but equally surreal Observatory Mansions) and is a delightful mix of legend, history, travelogue, and obsession in the relationship of two sisters, one agoraphobic, one adventurous, who recreate their home city of Gondal in miniature, in plastics, on their attic. The Picador hardback is beautifully illustrated with the little buildings.

William Gibson, Pattern Recognition (Penguin Viking, 2003). It may not be science fiction anymore, Toto, but when Gibson pulls off something like this, does it really matter? Pattern Recognition may be one of the books that best exemplifies Gibson's notion (incounted in John Clute's Scores) that while sf can no longer be read except, perhaps, as an exercise in nostalgia, we must now read non-genre novels as sf. There is little overtly generic in Pattern Recognition (the technology sits exactly on the cuff of now) but it couldn't have been written by anyone who didn't understand and appreciate sf, and how it operates.
CAROL ANN KERRY-GREEN

The one book this year that really blew me away was Alastair Reynolds, *Absolution Gap* (Gollancz, 2003), a masterpiece of Space Opera. Can the colonists rescued from Rossgarum keep clear of the pursuing Inhibitors? And on Hela, as a strange caravan of travelling cathedrals circles the globe hoping to catch sight of a vanishing, what will happen when the largest and oldest of them all, the Lady Morwenna, heads for Absolution Gap? This is a brilliant novel, full of intrigue, suspense and wonder.

My second choice would have to be Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Felahen* (Earthling, 2003). I found this fast-paced and breathtaking in places. Though this is the third in the series, my reading enjoyment of the novel didn't appear to suffer from not having read the previous two books. Ashara Bay came across as an interesting character with a past that was gradually released to the reader over the novel as she strove to discover whether he really was the son of the Emir of Tunis, or of a Swedish backpacker as his mother had always insisted. The book drew me easily into its story where the characters came alive.

Tricia Sullivan's *Mail* (Orbit, 2003), on the other hand, exploded into action. With teenage girls, fashion, guns, and rival gang shoot-outs in the shopping mall. Meanwhile in another time, a human male guinea pig is incubating a new virus as part of an experiment by his female watchers. To escape the pain and distract himself, he retreats into the game of Maui. As the two stories collide, what is really, what the game? Combining two worlds, one where teens roam the malls looking for excitement and another where men are in short supply and women risk all to have a natural child.

Richard Paul Russo, *Unto Leviathan* (Orbit 2003). The colony ship Argon has been out in space a long time when they come across a deserted planet where all the inhabitants appear to have been brutally murdered. Looking for answers, the ship follows a signal sent from the planet and discovers an alien ship that is lying inert and dead in space. As exploration of the ship continues, it starts to reveal its grisly secrets. A masterpiece of suspense, which is brilliantly written, it pulled me in from the beginning with its characterisations and plot tension to the point where I didn't want to put it down.

And last, but not least is Freda Warrington's *The Court of the Midnight King* (Pocket Books, 2003). This is an alternative story of Richard III, told from the perspective of Lady Katherine, one of Queen Anne's waiting women, and her lover Raphael who is one of Richard's faithful knights. It also encompasses the story of August, a student studying medieval history and her fascination for all things Richard, and the strange dreams she has of an alternate history. In this Richard's world, the Mother Goddess is worshipped alongside the Christ through the Church. He would like to destroy the cult of Richard. He has the backing of the adherents of the Goddess. This is a novel of what could have been during Richard's reign, at Bosworth and beyond, and maybe what should have been. Brilliant alternate history that pulls together the threads of its story in a tightly woven tapestry.

MARTIN McGRATH

I have a pile of 'read' books that stare at me balefully from the corner of my office and, normally, I'm years behind. Still, I've made an effort this year so there are some new books on my list, but books by Bob Shaw and James S.A. Corey in particular made it into this year's list.

An old book first, however. Three years ago I picked up John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* when Millennium reprinted it in their SF Masterworks series. I was going away for a few days and I wanted a chunky book to keep me occupied. I read it. Liked it. Put it aside. Then, six weeks later, I had to read it again. And then I read it again. It has become my favourite sf novel. Since then I've been looking out for Brunner's books, and while many are very good, none were quite as good as *Zanzibar*. Then I came across a copy of *The Sheep Look Up*, (Berenella Books, 2003) and had my head blown off cover again. This is an amazing, perceptive, intelligent, cunning, scary, science fiction book. The writing isn't as highly stylised as *Zanzibar*, but it remains a challenging read and, while I may be the only person in the BSFA who hasn't already read it, I still have to recommend it.

On an entirely different tack, Neil Zawacki's *How to be a Villain* (Chronicle Books, 2003) made me laugh out loud a number of times. It's a self-help guide for the would-be supervillain. There's help on choosing your secret lair, picking henchmen and selecting a career path (evil mystic, mad scientist or lawyer). Not all the jokes are wildly original, but it is nice to have them all in the one place to keep an eye on and the little hardback edition has some smart illustrations by James Dzen. It spoofs both of those maddening self-help guides without ever getting too heavy. A great stocking filler — if Christmas wasn't long gone.

I finally got around to reading *Light* by M. John Harrison (Gollancz, 2002) and, with the greatest of respect to the authors who won, I just can't believe this didn't sweep the awards board last year. For me, it's the best book of the year. It manages to make a vast, idea-packed story emotionally gripping and understandable on a human scale. It is, I think, one of the best novels (of any genre) I've ever read. Of the gaggle of newish British writers who are producing good books these days (stand up Alastair Reynolds, Ken MacLeod, Richard Morgan, Jon Courtenay Grimwood), there are two who frustrate and engage me in equal measure. Justina Robson and Adam Roberts drive me nuts — they have such tremendous ideas but, so far, have failed to tie them into a really compelling narrative. Still, *Natural History* (Macmillan, 2003) and *Polystorm* (Gollancz, 2003) are, respectively, their best works yet. Justina Robson is getting better with every novel and one day soon she is going to write something outstanding. If *Natural History* isn't quite it, it is another big step in the right direction. I think Adam Roberts is one of the best world-builders in modern sf; he has that knack of making the extraordinary seem perfectly reasonable, and the universe of *Polystorm* is his best creation yet. But the book is only really here because I couldn't get the idea of the place out of my head. As with his earlier books (for me) his plotting isn't as strong as his ideas.

JAN A. MALIQUE

My best reads for 2003 are an eclectic mix of (mostly) esoteric subjects. I have read these books for various reasons — research, fascination with the subject matter and personalities dealt with, interest in the authors, etc. The books have in their particular ways opened doorways into different realities and the landscapes were worth exploring. Some of the landscapes being those of the inner self, the turmoil of the self as it stands in the middle of light and darkness, between balance and chaos, disintegration and re-integration.

J.H. Brennan, *Occult Tibet* (Llewellyn Publications, 2002), an informative account of ancient magical and mystical techniques (some are included as exercises in the book) which are a melding of Tibetan
Buddhist and Bön practices (Bön being the main spiritual path of Tibet before Buddhism took root, shamanic in nature). Tibet is a fascinating country with a fascinating people and we are given a little glimpse of its rich culture in Mr Brennan’s book. I could say a lot more but then I would be- ing you with my enthusiasm about this subject matter.

Merlin has perplexed, maddened, fascinated and bewitched us for centuries. Whether he is fact or fiction matters little I think, his persona taps into some very deep seams within our psyche. Ancient shaman, magician (in the truest sense of the word...), mystic, philosopher, he is the call of the natural world, ancient mysteries and ancient knowledge. Merlin’s journey is the initiation into true wisdom and insight and we are given a glimpse of that in two books. In *The Mystic Life of Merlin* (Arkana, 1996) R.J. Stewart explores a twelfth-century biography of Merlin, called the *Vita Merlini*, in some detail, expounding upon the systems of magical and spiritual development contained within the text. This is accompanied by commentaries on each section, giving especial emphasis on practical application of Merlin’s initiatic journey. The same author’s *The Prophetic Vision of Merlin* (Arkana, 1986) is, for various reason, a rather complex text. Merlin’s sequiz is laid open (to a certain extent) for us to glimpse and perhaps divine some truth from. Mr Stewart explores the prophecies from historical and mythical viewpoints and asserts that “...they illuminate certain key issues within Arthurian lore,...” the means whereby Merlin acquired his vision, his power, and his ultimate relationship with the land of Britain”. I wish I could have put it in such clear terms.

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Collins Modern Classic, 2001). Worth reading, may not be everyone’s cup of Darjeeling/PG tips/hot chocolate/cappuccino but who cares? Fantasy on a grand scale and perfect opportunity for the imagination to take flight and oh, for the chance to go to New Zealand (yes, I did go and see the film trilogy).

Billie Walker-John’s book *The Setian: The Mysteries of the Shadows* (ignotus press, 2003) is about the Egyptian Mysteries and in particular about one of its most misunderstood gods (or ‘meter’) Seth. An ancient, primal energy Seth in the early part of his worship an exiled deity but through the political and social upheavals his land, Khem (Egypt), undergoes over vast periods of history, vilification replaces respect and love. The book is based upon sound research which has produced not a dry, dusty tome but one which speaks of veiled mysteries, hot sun, red-gold desert, vast temple complexes – housing equally complex personalities.

FARAH MENDLESON
Five books out of a year’s lengthy reading (most of it work, honest!) is really tough, but my list this year doesn’t have a single sf book on it. This is not a comment on this year’s sf - there are a number of books I’ve liked very much, many of which I expect will be on other people’s lists and which I’ve nominated for the BSFA award – but I’m currently writing about fantasy so that’s what I’m reading with the most intense concentration.

And hey, prejudices are being demolished almost as fast as Birmingham’s Bull Ring. There is some astonishingly fine fantasy fiction out there on the fringes of genre work which twists the pateoánology of the field; forces us to pay attention not just to parallel plots, but to two and three interlocking positions of fantasy. The three I enjoyed most were Peter Straub’s *Lost Boy Lost Girl* (Random House, 2003), Steve Cockayne’s *The Iron Chain* (Orbit, 2003) and a children’s book by Robert Townley, *The Great Good Thing* (Simon & Schuster, 2002). Peter Straub’s horror story casts doubt on the nature of reality and of reading; our expectations are being politely mocked and as with some of the best edge of genre fantasy, we are refused resolution. Steve Cockayne’s *The Iron Chain* is a sequel to *Wanderers and Islanders* but takes the concept of the ‘middle book’, transmutes it into a metaphor for middle age and asks us to consider the fate of the sidhe (and what takes place off stage). Robert Townley, apart from demanding that you know your fantasy, challenges the prison of text. The *Great Good Thing* explores the nature and mutability of fantasy space. If Straub asks us to consider the relationship of author to text, Townley considers the relationship of character to the reader. Ian Mac, when reviewing this book, argued that it was definitely a children’s book, but I’m not so sure. It may not speak over the heads of children, but it is a book that has meaning for adults, or at least those adults. Francis Spufford wrote about *The Child that Books Built* in 2001. But that isn’t my fourth choice.

We seem to be living through a golden age of non-fiction writing, and Francis Spufford is one of the brightest stars on my moonlit non-fiction shelves. In November Faber and Faber published Spufford’s *The Roommate Boys* (Faber, 2003), a lyrical account of the survival and re-emergence of British bohemia. It won me over as a tale of high romance, made me laugh and weep. I can’t think of a better title that did this for me this year. Finally, and only just added to my reading journal, is Lynne Truss’s *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (Pitlo Book, 2003), not only the funniest account of how to punctuate I’ve ever read, but also just plain useful. To my surprise, I actually remember the advice she gave. I’m thinking of it as I write this end of year summary. My writing may never recover.

SIMON MORDEN
G.P. Taylor, *Shadowmancer* (Faber, 2003). The Yorkshire vicar writes up a storm with this tale of angels and devils, pirates and priests, and gets more bang per buck than a certain boy wizard manages in seven hundred pages. Shadowmancer’s strength lies in its uncompromising world view and compassionate heroes.

Gary Greenwood, *What Rough Beast* (House of Domination, 2003). An extraordinary tale of the Second Coming, set somewhat unpropinquiously in small-town Wales. Everyday folks are joined by the weird and the wonderful for a genuinely original tale on life, death and beyond. Greenwood conties to be funny, thoughtprovoking and thrilling all at the same time. I am so jealous.

Stephen Lawes, *Spectre* (Telo, 2002). This is a classic, revamped and revived; Bloody, frightening and relentless, it shows wannabes how to write proper horror. Lawes evokes both chills and puffs in a top-notch supernatural tale set in and around Tyneside.

Bryan and Cheryl Alexander, *The Vanishing Arctic* (Checkmark Books, 1997). I got this book out of the library for research and fell in love with it. It marriage beautiful full-colour plates and elegant essays that allowed both the dignity and the plight of the arctic tribes to shine through.

David Whiteland, *Book of Pages* (Ringpull Press, 1999). A Zen graphic novel about a monk who goes to the big city to discover the meaning of life; machines, numbers, bureaucracy and chance fall under the spotlight. Elegant line drawings of the futuristic metropolis contrast with the naive text to form a perfect whole.

JOHN NEWSINGER
Both of the best books that I read in 2003 were MacLeods, by Ian and Ken respectively. Ian MacLeod’s *The Light Ages* (Earthlight, 2003) was the best novel published in 2003, a tremendous work of imaginative fiction that was in places quite over-powering. His fantastic version of Dickensian Britain is a tremendous achievement and hopefully will be

BSFA AWARD BEST NOVEL SHORTLIST 2003

William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (Penguin Viking)

Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Felaheen* (Earthlight)

Gwyneth Jones, *Midnight Lamp* (Gollancz)

Alastair Reynolds, *Absolution Gap* (Gollancz)

Justina Robson, *Natural History* (Macmillan)

Tricia Sullivan, *Maul* (Orbit)
successful enough to prompt the ressuing of his earlier (1997) novel, The Great Wheel.

The other MacLeod is, of course, the great Ken MacLeod, whose Engine City (Orbit, 2002) I read a bit late. The man gets better and better and is undoubtedly one of the giants of contemporary British SF.

He well deserves the critical attention accorded him by Butler and Mendlesohn’s recent volume, The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod.

I also thoroughly enjoyed Richard Morgan’s Broken Angels (Gollancz, 2003), a first-class thriller that seemed to effortlessly push all the right buttons. This is an extremely exciting, thoughtful, well-crafted action novel that is head and shoulders above its rivals.

Hopefully Morgan will be keeping us entertained for years to come.

Not one of the best, but arguably one of the most significant works I have read this last year is Steve (S.M.) Stirling’s Time Travel Trilogy ( Roc, 1998); Island In The Sea of Time, Against The Tide of Years and On The Oceans of Eternity. Stirling is arguably the best writer of US military of this collaboration has actually made Jerry Pournelle readable), although admittedly there is not much competition. In this trilogy, the island of Nauckeia finds itself transported to 1250BC and inevitably its inhabitants set about imposing a new world order.

American machine-gunning rioting crowds in ancient Babylon seem remarkably pertinent in a novel first published in 1999. Stirling has produced an intelligent and quite compelling example of the Imperial daydreams of our American masters. Imagine George W. Bush with access to a time machine — or ‘magic doorways’, as he would call it. Only Tony Blair could possibly approve.

Putting Stirling to shame in many ways is my last choice, Susan Price’s amazing Thorkari Handshake (Scholastic, 2000). Although originally published in 1996 I have shamefully only just read it. Supposedly a juvenile novel, this is fiction of the highest order, recounting the encounter between twenty-first century big brother Earth and the sixteen century Storkarm clan. The contact with Stirling is instructive; whereas the past has nothing whatsoever to teach his Americans, Price’s Storkarans, while not romanticised, are fully realised, with some values that put the future to shame. Pity about their smell, of course. I have just started the recently published sequel, The Storkarn Kiss, which will probably be one of next year’s top five.

One last point: there are on my shelves volumes by a number of my favourite authors (justina Robson, Adam Roberts, Jon Courtenay Grimwood and others) I have never had time to read in 2003. This is a very healthy sign: too much good stuff to get through.

MARTIN POTTs

Many of the books on my shelves had been sitting at me to read them for years and in 2003 I could turn a deaf ear no longer — so there won’t be anything new in my list for most of you but there is quite a mixture.

I rediscovered David Brin’s Uplift series by reading his 1988 Hugo winner The Uplift War (Bantam, 1987), a story of guerrilla warfare, political intrigue and true and invaluable: on a planet named Garth where the validity of humanity’s stewardship is challenged by a more ‘advanced’ species, Brin’s ability to create diverse alien characters and cultures and the excellent pace with which the narrative proceeds ensures a read that is never dull, I will definitely catch up with more recent instalments of the saga in 2004.

Tim Powers is always a fascinating read but his Declare (HarperCollins, 2000) is a masterpiece. Perhaps because it is set in Europe and the Middle East I found it more accessible than his recent California-based sequence (Earthquake Weather et al). Once again I marvelled at how he can weave fact with fiction and combine such diverse subjects as the Cold War, the Arabian Nights, and the story of the Flood! I put Declare on a par with his brilliant The Stress of Her Regard, a feat I never expected him to surpass.

Now then, I hate long books (because I read so slowly: anything with more than six hundred pages has to be a pretty sure bet before I pick it up. With my summer holiday approaching I finally got up the courage to give Peter Hamilton’s The Reality Dysfunction (Macmillan, 1996) a go — and what a pleasant surprise! The plot’s cracking pace kept me turning the pages and halfway through I had to concede that here was a space opera with sufficient scope to warrant the thousand-plus pages. I reached the end of August contemplating the timing of tackling book two with less trepidations, despite having to buy a second copy of Reality Dysfunction.

The two hundred which supported my original conviction that novels were just not supposed to be this long.

Not specifically sf, but I’m sure it will be of interest to some is Laurie R. King’s The Moor (Bantam, 1999). This is a Sherlock Holmes pastiche set after Holmes ‘retires’ and has married Mary Russell, an Oxford student whose intelligence and curiosity matches his own. This, their fourth recorded investigation, finds them on Dartmoor — the scene of Holmes’ notorious encounter with the Hound of the Baskervilles. Their latest resident of Baskerville Hall. King writes an intelligent mystery which respects both the original canon and the heroine, Miss Russell.

I love reading David Gemmell for pure escapism. Of the three I read this year one was Winter Warriors (Bantam, 1997) a tale of adventure from his Drenai

ARThUR C. CLARKE AWARD SHORTLIST 2003

Stephen Baxter, Coalescent (Gollancz)
Greg Bear, Darwin’s Children (HarperCollins)
William Gibson, Pattern Recognition (Penguin Viking)
Gwyneth Jones, Midnight Lamp (Gollancz)
Neal Stephenson, Quicksilver (Heinemann)
Tricia Sullivan, Maul (Orbit)

seqUENCE. The story follows three old warriors who, despite being put out to pasture, help a young queen flee from danger and in the process attempt to foil a prophecy that would plunge the world into chaos. Gemmel exposes all the human frailties of his characters during their trials and tribulations and yet the tale is tightly told in 315 pages and is genuinely a page turner. There is no doubt that David Gemmell writes excellent heroic fantasy.

DAVE M. ROBERTS

Picking the best five books I read last year is not really going to give any kind of insight into the best of last year’s books. It is unusual for me to get to read books as soon as they appear, but I have attempted to select the best of those recent books that I have read. This list absolutely has to include The Separation (Simon & Schuster, 2002) by Christopher Priest, a remarkable alternate history that considers both the questionable morality of much of the Second World War, in particular the bombing raids on civilian areas, and the impact of individual people on the course of history. This is both a compelling and a greatly rewarding read. My list would also have to include Dear Aldebar (PS Publishing, 2003) by Terry Bisson. This is a time-travel tale wrapped in the paradoxes of that concept’s paradoxes and shows how, on a large scale, the future of humanity and the Earth are affected by one another. It is a deceptively simple and very affecting tale.

Another book that connects humanity firmly with the planet we live on is Muezzinland (Cosmos Books, 2002) by Stephen Palmer. I’d never read this before but I was greatly impressed by this book. The mix of high technology and Africa myth and legend is a fascinating backdrop for a story where the journey matters more than the arrival.

Earlier in the year I read a great deal of Will Self’s work. ostensibly a mainstream writer, he has occasionally been saddled with the label of ‘Urban Gothic’: I think this means he writes dark fantasies. Certainly his writing, particularly the novels, frequently strays into the realms of science fiction and fantasy. I could have
selected any of a number of them for this list, but in the end I would have to pick his 1998 story collection Tough Tough Toys for Tough Tough Boys (Penguin, 1999). This successfully combines humour with the paranoia of contemporary life and is certainly his best collection. The stories are dark, slightly deranged and often very funny. This collection also contains, in ‘The Nonce Prize’, what I think is Self’s most powerful story.

Finally, a book first published in 1989, No Laughing Matter – The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien (New Island Books, 2003) by Anthony Cronin. As the title suggests, this is a biography of the great Irish comic fabulist Flann O’Brien (also known as Myles na Cопалкпн). O’Brien was best known for his regular column in The Irish Times, ‘The Crossken Lane’ (1940–1966). He also wrote wonderful complex fantasies such as At Swim-Two-Birds (1939) and The Third Policeman (1967). The novels never gained the mass recognition that they deserved and he was for many years an alcoholic, which did nothing to help his writing. Cronin paints a vivid picture of the man and of life in Dublin in the middle of the twentieth century, which he combines with some passionately critical of his writing. This is a very sympathetic and moving account of O’Brien’s life by someone who knew him well for many years. If I’d re-read At Swim-Two-Birds this year it would almost certainly be on this list. As it is, this will do nicely instead.

ANDY SAWYER
I have at least six novels on my ‘to read’ list which I suspect are to be scattered around everyone else’s ‘best’ lists. But for the record and in no order:

Pat Cooney Grimwood, Falafel (Earthflight, 2003). Arabesk 3, and the whole trilogy is on my ‘to read’ list. Wonderfully conceived future, and a remarkably enigmatic main character. Grimwood’s alternate history is very much to my taste.

Laurence Durrell, The Alexandria Quartet (Faber, 1933). I hadn’t read this for decades and then people started talking about it with relation to Grimwood’s Arabesk trilogy. I couldn’t put it down, although I suspect that it’s not so much the city as the way Durrell makes us re-enter situations which is the link with Arabesk.

Robert Meadley, Tea Dance at the Savoy (Savoy, 2003). Bizarre stuff, with the usual Savoy fascination with Lord Horror and popculture. A beautifully produced book. In The Alien Online I wrote: “Meadley is almost certainly the best essayist writing in Britain today, a sharp observer with a well-stocked mind who takes his writing close to the edge, circles about a bit, and, shooting a few choice obscenities, leaves joyfully over the abyss to see what might happen”.

Frances Spufford, The Backroom Boys (Faber, 2003). Spufford ‘came out’ as a fan with the extraordinarily good The Child that Books Built. Here he gives us the secret history of the British boffin, from the post-war Space Race, via the mobile phone, computer games, to Beagle 2. It’s all down to Dan Dare, really. Enthusiastic, intelligently observed, and it’s a Real Shame about Beagle.

Edward James & Farah Mendelssohn (eds.), Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction (Cambridge University Press, 2003). Sounds like one branch of Foundation puffing another, but everything aside this really is the one-volume, relatively inexpensive, up-to-date and authoritative book on sf which addresses as a literature of today that -asa teacher of the subject - I’ve been wanting for some time.

ANDREW SEAMAN
First, The Jerusalem Quartet (Old Earth Books, 2002) by Edward Whittemore. A cheat, but this sequence of four novels (Simal Tapestry, Jerusalem Poker, Nile Shadows and Jericho Mosaic), originally published between the late 1970s and 1980s, are of a piece, featuring recurring themes and characters, in them Whittemore’s intent is to create nothing less than a coherent history of the Middle East, its peoples, politics and religious history, from antiquity to the Six Day War, and he succeeds brilliantly. These novels, by turns fantastic, surreal, tragic and hilarious, could have been a complete dog’s dinner, but are instead compelling reading. The phrase ‘neglected masterpiece’ is probably overused, but undoubtedly applies here.

If aliens exist, then where are they? A question most of readers have probably asked themselves. In Where is Everybody? Fifty solutions to the Fermi Paradox and the problem of extraterrestrial life (Springer-Verlag, 2003), Stephen Webb presents possible solutions to the famous paradox, first articulated by physicist Enrico Fermi, grouped into the broad categories of: they are here, ‘they exist but have not yet communicated’ and ‘they do not exist’. Webb knows his stuff and includes quotes about (and possible solutions to) the paradox from authors such as Baxter and Benford. A thought-provoking read, which I won’t spoil by revealing Webb’s own convincing solution to the problem.

For proof that the alien can be found deep within ourselves, not just in deep space, look no further than Elizabeth Moon’s Speed of Dark (Orbit, 2002). In the memorable character of Lou Arendale, a high-functioning autistic, this novel fascinatingly explores what it is like to be human (though it does bear (its chief villain is a little too cartoonishly evil to be entirely credible) it’s still a narrative tour-de-force. Compare Mark Haddon’s The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time for another fascinating take on this theme. Just remember: ‘Normal is a dryer setting’.

Mortal Engines (Scholastic, 2001) by Philip Reeve is a work of young adult fiction that puts the work of some so-called adult authors to shame. Set in a shattered post-apocalyptic world where mobile cities prey upon each other in a ruthless struggle for survival, Reeve’s imagination is vivid and his central characters, Tom and Hester, engaging. Stirring action is balanced by moments of genuine emotion and exacting moral dilemmas. Besides, who could resist a novel that begins with the intriguing opening line: ‘It was a dark, blustery afternoon in spring, and the city of London was chasing a small man on foot across the mountains of the old North Sea’? The sequel, Predator’s Gold, is equally good, deepening and developing what has gone before and leaving the reader eager for the final volume in the trilogy.

Finally, the narrative of Nine Layers of Sky (Bantam Spectra, 2003) by Liz Williams shifts effortlessly between post-Soviet Russia and a parallel dream version of it, populated by refugees from ‘our’ reality. A compelling blend of sf and the fantastic that has much to say about the human impulse to spin utopian dreams and, equally, our failure to bring them to fruition. On the basis of it I’ve made a mental note to pick up and read her other novels as soon as possible.

PAMELA STUART
Joel Rosenberg, Not Really the Prisoner of Zenda (Tor, 2003) was by far my favourite. Sent to me for review, I took it away as my holiday reading. It has everything a fantasy reader desires and manages to maintain the suspense to the last word.

Raymond E. Feist, Magician (HarperCollins, 1983). An old book from 1983, I picked it up as a battered paperback for 20p on a charity book-stall. A bargain! I had no idea when I picked it up that it would explain all the details I found puzzling in the Servant of the Empire series Feist wrote with Janny Wurts. I had never understood where the magician Pug came from or why the others hated him, and there was a great deal about the Fifth War that I felt was lacking in detail. If only I had found this book before I read the others, it would all have been clear.

Anne and Todd McCaffrey, Dragon’s Kin (Bantam, 2003). A book that I have been awaiting for a long time, filling in some of those tantalising gaps in the development of Perm. The watch-words were previously seldom mentioned, except casually in their role of watch-dog; now it turns out that they are by no means dumb animals but really have many things in common with the dragons. After all, they were genetically engineered as part of the experimenters to grow the dragons; perhaps a relationship similar to that between the apes and Man. My only criticism is that the book was too short. Hopefully there will be sequels.

Robert Silverberg (ed.), Legends II (Voyager, 2003). A collection of eleven short novels by well-known fantasy writers, all original to this collection. There was only one I did not like, ‘The Happiest Dead Boy in the World’ by Tad Williams, and that was probably because I am not ‘into’ the web (I am only computer semi-literate) and I have not read his Otherland series. Of the others my favourite was ‘Baywood Between’ by Anne McCaffrey. It fills a gap left at the end of Meeves, Dragonfly of Perm explaining how she went Between on the wrong dragon, but was always down in the history as having ended her days.
on her own dragon. It also gives some tantalising ideas about the afterlife, although all religions were outlawed from the original Settlers’ Charter on Pern. The remaining stories are all linked to the author’s popular series, but can be read and enjoyed without having read the other full-length books.

Terry Pratchett, 
Night Watch (Doukbyday, 2002). As an ardent Terry Pratchett fan, I loved it, my only worry being that it seemed to be tying up so many loose ends, and have a sense of finality about it. I was afraid all the way through that it was going to be the last Discworld book. Fortunately a new one, Monstrous Regiment, has been published, so I can breathe again!

SUE THOMASON

Ursula Le Guin, 
The Birthday of the World (Gollancz, 2003). Because I love short stories, am fascinated to learn more about the strange and familiar worlds of the Ekumen, and value Le Guin’s insight into human nature.

Francis Spufford, 
The Child that Books Built (Faber, 2002). Subtitled ‘a memoir of childhood and reading’, this is an intelligent and sympathetic look at most of my childhood favourite reading (including Le Guin, C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, The Phantom Tollbooth, and Laura Ingalls Wilder), full of interesting critical and psychological observations.

Mark Haddon, 
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time (David Fickling, 2003). Funny, positive, heartwarming account of an alien’s experience of contemporary England – the alien in this case being a fifteen-year-old boy with Asperger’s Syndrome. It’s also a very good detective story.

Terry Pratchett, 
Night Watch (Doukbyday, 2002). Chilling book about the failure of a revolution, and what happens when there’s nobody but yourself to rely on...

Roger Deakin, 
Waterlog (Vintage, 2003). Another ‘contemporary Britain from an alien perspective’ book, this time written by a ‘wild swimming’ enthusiast, i.e. swimming in rivers, lakes, tarns, the sea – anything but swimming pools. Reveals a collection of magical, secret landscapes (waterscapes?) alongside/beneath the surface of many places familiar to me. A great sensawundawakener.

GARY WILKINSON

W.E. Bowman, 
The Ascent of Rum Doodle (Pimlico, 2001). An obscure humorous mountainaineering tale that verges on fantasy as it describes the adventures of a team of plucky Brits as they try to make the first ascent of Rum Doodle, the highest mountain in the world. Of course the Brits are useless and the Sherpas do all the work, especially Pong the cook who literally climbs mountains to bring them the worst food imaginable. Bill Bryson provides the introduction telling how he discovered and got this underground classic republished. It’s not quite as funny as Three Men in a Boat which it closely resembles – but then again what is?

Stephen Hunter, 
The Day Before Midnight (HarperCollins, 1989). A Cold War thriller from the mid-80s that, like Clancy, shades into sf at points. Terrorists capture a nuclear missile site and the good old USA has to get it back. It may be mako gung-ho nonsense but it’s damn good mako gung-ho nonsense. Took me a long time to track it down after I saw a vampire character reading it in the Prachner comic series. Rather appropriately I started reading this one afternoon and did not put it down until I finished it as the sun came up.

John Wagner & Collin McNeil, 
Judge Dredd: The Complete America (Titan Books, 2003). Classic later Dredd, showing the comic strip at its best. Unlike the typical American superhero Dredd remains a bastard more than a hero and most of the interest is in the side-characters. The plot is Magacity One at its wildest – a bloke loves a woman who dies because of his love, so he transplants his brain into her body so he can have their baby – but also strangely moving. And it has real things to say about immigration and terrorism (or should that be freedom fighting?)

Andy Winter & Natalie Sandler, 
Devil Child (A Winter, 2002). A cracking graphic novel – that proves comics are a real hotbed for innovation. Four stories; the longest, ‘Devil Child’ is a real bawdy irreverent anarchic fun where the Antichrist has risen except he’s a part-time waiter from Camden with two sexy female angels to look after him (it’s complicated). ‘Velocity Girl’ is a very biting satire on the superhero and the other two stories are equally good. Even more impressive when you realise this is self-produced. A labour of love by its creators, it’s as good as, if not better than, any ‘professional’ work I’ve read this year.

MCCULLOUCH, 
Raw Spirit (Century, 2003). First book of non-fiction by the popular and prolific writer who already straddles two genres. A grande tour of a whole lot of distilleries is a kicking-off point for meditations, anecdotes and out-and-out rants on, among other things, Scotland’s national drink, football, food, geography, big fast cars and the Gulf War. (Though it is odd that he does not put the latter two together.… It was all about oil, that war, right?) Possibly most interesting for me where the insights into his own fiction writing (who would have thought that Complicity does actually have a happy ending – even if it’s for another novel)

PETER YOUNG

The books which stood out for me last year are about as diverse as I could hope for in a year in which sf and fantasy didn’t quite reach the dizzy heights of 2002. On the one hand, for me the best sf of 2003 was Robert Charles Wilson’s Blind Lake (Tor, 2003). I marvelled on how he could top the excellence that was The Chronoliths, but it seems he has done it with verve, notwithstanding the grotesque (but very apt) Jim Burns cover. Blind Lake is a more inward-looking story, with all the trademark, fault-driven characterisation that Wilson excels at, and his gift for making small, personal stories resonate with something very much bigger again in evidence. As a story about surface and the mysteries that lie beneath them, this is as multi-layered a sf read as you will ever find.

M. John Harrison’s, 
Light (Gollancz, 2002) also made an impression but for reasons other than the story itself. As one of the most confident novelists around, beneath the tale of Billy Amker, Annie Glyph & co. Harrison gives us a cryptic journey into parts of his own psyche – there are some very internal things going on in Light which ultimately seem to dictate the story’s direction, and I was often puzzled trying to figure out why Light takes the turns that it does. All the more enigmatic, certainly, but somehow Light actually hits all its targets even when you think it’s going somewhere totally different.

I found Steve Cockayne’s fantasy Wanderers and Islanders (Orbit, 2002) to be especially absorbing, as I came to think of it as The sequel to Tiberian Chain. This book takes the reader into mysterious depths of a different kind, and Cockayne seems to have a tap on the collective memories of twentieth century British boyhood, with all the far-reaching adventures we could have had if really hadn’t got in the way. Cockayne has distilled these particular fantasies and memories in such a way that you keep getting the feeling you’ve read this adventure before, even when you know you haven’t.

Also impressive were Roger Levy’s two novels, especially this year’s offering, Dark Heavens (Gollancz, 2003). As another relatively new novelist on the Gollancz list, Levy seems to have been eclipsed by the stellar Richard Morgan, though Levy deserves critical attention as his prose carries no hint whatsoever of writing to formula. Dark Heavens is set some years after the events of Reckless Sleep and the world is in even worse shape, with a dystopic London once again the scene for a tale with even stronger religious and gnostic overtones than its predecessor. Levy shows no signs of ‘second novel’ hang-ups, is as a strong a sf voice as any writing in Britain today and deserved his BSFA Award nomination for Reckless Sleep.

My most poignant non-mort read of the year has to be Martina Benjamin’s Rocket Dreams (Chatto and Windus, 2003) which I quickly discovered, I was buying at the same time Columbia was dissolving in the upper atmosphere. As a commentary on cultural aspirations towards space travel and the disappointment we feel in that regard I found it particularly telling, and more so since the loss of our own Beagle 2. Necessarily pessimistic in places, it would seem idealism is dead and we are not where we thought we’d be… well, we all knew that, but Benjamin spells it out in a very readable mix of reportage and personal travelogue.
Films of 2003

by Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc

Another year has whizzed by and Sci-Fi is still pulling in the punters at the Box Office. Genre movies seem to have polarised this year – science fiction gets the big budgets and whizzy special effects, while horror films have tended to lurk in the darkness, vying towards the cheap, nastier and grimmer end of the market. And sadly there were fewer cult specials or fantastic foreign films this year.

Year of the Matrix

Matrix Reloaded/The Matrix Revolutions (The Wachowski Brothers)

2003, we were reliably told by those happy souls at Warner Brothers, was The Year of The Matrix. On the year of two Matrices, a pile of anime, some dodgy sunglasses and a big-ridden ferret that meant to be ironic computer game. Neo and Trinity are back for four plus hours of slow-mo, gravity-defying fistfights and embarrassing smoothing. The residents of fashion-conscious woolly-jumper-clad Zion are still concerned about the imminent destruction of their frankly rather grim city by machines intent on using them like giant Duracell batteries. It’s up to messiah-in-waiting Neo, aided and abetted by various cohorts, to wrestle with existential cod-philosophy, cryptic mythical character names and multiple copies of pantomime-acting MIB Agent Smith. Although the wire-work has become ubiquitous over the past few years The Matrix (1999) still packs a punch visually.

Underworld (Len Wiseman)

Hey, it’s got vampires and, get this, werewolves too. And they don’t like each other. Add some weapons, lots of gothic sermon and some fashionable industrial-metal music and entertainment must surely follow. It’s not art but it sounds pretty cool. Sadly, the end results are cool in an entirely different way. Sub-Matrix slow-mo shrug and walk with Goth-chic Crew-style sets and lighting. The results are messy, the effects average and even an occasionally easy-on-the-eye cast in tight leather can’t generate more than a modicum of enthusiasm. Half the time the editing is so sloppy you don’t know what’s going on, the other half of the time you wish you didn’t know as visible dialogue puts the final stake into the heart of this limp effort. Grit, the vampires hardly even feed and half the time they just shoot at each other. They are supernatural creatures, let’s have some shape-shifting and razor sharp teeth not Uzis with ‘special ultra-violet, steeped in garlic and covered in hawthorn’s bullets. Waste of time.

The Returner (Takashi Yamazaki)

With a list of influences as long as the arms of that stretchy guy from The Fantastic Four (more on that next year... maybe) The Returner is a pot pourri of science fiction and action cliches wrapped in a bundle of garish time-twisting effects and gratuitous violence. Hitman (or Returner) Miyamoto (check; cool shades; check; trenchcoat; check; cool guns and slow-mo wirework) accidentally shoots a girl from the future and has two days to sort out this conundrum whilst falling in love and shooting lots of people. Cool, surprisingly poignant and just cracking good entertainment – what popcorn blockbusters are meant to be... minus the price tag.

Equilibrium (Kurt Wimmer)


Heroes, Villains and Those Who Are Quite Undecided

Daredevil (Mark Steven Johnson)

He is Ben Affleck, aka Daredevil – blind super-lawyer by day defending the weak and victimised against corporate criminals, blind leather-clad superhero by night defending the weak and victimised against any sort of criminals. Worst of this distantly bunch is Kingpin, the city crime, er, kingpin who probably bopped up Daredevil’s parents. Before you can say ‘angst-ridden multi-millionaire’ we’re into a hodgepodge of superhero modulus operandi – Crew-style city and bar fight, Camden-style swinging around, Batman-style OTT super-villains and misunderstood love-hate nemesis side character with spin-off potential. It’s all fine and dandy in a ‘Gothic-ishly constantly raining city’ kind of way and everyone wanders around with either pseudo-severity or in pantomime-mould, which is pretty much expected. But therein lies the problem; there’s nothing wrong with Daredevil per se but nothing particularly noteworthy either. Diverting but no more.

Bruce Almighty (Tom Shadyac)

Jim Carrey, a newscaster whose dream job of lead anchorman is dashed by some idiot at his TV station, is having a not-so-good year. Being set upon by street punks, losing his job and crashing his car are just the start. Then it rains on him. His hero blames the only entity he can – God – claiming he could do a better job. Unusually God, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Morgan Freeman, gives the disgruntled Bruce divine power and promptly nips off for a well-earned vacation. At fast all is fine: he can metamorphose those pesky punks, make love like a sex machine and part soup in bowls with his celestial vigour. But naturally, as is inevitable, it’s not all rosy – omnipotence has its downside. So far so Groundhog Day (Harold Ramis, 1993) with a different prime concept but, rather like this year’s other big Hollywood comedy Anger Management (2003), once the concept has been gleamed the script plods along with clockwork tedium. And despite the 12 rating lone single use of the f-word, stop this madness please, that’s you Master and Commander (Peter Weir, 2003), too there is nothing dangerous to edge the comedy. You could set your watch by it.

Hulk (Ang Lee)

Word of mouth caused Hulk to be the biggest week-to-week drop of any film this year. The general consensus was that the graphics were rubbish, the action unbelievable and it took far too long for anything to happen. Piffle. Perhaps people just aren’t used to films with scripts, characters and dramatic tension anymore. Emotional vacuum Bruce Banner (confusingly played by Eric Bana) wrestles with his angst and tries to come to terms with his psychological scars of his childhood. Naturally he’s a scientist and a shocking accident results in
unusual side effects. These side effects, as fans of the popular TV show will no doubt fondly recall, result in muscle gain, worked-out clothes and a tendency for skin tone to head towards the green side of the spectrum whenever he gets riled. Where the TV show adopted a low-key approach to transformation, Ang Lee's Hulk is all multi-million CGI, leaping from mountain peaks like an elephantine gazelle and hurling military hardware about like a kid with the wrong Tonka toy at Christmas. All top destructive stuff but the complaints came nonetheless — apparently the effects weren't realistic. Excuse me? It's about a giant green bloke who rips all his clothes off bar the ones covering his modesty and goes on city-trashing benders — realism isn't built into the concept. Hulk is all the better for styling its mayhem, externalising its character's psychological hang-ups and painting them in large expressionist brushstrokes. Ang Lee's deliberate comic-book framing and editing, his export use of character development and uncluttered focus have turned what could have been a-by-the-numbers comic-book film into a pulp drama.

**Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines (Jonathan Mostow)**

Wouldn't you know it — the revolution against the machines is in trouble again! So is John Connor, again. So they send another machine back in time to protect him again. It still looks like Arnie and it's still several models down from the 'unstoppable beast of liquid metal blain blain' that those nasty robots have sent from the future. Again. Only this time the unstoppable mecha is a chick. With the largest green-light budget of all time it would have been nice to have had a script in there, but you can't have everything. This time round Johnny boy needs help, mommy's dead and there's no suitably empowered female to replace her. Instead we are, for the most part, left with a whispering abused-woman territory here except, of course, for the sexy robot woman because all women who look like that are clearly evil. And thus one hundred minutes of boys jumping from exploding stuff unrails in a mildy diverting manner while Arnie delivers a 'side-splitting' collection of 'hilarious' gags. The film is rarely dull but ultimately you're left with a huge portion of 'what's the point?' with a side order 'been there done that.' And as for the 12 rating, what did they think they were doing?

**Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Cradles of Life (Jan de Bont)**

One time cinematographer Jan de Bont takes the reins for Lara's second big screen outing. Angelina Jolie's Dunlop lips and pneumatic add-ons appear, much like her digital counterpart, to be growing substantially between sequels. Perhaps if there is a Part 3 someone should coax Russ Meyer out of retirement. This time Lara's quest is to thwart more ancient mythology shamans being planned by a mad despot. This time the crucial 'bad idea' is to introduce an ex-lover and full-time scallywag into the equation to help/hinder her in her globetrotting excursions. This undermines the whole 'one woman defeating a world of scumbag men' concept that made the first one so enjoyable. That said, the film is dynamic and pretty to look at. The stunts are impressive and tactile, something many of this year's blockbusters have failed to address — if you have a car chase, film it using cars (that's you, 2Fast2Furious?Teddious?2Muchcheez)

Ultimately though, Tomb Raider doesn't quite make the grade for all its side-saddled gunplay and tourist-friendly Britannia, because of haphazard pacing and lazy peripheral characters.

**The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (Stephen Norrington)**

If the much-publicised rifts are to be believed, this should perhaps have been titled The Beleaguered Film of NotSo-Gentlemen as Stephen 'treat them like cattle' Norrington and Sean 'I'm an Alist star, young whippersnapper' Connery lugged out the artistic differences. In the end fans of the comic are likely to be perturbed by the Americanisation of the League (box office, you understand) and everyone else by the general pace. It certainly looks the part, dark and fantastical, with the Nautilus in particular being a triumph of design over practicality; but this is very much a film that foregrounds the design over the substance and revels in its eccentric anachronisms. All very nice but the character interaction is all based upon event rather than any tangible emotion. That said, there's always something to look at; the snow sequences are marvellous, the action suitably grandiose and there's even time for Nemo to let rip with some wacky martial arts. Somehow you can't imagine James Mason doing that...

**X-Men 2 (Bryan Singer)**

Apparantly they are still not what they seem as the plot opens out from what, in part one, was effectively a one hundred minute prologue. X2 (as it apparently likes to be called, quicker to test?) opens with a tight combination of suspense, action and intrigue as an audacious assassination is perpetrated by a mutant that can seemingly teleport at will, leaving just a whiff of smoke in its gargoylean-looking wake. But naturally things are not as simple as they first seem. Rather like the Nazi connections in part one (which also strain to Singer's Apt Pupil (1997)) X2 doesn't hide from 'big issues', acting as a metaphor for society's treatment of race and disability and, more importantly, the ways that society's underdogs react to their predicaments. Magneto is not so much irreconcilably evil as reacting against a society that persecutes him, fellow Shakespearean heavyweight Mr X (avier) prefers a softer approach. Ultimately the real evil is humanity and politics, grabbing for power while honest mutants struggle to understand their roots and their place in a world that doesn't trust them. Overall, the combination of action and emotion with a script that has at least some intelligence (in other years, one might veer towards the expression 'pretentious' but 2003 was 'Year of the Matrix' so we'll let it pass) is something to welcome in the vacuum that is the modern tentpole flick.

**The Core (Jon Amiel)**

The Core suffers from a number of fundamental flaws. Firstly, a film full of wistly democratisation/apoliticism was never going to win the hearts and minds of a deeply polarised public just prior to a war starting. Secondly, the film took itself far too seriously and advertised itself (you may want to sit down at this point) as Science Faction (get it?). When boiled down you have Armageddon (Michael Bay, 1998) inside the Earth with a cast of highbrow Hollywood actors hamming it up in a ship, while every twenty-odd minutes some form of groovy new catastrophe hits a major world landmark. Get the oddball crew together, spot the flawed but decent characters who's inevitably going to redeem themselves by selfless self-sacrifice, then add touches of seventies disaster flick and Fantastic Voyage (Richard Fleischer, 1966). So there's more cool than the North Sea (but then that's not too tricky), but at least for once the heroes rely on brainpower, not macho posturing. The opening is a real oddball puzzler with people just dropping dead and The Birds (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963) ripoff in Trafalgar Square sets things up nicely. It becomes formulac and 'deadly' grim 19950s science fiction after that but at least they tried. Hey, the French guy kicks the corporate Coca-Cola machine too.

**Adaptation. (Spike Jonze)**

Films about writers, particularly Hollywood screenplay writers, have long been a small but defined genre-ette. In A Lonely Place (Nicholas Ray, 1950), Lost Weekend (Billy Wilder, 1945), Paris When It Sizzles (Richard Quine, 1964) the formula is simple — writer, normally alcoholic, struggles in vain to realise his (always his) former potential whilst wallowing in self-doubt and misery, normally uplifted by female level-headed intervention at some point. It's easy to see why — these are written by Hollywood screenwriters struggling in vain to
realise... etc. etc. Charlie Kaufman has, however, gone one step further by putting himself into the script as the central character with a (fictional) brother, both of whom are writing very different screenplays. Charlie’s trouble is that he is basically adapting an unadapted novel about illegal orchid hunting. The film is about the book, adapting it and not adapting it, and about how reality and Hollywood clash. Whether this is clever or not is hardly relevant because it feels clever. Cage gives flawless performances as the two brothers and the self-references to Jonez/Kaufman’s previous film Being John Malkovich (Jonez, 1999) is a nice touch.

Solaris (Steven Soderbergh)

Bizarrely, despite the brief impressive effects shots with their obso­processor-heavy volumetric renderings, Solaris is basically a chamber, with four people in a drawing room (albeit one millions of miles from home) where people sit and ponder as though in a Chekhov play, and loads of weird stuff happens, involving spirits that seem to be recreating important individuals in their past lives. And, wouldn’t you know it, the guy sent to investigate these spooky-but-oh-so-existential psychological projections is none other than, you’ve guessed it, a Chris Kelvin, who’s lost his wife and is going a bit loopy. Now, Tarkovsky fans may bemoan the lack of a ten-minute single take around a ring road or the savage bisecting of the three­­­­hourplus running time, but this is a big studio production with a big star that dares to be intelligent, thoughtfully and languidly paced. It’s (please sit down) a real science fiction film. From Hollywood no less! You Morning, 12A for one use of the ‘F’ word and George Clooney’s bottom.

Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle (McG)

Apparently the general consensus was ‘silly’. It’s Charlie’s Angels you know! More high-octane, gratuitously over-the-top action with totally unnecessary glamour shots and innuendo assault the eyes, while the ears are pounding from the pick ‘n’ mix MTV soundtrack. That hair-sniffing fruitcake from part one, however, is back (meanwhile, although sadly Bill Murray has been replaced by the decidedly inferior Ben Stiller, who, when he arrives, gets unleashed, bombs explode, wirework kung-fu goes even more slow­­­­mo and there are really stupid motorcycle fights to contend with! Somewhere in here’s a plot but frankly we’ve forgotten it. Not as interesting as the first film but still a big bundle of low attention span eye-candy that never gets bogged down in real world physics. As predicted last year, the trend for women who fight was just that and any hope of equalling Hong Kong’s impressive range of female fighting flicks has been drained away by Charlie’s Angels lack of box­­­­office clout. C’est la vie.

Shanghai Knights (David Dobkin) / The Medallion (Gordon Chan) / Tuxedo (Kevin Donovan) – A Jackie Chanathon

Shanghai Noon (Tom DeR, 2000) remains Jackie Chan’s only half­­­­­decent Hollywood outing, mainly due to the interaction with Owen Wilson and a discernable Hong Kong feel to the fight scenes. Second­­­­­time round and things ain’t so rosy. Transported to a bizarre alternative Victorian London complete with characters both fictional and real, the bungling baddies are out to save Wang’s sister and inadvertently prevent the devious masquerade of the royal line to appoint that bloke off Queer As Folk as king. All very alternative history but B-movie acting, an incompleteness and some fairly lacklustre fight scenes take their toll. What’s more, the chemistry between the two leads in part one has evaporated. What’s more bizarre is that, as bad as this is, it is still head and shoulders above Jackie’s other two outings this year. The hugely-delayed The Medallion (originally Highlanders) is a laughably inept fantasy outing with ludicrous wirework and ropey effects (and Lee Evans, for light relief. Be afraid, be very afraid... AMB). Meanwhile, The Tuxedo is one of the most painfully embarrassing pieces of celluloid trash ever to grace a cinema as Chan becomes a spy by donning a high-tech, James Bond gadget-strewn dinner jacket. It’s virtually impossible to describe the sheer awfulness of this loadsmome funny venture into science fiction.

The Horrors, the Horrors

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Marcus Nispel, remake)

A slight change in the title spelling and a bit of trendy ‘retro seventies’ styling can’t disguise that this is a pointless exercise on par with the van Sant remake of Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960/CoS van Sant, 1998). Here the gore is laid on to hard-R levels because the kids need viscera (apparently) without realising that the whole point of seventies horror cinema was its intense inescapability. The original film was banned here for two decades not because of gore, but because there was nothing that could be cut without inexplicably ruining the film. First time round you covered your eyes when you thought you saw the hook go in; here you see the hook, the sheriff’s over in a blink and you’re left with an average slasher at best, a blasphemous travesty at worse.

Wrong Turn (Rob Schmidt)

What with The Texas Chainsaw Massacre remake trying to bring back the mid­­­­seventies horror (unsuccessfully), Wrong Turn looks, oh, a few years later to the time of hideous mutants going disas­­­­tracting their mobile victims in some backwater inbred part of the Southern states. Here Deliverance (John Boorman, 1972) meets The Brokeback Mountain (Tobey Maguire, 2007) as Eliza Dushku (you know, Faith from Buffy) and her cohorts are hunted like animals by skilled, but obviously, crossbow wielding cannibals. Gasp as bats are hit off, shudder as they have to sit quiet as their friend is being carved up on the table and marvel at the number of sudden shocks that you knew were coming but made you jump anyway. Lowest common denominator filmmaking but done with a sense of gleeful nastiness and gratitude early-80s teens might all too often absent from modern horror.

Cabin Fever (Eli Roth)

The Fangoria revival, where the make-up crew are more important than the cast, is well and truly upon us. A group of youngsters go for a holiday in a remote cabin in the country (can you see where this is going yet?). These set light to a diseased raving mutter who manages to slash around vast quantities of pus-laden blood over the car, the house and them before running off and, unbeknownst to them, contaminating the water supply. Soon the youngsters start falling foul of a hideous flesh-eating disease, have to contend with the world’s most insane cop and a community of, yep, you’ve guessed it, creepy yokels. A low poem to exploitation slasher. Cabin Fever is a delicious, unrepentant, gross horror nasty that knows its sources and adds some touches of its own. However the BBCF must have nodded off for about half of the film because how this ever got a 15 rating is anyone’s guess.

Freddy vs Jason (Ronnie Yu)

Take One inexplicably successful 80s to ‘90s horror icon who’s never been in a half decent movie except that 3-D bit with the bloke’s eye in Part 3 (Steve Miner, 1983). Add one inexplicably successful 80s to ‘90s horror pop icon who’s only starred in one decent film (if you don’t count New Nightmares (Wes Craven, 1994)). So that’s about 15 films between them. Not great odds, especially as crossovers are notoriously contrived and rather dodgy. And yes
Freddy vs Jason is convoluted, base and shamelessly exploitative. But it's also a Ronny Yu film, who managed to turn the Child's Play franchise from sub-Freddy territory to the deliciously ludicrous heights of Bride of Chucky (1998). And he doesn't disappoint here. There are enough bizarre dreams, blood-dripping walls, OTT wirework fights involving the hearse driver in Hollywood now but remember, Yu was doing Body With The White Hair (1993) years ago, needless heavy petting, massages, twists, deaths and corpses to fill a trilogy. Yu knows he's making popcorn-fodder pure and simple and is flamboyant but unpretentious filmmaking, albeit one with a deeply pongy screenplay...

The Ring (Gore Verbinski, remake)

Why, oh why, oh why? That's the question, when faced with a US remake of yet another non-American language film, in this case the 'so recent the original had barely finished shooting' Rings. It could never have lived up to its slow-burning creepy low-budget predecessor. To be fair, it is effective in some places and nowhere near the unmitigated disaster it so clearly might have been. It succeeds with the newly added material that has nothing to do with the original, where it falls badly is in the recreations of Ringo's key scenes. All the gore and make-up effects in the world can't match the frisson of the original.

Ghost Ship (Steve Beck)

This haunted house film on the high seas sank without a trace at the box office which is a shame as, despite shameless nods to The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), Ghost Ship has all the trappings of sick and silly horror with the requisite number of jumps and plot holes the size of ocean liners. If the deliberately tasteless opening never really gets topped, there are still enough pacey shivers to keep you amused, as a team of renegade ship salvagers make the savage mistake of trying to plunder a eerie cruise ship filled with the souls of the damned.

Dark Water (Hiroyuki Nakata)

The thing about haunted houses is that it's usually obvious that you shouldn't go inside one. They look big, gothic and generally have creepy butlers and, a bit of a giveaway really. But change the setting to a block of flats and suddenly it seems less implausible. Yoshimi is the woman in terror trapped in her own home, haunted by fleeting 'don't look now' (Nicolas Roeg, 1973) style visions of figures in the rain. And it even rains inside, dark mucky water that envelops the sound and drips with creepy intensity constantly keeping the viewer on edge. She adds to this phantasmagorical problems she's also trying to maintain custody of her daughter, protecting her from the well, that would be telling. Hideo Nakata spins up the creeps yet again in another understated, slow-burn high-shiver masterpiece. Await the 'pointless Hollywood remake' with the same dread as all of his other superior films.

Fantastic Fantasy

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (Gore Verbinski)

Aye, aye, me hearties. Shiver me timbers. Ooh arr yer scurvy dog, etc. The box office disasters of huge-budgeted flicks such as Pirates (Roman Polanski, 1986) and Cutthroat Island (Ken Harlin, 1995) had put the outclass well into the dead man's chest. Until now. Mercifully, the pile film is back with a vengeance and a yio ho ho. Prepare to have your buckle well and truly swashed for over two hours of zombie ghost ships and sword fights. The scripting is great; the undead angle inspired, the action is old school meets new and the whole thing zips along at a tidy pace. Johnny Depp shows his mettle with this year's most barnstorming performance but Geoffrey Rush holds his own in true eye-rolling fashion. Gore (the bloke behind the pointless remake of Ringo) Verbinski has come up with the summer's best popcorn flick by a mile. Based (probably) on a fairly lacklustre Disney World ride, we await with eagerness the inevitable spin off 'It's A Small World'. With multinational zombie children of course...

Holes (Andrew Bergman)

Prison drama are nothing new. You know the genre conventions—someone is shoved in the slammer for a crime they didn't commit and the new fish has to cope with the prison hierarchy, the sadistic guards, the 'friend' rations knocked to the floor' and the regular punishments. And normally there's forced labour too. All these elements are present and correct but with a twist because this time it's a kid cast into a hard-labour camp for juvenile delinquents on trumped-up charges pertaining to the stealing of some charity training shoes. And work he does, digging huge holes in the desert heat day after day, watched over by the guard under the command of the mysterious and cruel warden. Naturally there's a nefarious plan afoot and some poisonous lizards to contend with. With a fragrant structure that slowly reveals a superbly constructed plot, excellent scripting and uniformly consistent acting, this is unpatronising, thoroughly engaging and dramatic. An intelligent film for families? John Vought acting? Whatever next...

Snake of June (Shinya Tsukamoto)

It's Shinya Tsukamoto. It's cheap, black and white and has a central love triangle with two men and a woman, one of the men played by Tsukamoto-san himself, who also edits, writes, shoots most of it and probably makes the lunchtime namer for everyone too. Here the central character is eventually empowered by initially humiliating erotic blackmail games involving highly dubious technology in an outpouring of orgone energy that threatens to disrupt the whole fabric of the film. Kitsch, controversial, underground cinema at its best but not recommended for those of a delicate disposition or a tired desire for films that equate cutting edge with the size of the budget rather than the quality of the imagination. This year's 'must see' cult film...

Finding Nemo (Andrew Stanton)

There he is! Film over. Nope, seriously, Pixar's latest offering is as delightful as you'd expect although unfunny clownfish Marlin's constant self-lashing can grate a bit, as can the repetition and the repetition. The usual collection of easy-to-identify characters with bizarre traits, microsecond-perfect comedy timing and fishy gags make this a true family film in the best sense of the term. Surfer turtles, sharks trying to beat their carnivorous habits in self-help groups and a talkish idiotic sealife populate all corners of the film. Marlin's son Nemo has been fishnapped by an Australian dentist and it's down to the father to save his wife and his other. Few hundred kids in a brutal pre-credit attack to get him back, aided by Dory, a fish with a memory as long as a... sorry what was I on about...

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (Peter Jackson)

So Peter Jackson finally reaches the final hurdle, galloping past the three hour mark and annoying Christopher Lee in the process. So it any cop? Well it's spectacular to be sure, those dollars have been well spent (F3 looks crap: $180million —100mins; LOTR looks fab: $300million —600mins. You, as people with different usage of the English language might hypothetically say, do the math) and Jackson sure knows how to fill the screen. However leaving Lee out was a big mistake. Ultimately the threat of hordes of horrible beasts is pitched
right and the scale and detail of the battles is very succint, but there is no real adversaty that the audience can relate to. It's all too abstract, just some flame-eyed wowt on a stick and some blokes so scary they are hidden by big clouds. The running time fair whizzes by but there is a feeling that perhaps the Star Wars style of the New Order should have been of a more robotic and the same old Star Wars is a distinct possibility. They could even have stretched out a straight-to-video coda for that. Still w're nit-picking, because ultimately this is a tremendous achievement.

**Dracula: Pages From A Virgin's Diary** (Guy Maddin)

Imagine pitching this one to Jerry Bruckheimer: 'Jerry, you're gonna love this: it's Dracula, you know, that old black book, done properly but, get this, entirely through the magic of ballet. That's right, ballet Jerry, and what's more we'll set it to the music of that foot-tapping master Gustav Mahler. And film it like a silent film with super 8 stuff and everything! Jerry? Jerry?'

Insane Canadian genius Guy Maddin's intense reworking of Bram Stoker's novel is based upon the production by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Before you turn away this is one of the films of the year, a dizzying blur of fast editing, stylised sets and black and white photography emphasised with crimson-tinted blood. Quite simply stunning, Maddin has transformed the, let's be frank here, mad concept into a rare beast - a rollercoaster of an art film. Exquisite cinematography mixes with distinctive use of sound. You can hear footsteps when they are relevant but all the characters speak through title cards to make, and we don't use this term lightly, a unique cinematic experience. Another classic from one of the world's most distinctive auteurs.

**Peter Pan** (P.J. Hogan)

Wiping forever (hurray!) the rantid memory of that Spielberg atrocity, Hook, comes P.J. Hogan's take on the Peter Pan story complete with curious Mohammed al Fayed involvement. So what do you get? You get a pile of visually arresting special effects, wirework and sword-play that together to make a coherent and internally consistent film. Shock. This is what effects are made to - take you to another place, one that's not like the real world at all. We are in the enchanted world of Peter Pan land, albeit with a darker edge, big fluffy clouds you can bounce on, who else mirrored in a day and fijds of fairies (fjord, of course, being the collective noun for fairies) sprinkling glittery magic dust on the land. Fabulous. Tinkerbell is morally confused. Peter is suitably hedonist, wondrous and a little bit creepy. Richard Briers is an excellent Smee and Hook is a perfect combination of evil, daftly and conniving. Wendy's turn to the dark side (so to speak) is both believable and frightening. Visually gorgeous, imaginative, exciting, emotional, literal and funny. No modern day re-imaginings. No Robin Williams. Just great entertainment with a heart and soul. And, in case you're asking, we DO believe in fairies. Yep, we do. We do.

**Freaky Friday** (Mark S. Waters, remake)

Not only a remake but also a pop-friendly reinterpretation of the classic Cartesian mind-body problem. Freaky Friday scores many points for its deconstruction of modern society and the funny relationships between children and parents. Jamie Lee Curtis is a popular author and psychoanalyst who becomes swapped in mental form with her hard working纽约-but-with-a-heart-in-there-somewhere teenage daughter. This allows for that rarity in family films - one in which the kids can rightly bemoan their parents' behaviour and vice versa. That it manages to debase the two scourges of modern society - mobile phones and psychoanalysis (daughter dispenses with all the analytical crap and just tells it like it is) is merely icing on the cake. Good solid fun, it's not the greatest thing since sliced bread but is a cracking romp nonetheless.

**Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over** (Robert Rodriguez)

Three evil Sylvester Stallones are responsible for an insidious plan to rule the world through an interactive immersive video game platform that is, apparently, impossible to win. Yumi must take on the game and reclaim his sister's life. Think extreman II (David Cronenberg, 1999) but, like, you know, for kids. Oh, and you get cool but headache-inducing 3-D glasses to don at appropriate moments (in fact most of the film). Not up to Rodriguez's first Spy Kids films but a lot of fun nonetheless, without relentless action and constantly impatient but coherent camerawork (Rodriguez, like Tsukamoto above, edits his films, shoots, does the music etc - he just has more money). It's fast, shot, frothy and fun and you can play the 'spot the cameo' game too. Also from Rodriguez this year is **A Time In Mexico**, a distillation of Mexican spaghetti westerns with some delicious imagery and 'man of the year' Johnny Depp in fine form.

**Kill Bill Part I** (Quentin Tarantino)

The Bride has been put in a coma for six years following a massacre on her wedding day that left everyone dead, apart from her. Naturally she's not impressed with events, but rather than seek therapy she takes matters into her own hands.

You see, Bride was once part of an elite gang called the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, so she's not someone to cross lightly. Problem is the very people who instigated the hit are her ex-cmrades and their boss, Bill. Now Bride has made a list of who's been naughty and she's working her way towards killing Bill. First, let's get this straight: there is no big, bad problem with **Kill Bill** - it's only half a film. That said, it's a very good half, packed to the gills with cool stuff and more exploitation classic references than you can shake a stick at. For those of us weaned on Shaw Brothers films, Baby Cart, Jack Hill, Larry Cohen and Kinji Fukasaku this is like the cinematic 'best of' congealed from your favourite gleelessly unsound films. There's an animé section, silhouette scenes and lots of kick-ass coloured blood gushing in torrents over the beautiful oriental sets. It's got Sonny Chiba in it! Its got snow, zen gardens and The 5678's. It's got the music from Battles Without Honour and Humanity (Kinji Fukasaku, 1973) in it. Some day all entertainment will be made like this, only three hours long.

**And the winners are** (paradiddle purlease):

**Best Horror:** Dark Water

**Best SF:** Solaris

**Best Fantasy:** Holes

**Special Yo Ho Ho Award for Most Enjoyable Romp:** Pirates of the Caribbean

**Smug Award for Best Film Last Year:** Spirited Away
what better bunch of people to check out the retro-warfare action on offer than a troupe of military grunts and an ark of fresh-faced archaeologists? A fax machine for objects has the side effect of journeying to the aforementioned French countryside but, wouldn’t you know it, travelling too many times makes your artifice go skew-whiff. Billy ‘Oh my God!’ Connolly has got himself stuck in the past and it’s up to his son and a variety of companions to get him back. Cue wildly fluctuating accents, the entire cast insisting at every turn that they are not English and a case of Star Trek ‘spot the red shirt’ that pretty much decides who gets it when from word go. By no means a total disaster, this is cod-strewn light entertainment with most of the action taking place in-camera rather than in-computer and is the better for it. Oh my God!

Treasure Planet (John Musker and Ron Clements)
That updating of Treasure Island in a sci-fi setting is a jolly good ride marred only by irritating Blond the robot, but mercifully his unfunny mannerisms don’t see the light of day until two thirds of the way through. Inventive, spectacular and fun, it was, of course, a flop. Like Atlantis (Gary Trousdale, 2001). © Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc 2004

An Interview with Ray Harryhausen
by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Some people judge a film by who directed it. Others look out for the starring actors. Even though special effects and the promise of spectacle saturate the summer blockbuster schedule it is rare that people choose to see a film on the basis of the person who created the effects. Partly this is a result of the huge production teams required to realise the impressive, but often faceless ‘money shots’ that are required to satiate the appetite of short attention span thrill-seekers. These days the Hollywood special effects business is worth many millions of dollars. However, one man has always managed to draw audiences on the basis of his effects work — Ray Harryhausen, creature creator extraordinaire and producer of some of the most memorable and loved scenes in fantasy cinema. He is the man who put the ‘special’ into special effects. His name was a guarantee of a quality film, even when the restricted budgets did not extend as far as A-list actors. Who can forget the giant crab in Mysterious Island (1961), the Salamanders of First Men in the Moon (1964), the Cyclops in Seventh Voyage of Sindbad (1958) or the plethora of creatures and gods in Jason and the Argonauts (1963)? At last the whole story of these wonderful creations is told in Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life. We were delighted to have the opportunity to talk with Mr Harryhausen over coffee and cookies, surrounded by bronze statues of his most famous scenes — a tribute to Willis O’Brien in the shape of a Kong Kong sculpture in full wrestling mode and, looking somewhat artificial amongst all this wonder, a special Oscar® for his contribution to cinema. We discussed his films, his influences, dinosaurs, science fiction fandom in the 1930’s and the state of special effects today. Along the way there was even time to debunk the auteur theory of film criticism.

Mitch & Colin: Congratulations on your book.
Ray Harryhausen: Well, thank you, we launched it at the NFT. It was a big success. More people bought it than we ever imagined.
C: One of the things we had wanted to ask was about how some of your extraordinary creations came to be and how you achieved your special effects, but then we realised we didn’t have to.
RH: It’s all in the book!
C: We’ve been watching some of your films recently and still wonder ‘How did he do that?’ The films still hold up even today. We saw Jason and the Argonauts in the cinema about 8-9 years ago and there were some children in the audience who, at the moment the skeletons appeared, were on the chairs waving magazines as though they were imaginary swords. They loved it.
RH: I hope we haven’t created some delinquents! Many of the modern pictures will. There’s got to be a generation of delinquents with some of the modern pictures. Some people promote a picture by telling you it’s obscene.
M: We’re here on behalf of the BFPA. One thing we thought was very interesting when we read the book was that you were part of the LA Science Fiction League.
RH: Yes, very early back when it started in the 1930s. That’s where I met Ray Bradbury and Forrest Ackerman.
M: What sort of activities did you get up to?
RH: We had meetings every Thursday night at the Clifton’s cafeteria.
people pulling a log stone up a hill.
C: I suppose in your own way you've put up buildings, albeit to scale — with all the models you've made.
RH: Well I built the house for Hurlz and Cret (1951), from my early fairy tales. I built it out of real cookies and real candy. I didn't want to have to cast it. I went to the market to get cookies and candy and glued them on the basic structure of the house. I stored them in the garage after the film and pretty soon they were all eaten away by mice. I hope to put a DVD out of my Fairy Tales.
C: We've been wanting to ask you about these. They look fabulous.
RH: I want to put them all out. They've been on the market for years, but mostly to schools. But the black market was taking over too, which destroyed them.
C: In some respects a nice DVD edition negates the need for a black market.
RH: They were all dups of dupes. That's the way the cookie crumbles.
M: You've just finished The Tortoise and the Hare (2002).
RH: Yes, I finished that after fifty years.
M: The tortoise finally crossed the finishing line.
RH: That was the last. I was doing a series of six, and I had shot four minutes of animation and then my features came along and I never went back to them. Two young men wrote to me and told me they'd like to finish the picture and I saw some of their work and decided to loan them the puppets and they finished it in their spare time in their garage. Just as I started out. I don't think you can tell where one left off. They studied my technique. I wrote the script and directed it by telephone but they did all the work and they did a marvellous job.
C: Do you think that makes it the longest film production in the history of filmmaking?
RH: For a ten-minute film, it was fifty years in the making. Of course it was in limbo for a good few years. The film business was a lot of fun and I'm glad I got on it even though it was the last of the golden age of Hollywood. I'm grateful. It was a different business than it is today. I'm amazed when I look at the credits at the end of modern films — eighty people doing the special effects.
M: It feels as though these days Hollywood has money to throw at projects, but not time.
RH: They've got no imagination because they keep remaking things. But then of course they say there are only seven possibilities of drama.
M: How involved were you within the whole filmmaking process? You used to work alone when you were doing the animation, but would have had a lot of involvement with the scripting and shooting.
RH: People think I'm just a special effects man who was handed a script and told to "put this on the screen". I was always involved with the writing right from the beginning. The director doesn't know what I can do and our pictures were always on such tight budgets. I don't like to use the word "cheap". We tried to make them look more expensive than they actually were. The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms, the whole picture only cost $200,000; you can hardly buy a costume today for that.
C: The catering budget for a week is sometimes more than that.
M: A lot of people focus on the animation, which is of course astonishingly good, but there are other elements to film than simply visual. Sound is an area that tends to get neglected, yet the sounds of your creatures are so distinctive — I can hear Talos even now.
RH: The creaking? (laughs)
C: And the Medusa's rattle and the sound of the flying saucers in Earth vs the Flying Saucers (1956). The sound is such an important element.
RH: It helps bring things to life.
M: And were you involved with the creation of the sound?
RH: In the studio system you have the sound effects department. They made me two or three sounds then we picked out the one we felt fit.
But most of them are so experienced they know pretty well when they see something on the screen it needs a certain type of sound, so they go in that direction. Earth vs the Flying Saucers we shot in a sewage plant, so the sound effect you hear of the saucers is actually the goo of sewage going through the pipes. We don't like to tell that, but in this day of vulgarity I don't think it matters.
M: Which is your favourite creature?
RH: I can't have one because the others get jealous. I like the more complicated ones like the seven-headed Hydra and the skeletons... and Medusa. They were a big challenge. I guess those are the ones I most enjoyed animating.
M: That leads on to the next question — which was the most challenging creature.
RH: Seven skeletons (Jason and the Argonauts) took four months to do that five minute sequence. Or rather, put it together, because it had a lot of cuts. You had to match the source and every frame so the sound effects department could put in the crash of the swords.
M: Which film was your personal favourite?
RH: I think Jason is the most complete but every other one has certain elements in it. Sometimes we had to compromise terribly because of weather, because you can't get the people you want at that time. There are many compromises when you are making a low budget film. You have to. It's not just like you read about where some directors can sit and wait for a cloud to be just in the right place for that particular shot. We had to shoot in rain or dry. Most of our films were very low budget. I wanted to put impressive visuals on the screen so it didn't look like it was made by Republic Pictures or something.
M: They still do inspire people.
RH: I'm so grateful that they do. When I go to these conventions a whole family of three generations will come up and say 'my father saw your films and taught me to see them and I'm teaching my son.' He'll probably teach his. So I'm glad that Charles Schnee and I have left a positive impression. So many films today think leave a negative impression. I don't like to go to a film and come out rating my fellow man. But seeing some of these dreadful things — every film seems to say you can only solve your differences by your fists or a gun. That's terribly dangerous particularly with television brought right into your house. And people ignore this and that's the whole reason why I think our society is falling apart. Young people grow up without wanting a continuity of story. King Kong (1933) has the most perfect development of story. They took you by the hand from the mundane world of the Depression and brought you to a world of fantasy that was outrageous. Really, for its time.
M: It still has a sense of wonder.
RH: We tried to keep that. The more spectacular images you see on the screen with CGI — even for a thirty second commercial — you see the most amazing images. They used to be unique. Now the amazing image is mundane.
M: There's less soul in a computer generated image, because so many people are involved. You were manipulating the creatures by hand.
RH: Yes we tried to put ourselves in. When you're animating say, Mighty Joe, you have to sit on the floor and go through the motions with a stopwatch. You try to put yourself in the place of the creature.
M: When you look at your films, there's still a sense of personality that you get in all the creatures and you engage with what is happening on the screen. Because you believe in the story and characters, you believe in the creature you're seeing. In films nowadays you see something that looks graphically real at any moment, but it just seems to be a cinema of attractions where there's spectacle rather than something fantastical.
RH: Well, we tried to put a simple story in all our films, and many times the critics criticised us — that our stories were too simplistic. But you can't put a complicated story in a fantasy. It's mainly visual. That's why music was so important and we had some of the best composers to do our scores. Bernard Herrmann fit our pictures.
beautifully. He did 4 pictures for us. Miklós Rózsa who did Golden Voyage (1927/28), Jerome Moross did [The Valley of Gwangi] (1969). Laurence Rosenthal did Clash of the Titans (1981). All musicians who have wonderful imaginations, and lifted the audio image to the visuals. And that is a lost art today. You see so many films where the music just goes 'mumble, mumble' and has no relationship to what you're looking at on the screen. We tried to get the imaginative musicians. Sometimes the budget couldn't afford it, so we used to use canned music a lot. In as much as the films are visuals, they really start from my drawings because the plots - do you understand some of the pictures today - they don't have a continuity.

C: There are two problems these days. If the studios think that a film is too basic they throw lots of extraneous plot in to try and make it look as though it's clever. RH: Pseudo-intellectual, yes. They try to make it look good as intellectual.

C: ...Or they have a prime concept which suddenly gets greenlit and they throw lots of money at it, but they haven't actually got a completed script. So they start to make a film and do the effects, because all they've decided upon is the basic premise and the effects. They write a script while they're making the film.

RH: And that's very costly. We go out of our way to make our final script as close to what we see on the screen as possible.

M: Your storyboards are very detailed works of art in themselves.

RH: It's very important. My drawings influenced art directors and influenced everybody down the line. That's why our pictures are not what you'd call directed pictures in the European sense of the word. The director's main job on our films was to get the best out of the artists and that's not always that easy. In fact one critic said 'Harryhausen should have animated the actors.' It was very flattering to me but as for the actors... This was one of our earlier films. We always tried to have very competent actors, but Clash of the Titans was the only one where we had stars. Today the word 'star' means nothing, every Tom and Dick off the street is suddenly called a star, just because he screams into a microphone. The word has no meaning nowadays. The word 'art' has no meaning. When they give somebody £25,000 to cut a cow in half - God made the cow, all they did was freeze it and cut it in half. And they call it conceptual art. It's ridiculous.

C: Your work is very much cinematic art. Nowadays you don't have cinematic art, you have movies. Part of it's down to the studios themselves being businesses. Hollywood was always there to make money, but in the Golden Age the people at the top cared about what they were making. Now it's all corporate.

RH: That's shows. People don't emphasise that today. Something that I've always felt happens with stop motion is that it gives a fantasy dream quality to a film. With a subject like Sinbad or King Kong, even though the gorilla was kind of jerky compared with standards today it doesn't matter, because it has that quality of dream. You lose that if you try to make things too real, for a fantasy. Then the spectacular becomes mundane.

M: Just one more question. Of all your unrealised projects is there another film you would have loved to have made, a story that never was?

RH: I wanted to make Dante's Inferno at one point. In the early days it would have involved censorship because you can't go to hell with your clothes on. But I liked Gustav Doré's drawings - I was very influenced by them - so I wanted to make Dante's Inferno. When I got deeper into it I thought how can people sit through an hour and a half of tormented souls, wailing in torment. But today they sit through three hours of computer-generated effects, so why go to £20 to watch Dante anyway, whatever you have to pay today, to sit through somebody in the process of dying is very attractive. After all I think the film was made for fantasy. In the book there's a long listing of films never realised.

M&C: Sinbad on Mars sounded brilliant!

RH: (laughs) Everybody smiles whenever that gets mentioned. We had a unique way of getting him up there that would have been dramatic, but when he got up there we had two versions of the script and it turned out to be Ming the Merciless, destroying the world or wanting to rule the world and the writers couldn't seem to get away from that. We never made the film.

M&C: Such a shame. Mr Harryhausen, thank you so much for your time. Good luck with the book.

RH: Thank you. I don't know if it'll ever get on the bestseller list as there's no scandal in it - who's interested in naked dinosaurs?

Ray Harryhausen and Tony Dalton, Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life

For those of us of a certain age, the words 'Ray Harryhausen' almost define your childhood. Well, the good bits at any rate. His use of stop-frame animation to create mythical creatures, monsters and aliens took us to worlds we could otherwise only dream about. Think of the skeleton fight from Jason and the Argonauts, Medusa from Clash of the Titans, the 20,000ft octopus or the prehistoric whale from Ray Harryhausen's 1975 feature One Million Years B.C. Now imagine the credits on most Hollywood films list hundreds of people responsible for the effects work. Twenty people rendering the heroine's hair, lit by ten others and shot by a team the size of an average classroom. In this digital age of so-called photo-realistic CGI it's hard to see how all the incredible effects on Jason and the Argonauts were the work of just one man.

Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life is no standard autobiography. Sure, it covers his life story from his first viewing of that masterpiece of fantasy cinema King Kong, but more than that is his work, of one man's lifelong dedication to the art of stop-motion special effects. All Harryhausen's films are covered, from the large-scale fantasies to the more intimate fairy tale stories that have delighted children and adults for decades. The latest of which The Dragon and the Door has finally been completed, having been started fifty years ago. The creation of those special effects is examined in detail, from the exquisite pre-production sketches, through the animation process to the finished result viewed with copious thumbnail sketches.

This is a film-inspired delight in that we can see the whole animation process from start to finish, learn how the models are armatured, how the animator moves each little intricate piece and also grasp the overall scale of these creations. In many respects you would think that this de-mystification of the process would somehow take away the charm and awe of the films (after all, the quick fox hind of Hollywood becomes has diminishing impact when you've watched the fifty-third DVD featured, but paradoxically the opposite is the case. You lock on them with renewed enthusiasm when you realise the sheer attention to detail and painstaking, often crazy, methods of production. In Earth vs the Flying Saucers each exploding building was hand animated, brick by brick, the wires hidden by painting them to match the background frame by frame. Think about that for a moment and consider one scene at any moment, would you have meant re-shooting every single frame all over again. The secret of Harryhausen's patience is revealed early on, a necessity for the animator.

Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life is a solid book over three hundred pages of full colour high-quality photographs and sketches accompanied by detailed text. This is no mere coffee table book but a indispensable look at one of cinema's greatest, previously illustrated and a cracking read to boot. But be warned - you'll need to work out before dipping in, as it's a behemoth of a tome requiring Talos levels of strength to hold it. And how can you not want a book that has a quote from Kenji the Frog on the back? Essential for all lovers of fantasy cinema and those interested in the history of special effects.

5 Colin Odell, Mitch Le Blanc and Ray Harryhausen
First Impressions

Book Reviews
edited by Paul Billinger

All novels marked: • are eligible for the 2003 BSFA Award for Best Novel
All collections and anthologies marked: • contain stories eligible for the 2003 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction

Sarah Ash – Lord of Snow and Shadows
Reviewed by Lynne Bispham


There have been countless fantasies in which the main character, believing herself to be just an ordinary person, discovers that they are actually the heir to a kingdom or that they possess amazing supernatural powers. In Lord of Snow and Shadows, Book One of The Tears of Artamon, this old archetype is given a new and original lease of life, the action of the novel taking place on a broad and richly coloured canvas, with the various strands of the plot skilfully interwoven to make an utterly compelling read. Gavril Andar, a young portrait painter living in the Smarna, a warm southern land of sun and blue seas, is astounded by the arrival of a group of clan warriors from the kingdom of Ashkendir in the north. The leader of these men, Bhogutur Koetha Tozjamm, informs Gavril that he is the son of the Drakhton, Volkth, who has been betrayed and murdered, and that he, Gavril, has inherited the throne and must avenge his father’s death. Gavril’s mother, Elysia, when confronted with this information, admits that it is true, and that she had fled Ashkendir when Volkth’s impulsive nature had been revealed as hiding a savage cruelty. Gavril is reluctant to leave immediately for Ashkendir, but is given no choice, for he is abducted by the warriors and taken forcibly to Kastel Drakhton. Here in the frozen north, in a land of forests, wolds and vengeful spirits who can possess the living, Gavril’s appearance, and his blood, gradually alter, and he begins to understand his true and terrible nature.

Meanwhile, Elysia determines to rescue her son from his abductors, and travels to Muscobor, the capital city of Muscobor, to seek the aid of the Grand Duke. In contrast to the blood-feud-riven Ashkendir, Muscobor is portrayed as an elegant land that has echoes of our own world in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, but where magic exists and can be used to create armies. Unfortunately the Grand Duke’s regime is under threat. Elysia becomes a pawn in the politics and intrigues of the court, and falls victim to the territorial ambitions of Prince Eugene of Tielen, whose plans include invading Ashkendir and placing his own candidate on the throne. Before long Elysia finds that she too has been betrayed.

While the main plotline is resolved by the end of this novel, there are still threads that need to be tied, and enough tantalising hints as to the way the story may develop to make me eager to read the next book in the series.
Neal Asher – Cowl

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

Neal Asher has made a name for himself writing highly entertaining, fast moving and frequently violent novels. In this regard, Cowl is not really any different, although this one does inhabit a different universe, as there is no mention of the Polity, the governance system that links his previous three novels.

In the future there is an ongoing struggle for domination of the Solar System. As part of this struggle Cowl, an artificially evolved human, has been created and has travelled back in time to the Nodus. This is the point in time at which life first appeared on Earth and the point past which it is not possible to go. Cowl has yet, the Torbeast, which travels through time shielding its scales. These are organic time machines which are being used to harvest people and drag them back to the Nodus. The Torbeast is a truly monstrous creation, so big it doesn't just fill space but time as well. The sheer scale of many of the constructs, the Torbeast, is a testament to the energy for the time travel and even just the time periods involved are quite awe-inspiring.

However, all that comes later on. The novel opens with Polly, a prostitute in a not-too-distant future. She is hired, under duress, by Nandru to collect an object on his behalf. The pick-up goes wrong and Nandru is killed in a surprising and somewhat unpleasant way, but not before his personality is downloaded into a device he had implanted onto Polly's chest. Polly ends up with the object firmly attached to her arm and is thrown back in time to the Second World War. Tack, a genetically programmed hunter, now programmed to track and kill Polly, has a fragment of the object attached to him and he too is thrown back in time, just not to the same time period. Now the story can get going.

The first half of the book is mainly concerned with Polly and Tack as they are continually dragged further back in time. Polly with Nandru's personality attempting to figure out just what the hell is going on, and Tack as he encounters and joins a strange traveller who seems to know rather too much and is conveniently able to mess with Tack's programming. This section could almost be described as leisurely (at least by Mr. Asher's standards) and it shifts easily between the humour and intense danger of the characters' changing situations.

As with his previous novels, Neal Asher has used chapter headings to provide background to the novel. In this case, these headings become rather more pertinent as they provide the reader with important plot elements. Although initially these do appear to be completely disconnected from the main story, the significance of this thread becomes steadily more apparent. The scale and pace of events both increase in line with one another, moving from the straightforward personal and growing to encompass all of time and most of the solar system. The novel rapidly accelerates as we learn more about what is really happening and get further back in time closer and closer to the Nodus. It is told in short passages, rapidly shifting between viewpoint characters in a way reminiscent of A.E. Van Vogt, which makes for an intense read. It can also make it a little confusing, as the constant shift of viewpoint, given the scale of events, occasionally makes it hard to keep tabs on what is happening. In spite of this, Cowl is another highly entertaining, fast-moving and frequently violent novel. With dinosaurs in it. Sit back and enjoy the ride.

Terry Bisson – Dear Abbey
Lucius Shepard – Floater

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

The novella is a literary form that rarely gets seen on the bookshop shelves. This is a shame, as I believe that some of the best fiction ever published is written at this length. PS Publishing seem to be attempting to redress the balance by largely specialising in novellas.

Dear Abbey by Terry Bisson is probably the most beautiful time travel story that I've ever come across. It's also one of the simplest. Cole, an American Studies Professor, shares an office with Lee, a Chinese Maths professor and a political exile from his own country. They share a taste for the writer Edward Abbey and not much else. The Dear Abbey of the title is an underground environmental program that would effectively end the human race in order to save the Earth. One evening the two travel forward in time to retrieve a gene patching formula that will halt Humanity and its destruction in its tracks. The two move forward in ever increasing time periods, 10 years, 10 thousand, a million and so on until they reach the end of the Earth.

The two are very passive travellers, stopping off at each period, meeting small groups of people who all appear to be expecting them and generally getting to understand the effect that time and humanity has had on the planet. The cumulative effect is far more powerful than any of the individual stops. That Cole and Lee are for some reason attached to do some of what would bring the human race to an end adds an entirely new perspective on the world that they are shown. Cole must decide, once he returns, whether or not to use the knowledge of how to end the human race, and whether it would ultimately matter if he did or not. The technology of time travel is almost entirely peripheral to the story. It is accomplished with the use of just a palm-top computer and higher maths. What is learned about our planet and our place upon it is what really matters here. There is a real affection for it that shines through. Simultaneously, Cole comes to understand and appreciate Lee, a man whose existence was almost inconsequential to him previously, and his motives for taking him on the trip in the first place.

For such a simple tale there is a tremendous amount going on, a lot of which is not readily appreciated until the story is complete. In his introduction, Brian Aldiss describes this as a masterpiece and I think he might just be right.

The second novella, Floater by Lucius Shepard, is an altogether darker affair. William Dempsey is a detective who has just gone through a long, horrific trial for the part he played, with two other officers, in the shooting of an Haitian immigrant. The shooting itself was an extreme incident, with the officers having fired a large number of rounds at an unarmed civilian. The event and the trial have clearly taken their toll. One of the officers has committed suicide and Dempsey himself has a 'floater' in his eye. This is a small bit of protein, a medical condition that could well have been brought on by stress.

Making efforts to understand what happened, and to deal with his own guilt, Dempsey carries out his own investigation. He finds the victim had links with a Voodoo church and also that Pinero, the third officer, appears to be connected to both the victim and the church. Part of the Voodoo myth system allows for the Black Sun, a sort of god-in-waiting to challenge the other gods, and the warrior god Olukun must defend them by fighting in the physical world via a possessed acolyte. Dempsey comes to believe that Pinero is carrying the dark god and he himself is carrying Olukun, and the floater in his eye is part of that physical manifestation. It is unusual to find portrayals of Voodoo in fiction that do not succumb to the popular image of zombies. Lucius Shepard succeeds in giving a
more believable portrayal, although in some scenes where Dempsey is being lectured about the religion it starts to feel like the reader is as well.

The floater in his eye becomes worse the more obsessed he is with establishing what really happened, and can also be seen as a physical manifestation of his guilt. What really takes place, whether a duel between Pinero and Dempsey, battling gods or even just vivid hallucinations, becomes secondary to Dempsey and his own fight to understand and come to terms with what it is he has done and what it has made him.

These novels are both deeply affecting works and either one could justifiably turn up in one or more of the 'best of year' anthologies. On the strength of them, it would seem that PS Publishing is most definitely a small press to keep an eye on.

[Available from www.psppublishing.co.uk]

Andrew M. Butler and Farah Mendlesohn (eds) — The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod

Reviewed by Claire Brailey

The first thing you notice about this third volume in the Foundation Studies in Science Fiction series is the cover. Designed by Colin Odell and now shortlisted for the BSFA art award, it's strongly reminiscent of the old Soviet-style industrial posters, albeit with an intrinsic science-fictional element; it's both a striking image in itself and, with its juxtaposition of politics and sf, an excellent scene-setter for the contents of the book.

Those contents are an eclectic mix of contemporary reviews of MacLeod's novels, subsequent analysis of his themes and messages, and critical commentary on his influences and motivations and the uses to which he puts them, alongside two interviews with the author and two articles of his own. Contemplation of MacLeod's contributions and challenges to the canon thus intermingle with consideration of his methods and techniques.

Some of the longer pieces in this volume were originally presented as papers at the SF Foundation's '2001: A Celebration of British SF' conference or the Science Fiction Research Association conference in 2003. Often authored by academics, inevitably these are at the harder academic end of the Foundation's sf criticism; but, beyond the conventions of title, they are entirely accessible to the non-academic reader. 'Nothing Is Written: Politics, Ideology and the Burden of History in the Fall Revolution Quartet' by John H. Arnold and Andy Wood – also up for a BSFA award, in the non-fiction category – and 'Not Losing the Plot: Politics, Guilt and Storytelling in Banks and MacLeod' by James Brown have both been expanded for this volume from the original papers, and stand out as engaging and thought-provoking pieces of analysis which provoked in me, at least, a desire to re-read the source material in order to engage with these readings. Adam Frisch's 'Tension and Progress in Ken MacLeod's Engines of Light Series' provides a creditable overview of the big themes in the later novels but seems almost introductory in its scope; it perhaps lacks the benefit of chronological distance from the source in order to step back and apply more targeted analysis. A piece new for this volume from K. V. Bailey, 'A Planet Engaged Lived Throughfronically Observed: Poems of Experience in a Polymatical Setting', explores a lesser-known side of MacLeod's work; this examination of his self-styled poetry and polemics reveals familiar themes but also uncovers more directly some of the anger and inspiration which underpins the fiction.

The reviews are interesting in a different way. While being generally positive and enthusiastic that MacLeod is tackling political topics only rarely considered in sf, and overtly exploring the effects of particular movements and ideologies, reviewers including Neal Baker, John Newsinger and anthology co-editor Farah Mendlesohn usually concluded that an initial promise was unfulfilled. Their main source of disappointment appears to be not so much that MacLeod enables characters with ideologically impure viewpoints to air their views, but that he sometimes seems to allow the narrative momentum to confirm or validate their prejudices, taking a lazy way out which impacts on the credibility of both the story and the authorial voice. As co-editor Andrew M. Butler notes in the introduction, these reviewers seem to have felt, on first reading, that MacLeod could do better. Again, critical and chronological distance lend perspective to an assessment of what he has achieved within the field.

In the end, though, a particular strength of this book is that it includes a 360° picture of the artist, with Ken MacLeod’s own contributions providing a vital piece in the jigsaw. Opening = after the introduction = and closing the volume, they provide some subtle parameters to this evaluation of what Ken MacLeod's science fiction is all about and why it matters. We know enough, especially when reading a volume like this, not to believe that the author automatically has all the answers or even that he can't be wrong; but neither of MacLeod's own pieces are set up to serve such a purpose or be knocked down accordingly. Instead he tells us about the possibilities of sf, and about the realisation of some of those possibilities; and thus, like the rest of the analysis in this volume, points to some ideas against which his own realisations can be considered.

Anyone who has read and enjoyed, or been challenged by, Ken MacLeod’s novels should consider reading this book; and be prepared to then want to re-read all of the novels again.

[Available from www.sf-foundation.org]

Lin Carter – Tolkien: A Look Behind The Lord of the Rings

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

First published in 1969, this is a revised edition (by Adam Roberts) one of the earliest books on Tolkien, written at a time when there was a certain need for an explanation of how and why Tolkien wrote his epic fantasy. In some ways, it’s an odd book. Lin Carter’s scholarship has both the virtues and failings of fan- scholarship. He was enthusiastic, committed, knew a lot, and tended to believe (or seem to believe) that being passionate about something meant that it was therefore good. He was capable of crassly dim judgement (such as an apparent belief, stated in chapter sixteen of this book, that E.R.R. Edinson’s use of quotations from Sappho, Horne, Donne, Herrick, Webster and Shakespeare in his books is ‘internal self-contradiction’) and as a fantasy novelist was himself – well, let us say, not of the first rank. Yet he was the general editor of the Ballantine ‘Adult Fantasy’ series which, in the immediate wake of Tolkien’s mass popularity, reprinted many of the field’s most significant works, many of which had been virtually unobtainable, and anyone who discovered fantasy in or after the Seventies owes him a debt of immense proportions. Without Carter, people like me who discovered Tolkien and then tried to search out more of the same (of course, you can’t look for ‘more of the same’ in effective fantasy, and whatever he said, Carter showed us that would have had a far smaller pool of material to search through.

Whether there’s a need for this particular book at this particular time, even at a bargain rate of £6.99 for a hardback, is a moot point, but the success of The Lord of the Rings as a film has
meant that there must be many thousands of people tempted to try the book with, like we neophytes in the late Sixties had, only a very hazy idea of where and why it came about. The slim summary of Tolkien’s biography in chapter one has been superseded by various other works, as has the chapter on Tolkien’s sources. For anyone other than the reader who wants the most basic of information, there is a whole range of other material available—both scholarly and popular. Several chapters are just plot summary – useful for the novice who wants to remember exactly what happened when, but of little basic use otherwise. There is, however, an interesting reminder, in the second chapter, of the critical reaction to _The Lord of the Rings_ on first publication. While nowadays it seems to be a story many literary folk love to hate, it’s fascinating to be reminded that a number of reviewers were certainly enthusiastic about the book, but were slightly confused about it, with its roots in romance, fairy-tale, mediæval epic, or whatever category they considered it to possibly be. (Naomi Mitchison’s “super science fiction” which one takes... as seriously as Malory’s swung it for me, I remember.) Part of the reason for Carter’s book was to explain, maybe for readers like me searching for the spaceships and robots, just where _The Lord of the Rings_ came from. His idea of the “tradition” of heroic fantasy is only partly helpful and in some cases only helpful at all if we forget ideas of ‘tradition’ as direct influence and consider fantasy instead as a mode of storytelling: you certainly need fairy-tale and medieval romance to understand Tolkien but it’s arguable whether Ariosto Fanno (wonderful though it may be) will heighten your understanding of Tolkien enough to warrant reading it, while although Dunsany must be read he is coming from a rather different strand of fantasy. There’s also an interestingly ironic paragraph in the chapter on medieval romance, where we are told that because of each writer’s need to outdo the other in audience-hoiking marvels ‘the whole romance genre became corrupt very quickly’. I’m sure I need say no more... Despite this, there’s a useful bibliography which will provide guidance to the necessary further reading. Adam Roberts’s revision updates the text at times (e.g., there’s a reference to Christopher Lee as Saruman) and occasionally seems to clean up what Carter is saying; for example Carter on page 166 identifies Gandalf as Tolkien’s version of Odin but the rest of the paragraph cites _The Silmarillion_ for Tolkien’s rather different, although not necessarily contradictory, explanation of Gandalf as one of the Maiar.

**Hal Clement – _Noise_**

*Reviewed by L. J. Hurst*

Hal Clement died on October 29th 2003, a month after _Noise_ was published, so it is likely to be his final work. It features a major trope from his earlier œuvre – a journey through a strange new world, in which problems have to be overcome by the protagonist(s) – but is unsatisfactory. The story describes the voyage of Mike Hono, a research linguist, through the seas that cover Kainui, a waterworld which has been settled by descendants of Polynesians, trying to re-create something of their ancient lifestyle. Much must have already happened on Kainui before Mike’s landing, because the oceans are destructively alkaline and devoid of life. Now, though, floating cities exist and traders cross the seas, harvesting the pseudo-life which collects the minerals and riches of the seas (as Polynesians would have harvested sea cucumbers, or others spermatzoi). I would have liked to know more about the pseudo-life. Each one – I thought of them as giant jellyfish-like, but that could be just me – must at some time have been set going by the original Kainuans. I would have liked to know more – some must have had an original purpose, others may have evolved into a ecological niche – but Mike and his two hosts never seem interested, while the child with them is more interested in becoming a Polynesian Hornblower. On the other hand, Mike never develops his interest in language either. This has the consequence that if the significance of the title was ever mentioned it escaped me.

**Paul Féval – _The Vampire Countess_** (<adapated by Brian Stableford>)

*Black Cat Press, Evroco (USA), 33pp, $22.95, p/b, ISBN 0-76407114-5*

**Paul Féval – _Knightshade (Le Chevalier Ténébre)_** (<adapated by Brian Stableford>)

*Black Cat Press, Evroco (USA), 172pp, $16.95, p/b, ISBN 0-76407114-5*

**Paul Féval – _Vampire City_** (<adapated by Brian Stableford>)

*Black Cat Press, Evroco (USA), 201pp, $19.95, p/b, ISBN 0-76407114-4*

*Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc*

The Vampire genre has long been established in folklore, literature and cinema and these days its conventions are almost rigidly defined. The vampire is a bloodsucker, active only by night and has aversions to stakes, garlic and crucifixes. But these conventions have largely been defined by the ‘mother’ of all vampire novels, Bram Stoker’s _Dracula_, and enhanced by his plethora of cinematic incarnations. Indeed nowadays these conventions are implicit for most vampire books/tv, unless the author goes to tremendous lengths to dispel the myths. So then, it comes as a refreshing change to be able to read stories about vampires before they were famous. Hair transplants, bands, multiplicity, scalps, an opulent city of masolea, animal vampires, hallucinations, avarece and lore are amongst the many themes and ideas used within Paul Féval’s trilogy of vampire tomes. Writing in mid-Nineteenth Century...
France, Feval was not specifically a genre writer, but he was prolific — his output was enormous, and many of his works fall into the ‘penny dreadful’ mould or were published as partworks. Although neglected compared to, say, Dumas, he is still read and his works (most notably Le Basu) have been adapted for cinema. These books do not merely contain horrors, they are also tales of adventure, crime and comedy — a melange of styles, fitting from one to another.

Seduction, conspiracy, and betrayal are the key themes of The Vampire Countess. Set against a seedy Paris backdrop, the young Rene de Kerayz rejects the love of his life, Angela, seduced by a beautiful woman. It’s not really his fault however, as this woman just happens to be Madame La Comtesse Marcelli Gregori, a notorious vampire whose life is extended by scalps, ripped from her victims, her hair acuing the colour of the poor unfortunate’s very own tresses. Such a tragic fate befell young Rene’s true love, Angela. Moreover the fiendish countess also gets him hooked on opium and tricks Rene into betraying his uncle for the dual purposes of revenge and greed. Feval uses real historical personages along with his fictional characters to produce a rippingly, if slightly confusing, yarn. Reminiscent of Erasme Bats, who bathed in the blood of virgins to maintain her youth, La Comtesse is truly terrible, her powers of seduction magnificent — once trapped, poor Rene doesn’t have a hope — he is kept under a spell, a slave to her whims.

Knights of the Round Table is a tale of phantoms and brigands, admittibly with more brigands and less vampirism than expected. Events take place at one of Archbishop de Quen’s soirees. His distinguished guests are amongst Paris’s most eminent citizens and they demand a story. Amongst these Parisian partygoers lurks Monsignor von Altenheimer who has quite a tale to tell... of the notorious Brothers Ténèbre, ‘two of the dead’, one an opium, the other a vampire. Their graves had been opened many times over the course of 400 years; sometimes there were bodies inside, one large, one small, and at other times the graves were found to be empty. This notorious pair were villains in every sense of the word, outlaws and thieves who terrorised most of Europe. But the hero in this tale is an unlikely one and may be just as supernatural as the villains. The structure unfolds tales within tales and several plot twists, as all good pulp should.

Now Vampire City’s story is a quest as young Anna (a heroine based on popular Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe), runs to the aid of her childhood friends, who have fallen foul of notorious vampire Monsieur Goetz. Along with her faithful servants she pursues the errant fiend across Europe and catches up with him inside Selene, the magnificent and malevolent Vampire City, an architectural wonder full of mausolea, temples and sarcophagi; all utterly awe-inspiring but devoid of life... until the vampires awaken. Feval really lets his imagination run riot in this book — anything is possible. M. Goetz’s vampirism involves hair transplantation and the ability to reproduce by turning his victims into exact copies of himself. Anna is a feisty heroine; although she doesn’t get too heavily involved with the physical side of vampire slaying, she leads the party of vampire hunters and makes all the decisions concerning how to thwart Goetz’s insidious plans.

Although cracking yarns, these books are not the easiest of reads as the plot structures and extensive list of characters demand a good deal of the reader’s attention if progression is to be made with any sense of coherence. Much of Feval’s work was serialised and this is often reflected in the narratives — a chapter may end on a shocking revelation, then the next few chapters go back in time to cover events from the previous chapter. Additionally, there are many references to contemporary people and events; but fear not, each book bears a handy set of endnotes that provides much needed background material. Particularly praiseworthy is the fact that the forewords serve as an introduction to Feval himself, his oeuvre, his contemporaries and the literary movements of the time, while the afterwords discuss the themes and ideas within the story. The foreword for the Vampire Countess is particularly helpful as it provides a lot of historical information, essential to understanding the underlying events of the narrative. This use of notes is a great move, and means you can read the book from start to finish without running the risk of ruining any surprises, as there are effectively no spoilers. The books are exciting and inventive, and all good popular fiction should be, but they are also rewarding, fascinating and delightfully translated. A great twist on the vampire genre and welcome revival of an author who has been overlooked in favour of his contemporaries.

[Available from www.blackcoatpress.com]

Mary Gentle – 1610: A Sundial in a Grave

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

After the monumental Ash, Mary Gentle turns again to alternate history. And, once again, what she presents in 1610 is also a secret history: a story concealed in a past which appears nonetheless to have led to something very like our own present. The Stuart dynasty seems popular at the moment, with an abundance of biographies, TV documentaries, and novels focussed on the middle of the seventeenth century. 1610 starts earlier (the clue really is in the title) and features James I, prince who first held the thrones of England and Scotland, beset by conspiracies to hasten the succession and save the future of the world.

Here, however, the story is also something of an alternate fiction: a precursor to and pastiche of Dumas, featuring as protagonist one Rochefort whose fictional future seems destined to include a best supporting role in The Three Musketeers. This novel is set within a framework of the discovery by a modern translator of the nearly complete original memoirs whose fragments had previously served as the source for both French and English language popular novels and several subsequent film adaptations. The novel thus sits within its own history, albeit one which has long held its subject matter to be at several removes of complicity and disbelief from the book we are reading – fiction.

As one might expect with Mary Gentle, there’s still more in the novel than this: rational magic, as practised by Robert Fludd, a physician and scientist who has pursued astrology to its very logical extremes; homoeroticism, sexual deviance, and unrequited love; squab, dish, cruelty, and a powerful social historical imagination; ideas of political and religious breakdown that have continued throughout the ages. M. Gentle is perhaps the only writer I know of who has ventured into a Japanese warrior, nobleman, and ambassador who is drawn into the intrigues of the English court through his friendship and bonds of honour to two French swordsmen. This element is perhaps the only way in which the author seems to have succumbed to a desire to include all her research and interest in the subject at virtually any cost to the story.

Notwithstanding the lure of the east, this time she merely gets the length right. The narrative, told predominantly through the rediscovered 'memoir', is broken in several places and then supplemented by letters or memoirs from other characters — thus neatly allowing for viewpoints to switch when the characters and

March/April 2004 • Vector 234
action are separated. And at the point where events seemed almost resolved, and yet it was clear from the 200 pages of novel remaining that in fact everything was about to be shaken up again, Mary Gentle inserted the single additional fragment most inclined to make me, at least, continue reading with joy rather than disappointment: scenes from her own Jacobean tragedy, already referenced in the plot, and containing overt and glorious homage to Shakespeare, Marlowe and Webster. What more, possibly, could a girl want?

For a full immersion into the seventeenth century, I suggest reading this alongside the D’Antignac novels, The Duchess of Malfi, and Neal Stephenson’s Quicksilver.

Rob Grant – Incompetence

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Terry Pratchett is certainly on top form here in the latest instalment from his brilliant Discworld saga. I particularly enjoyed the scenes of Rincewind and ... wait a minute – I’m reviewing the wrong book!

Let’s begin again. Incompetence is a comic novel by Rob Grant (co-writer of Red Dwarf). Although it should be filed under ‘Humour’, it could be argued that this book is legitimate speculative fiction. Grant has extrapolated trends of political correctness to the nth degree, and sets the story in a near-future EU where no person can be prejudiced from employment by reason of his or her incompetence. The theme is rammed home by the incorrect spelling of the title on the cover, the author’s bio is of Mark Twain and the prologue appearing several chapters in. So far so funny, especially with Grant’s manic prose describing several witty trades against particularly daft manifestations of incompetence: my favourite being the hotel switchboard operator who always puts you through to the restaurant.

The problem is that Incompetence drapes its amusingly silly knockabout stuff around a tired gumshoe plot so cliched that you can skip all the plot exposition to get to the next funny bit. The bland protagonist, detective Harry Salt, tracks down a serial killer and uncovers a political conspiracy along the way. Ho hum! Does a comic novel need a coherent and original plot? I guess not if it only aspires to be occasionally funny rather than satisfying as a novel.

On this evidence Grant’s talents are clearly better suited to comedy routines or thirty minute sitcom scripts where success is rated by laughs per minute. This novel, while sporadically funny, fails to hold the attention.

Elizabeth Hand – Bibliomancy

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Bibliomancy collects four novellas by Elizabeth Hand, all published within the last four years, and repackages them in a fairly luxuriously hardback with an introduction by Lucius Shepard. All four are more or less realist tales (I’m strangely reluctant to call them stories in this particular genre) with fantasy elements impinging to greater (‘Cleopatra Brimstone’) or lesser (‘Pavane for a Prince of the Air’) degrees.

Before we go any further, let it be noted that I am going rather against the critical grain here. I suffered an attack of chronic reviewer insecurity after finishing Bibliomancy because having read some good things about Elizabeth Hand I found myself peculiarly unmoved by all of the stories in this collection. They were well written, well observed – but interesting, engaging or memorable? No. Was it just me, I asked myself? Had I been desensitised by too much fanboy space opera in 2003?

Fortunately help arrived. In the unlikely form of the annual Vector request for a list of my five favourite books of 2003. I happened to notice that only one out of my five choices was at all space-operatic and the rest were a rather old jumble of genres. It wasn’t necessarily my narrowness of taste, then. And so I shall say loudly and proudly that I didn’t enjoy Bibliomancy much at all, and that it seemed full of meandering and rather limp tales.

The first tale, ‘Cleopatra Brimstone’, follows a quiet and intense young American woman who grows up to be a lepidopterist. In the aftermath of a rape she goes, alone, to London to house-sit for a family friend and gets very much into clubbing, whilst working at Regents Park Zoo during the day. Her chance discovery of a strange club in Camden somehow awakens a strange latent ability in her – one that she indulges – throwing herself with absolute abandon into a new sybaritic life. I couldn’t help thinking that every Goth I’ve ever met would love this story, what with its dark vampiric undertones, ‘alternative’ fashion sense and its being set in Camden Town.

‘Pavane for a Prince of the Air’, by far the shortest member of this collection, is a slight, cathartic tale of love and death amongst the hipsters. It follows (though at a respectful distance) a close group of friends when one of them is dying, and dying rather unpleasantly. There’s only the faintest wisp of the fantastic here, a bright endnote at the closing of an otherwise sad story. This is probably the best novella in the collection, dealing with a difficult subject without becoming overly maudlin. That said, it perhaps errs in the other direction, giving us too little of Cal, the cancer victim, and too many supporting characters to really feel for any of them.

The longest tale of all, ‘Chip Crockett’s Christmas Carol’, possesses elements of A Christmas Carol but not to excess, I’m glad to say. Brendan, a beaten-down everyman, is just trying to hold things together in the face of a mediocre job, a divorce and a mentally disabled son who seems completely alien. This is a closely observed tale of redemption – or as close to redemption as most people ever get, via family, work, friends and memories. There are some great moments in this piece, and some great pieces of characterisation as well: Brendan, basically a good guy who’s been slowly ground down to nothing by bad luck, and his friend Tony, a chirpy middle-aged optimist with apparently nothing really to be optimistic about. But the roughly 4–5 pages of brightness are left washed out by the 128 other pages that seemed to spiral around endlessly with no direction or likelihood of resolution.

The Least Trumps’ is the affected tale of a tattoo artist who lives alone on an island. Discovering a lost set of tarot cards, all but two of which seem to have been worn away by time, she copies the design of one onto her own skin. Things get a bit strange then a la Ursula Le Guin’s The Lathe Of Heaven.

I hate to dismiss the whole thing so brusquely but this seemed like another story for our Goth friends, and arriving, as it does, at the end of this collection it left me feeling simply relieved to finish Bibliomancy. Elizabeth Hand can craft a fine individual sentence, but I remain unconvinced as to her ability to engage as a storyteller.

[Available from www.pspublications.co.uk]
David J. Howe & Stephen James Walker – *The Television Companion (The Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to Doctor Who)*

**Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson**

What is it to be a critic then? I found myself asking myself this whilst I was reading the introduction to this weighty tome because in it the authors say: “Like most critics we have no desire to impose our will on others.” Right, I had thought the whole point of criticism was to provide a, hopefully informed, opinion on the subject being discussed. Well, given their approach, what do the authors bring to *Dr Who* with their Companion?

Structurally, *The Television Companion* (and could they have not come up with a better, snappier, title than that?) is divided into yearly sections with brief introductions to each season, then further subdivided into subsections on each individual story. Interspersed among these are short essays on each Doctor (well, the careers, up to the point that they were hired, of the actors who played him) as well as one-offs on topics like the series’ origins, the famous monsters such as The Master, Cybermen and The Daleks (who merit an extra one on the Dalekmania of the sixties) and the spin-off, *K9 and Company*, as well as pieces about the seasons that were themed around one long-running story like *The Key to Time* and *Trial of a Timelord*.

For each story we have detailed cast and crew, shooting times and locations, transmission times, viewees, and chart position (a surprising reminder on just how popular it was when it first started... top ten!). As well as a brief plot summary we have notes on ‘Popular Myths’ i.e. misconceptions about the story (which tend to be a bit spodish with the typical nipping over story titles), trivia lists like ‘Things to look out for’ and ‘Things you might not have known’ and ‘Quote, unquote’ which are somewhat eclectic choices.

A notable addition that I’ve not seen elsewhere is a sentence or two on the cliff-hangers which ended each of the episodes within each story. A nice reminder of just how many of the later episodes (like just about all of *Trial of a Timelord*) end with a crash zoom on the Doctor’s face looking ‘shocked’, ‘concerned’, ‘defiant’ or ‘constipated’. Oh, okay, I made the last one up.

We then get a longer ‘Analysis’ section. As with Liberation, the programme guide to Blake’s Seven, from the same publisher which I reviewed in *Vector* 233, this is all ‘unofficial and unauthorised’. So no interviews or direct insights from any of the actors, directors, writers, production staff or anyone involved with the show. This is sadly missed. What we get instead in the ‘Analysis’ sections are a lot of quotes from (mainly) various fanzines – some insightful, some frankly trivial. Keeping with the authors’ agenda, these are selected to show opposing points of view unless it’s a stone cold classic like ‘Genesis of the Daleks’ or a stinker like ‘Heroes of Nimon’, but even then they will go out of their way to find at least one dissenting voice. Whilst this did provide some interesting points on a couple of stories I’ve recently rewatched, I found the analysis somewhat uninteresting when reading about stories that are dim and distant memories or not seen at all and found myself skipping over it.

We close on the infamous McGann ‘Television Movie’ and such spin-offs as *K9 and Company* (again) and fluff (where the writers get more than a bit po-faced) like the Comic Relief one-offs and, I’m sure you remember this, ‘In a Fix with Sonarons’ from an episode of *Scully-* Fix It. There is also an availability checklist of the episodes’ appearances in various media (that is updatable when new stuff comes on the market). The overall design is even more stripped of its origins than Liberation – there’s none of the *Dr Who* logos or typefaces, no pictures (the cover is a murky, swirly, spiral which with a squint looks slightly like the vortex from the title sequence). Note also, hidden in the copyright notices: ‘Previously published in a different form by BBC Worldwide, Ltd 1990’ so Who completists may already have it. I can’t bring myself to recommend this, but at long last Telos seemed to have at least adopted a sensible pricing policy. It’s certainly better value than the forty quid official beeb book (even if that has got lots of pictures and may actually be a better read).

[Available from www.telos.co.uk]

Gwyneth Jones – *Midnight Lamp*

**Reviewed by Cherith Baldry**

*Midnight Lamp* continues the series of novels in the *Bold As Love* universe, this time taking Axl, Sage and Florinda to the United States. They are persuaded into making and promoting a movie; at least, this is the cover story, though it will surprise no one to learn that there are hidden agendas and unexpected pitfalls, and they face the possibility of a monstrous magical threat to their world.

Although part of *Castles Made of Sand* took place in the US, this is the first time that Jones has given us a full length portrait of this area of her near future world. It works extremely well. The physical background, particularly the Mexican beach setting in which the book opens, comes across vividly. The values and attitudes of the present day – particularly in the movie industry – are adapted convincingly to the new technology, and the technology itself is presented in precise, believable detail. However, because the society has not experienced the same crash that has taken place in the British Isles, the setting is less individual, less special to Jones herself. This is perhaps another way of saying that Jones isn’t repeating herself, yet I found that I wanted to know more about how the situation is developing on this side of the Atlantic.

The relationship of the three central characters develops further in this book. For much of the time Jones is charting the process of healing after the physical and emotional trauma of the previous novel. There’s added pressure in the way that Axl, Sage and Florinda meet the new threats when they are still in no fit state to meet them. The Americans, whom they came over so strongly in the two previous books, are less important here; I’d be sorry to think that Jones is leaving this aspect of her work behind.

The style, as always, is lucid and precise, and in spite of the serious themes of the book there’s a great deal of humour. I particularly enjoyed the satire of the movie industry, and the scene towards the end of the book where Sage faces the powerful Internet Commissioners and with a concise elegance gets them to do what he wants: the humour serves to enhance the crucial importance of what is happening. There’s also a strong sense of healing which runs through the book, not only for the three central characters, but elsewhere, shown most strongly of all in the way in which the threat of the magical monster is eventually contained and made harmless. Taking similar themes, another writer could have produced a horror novel, and how much weaker it would have been.

As I said when I reviewed *Castles Made of Sand*, the place for
new readers to start is at the beginning, with *Bold As Love*. Too much has happened, the situation is too complex, and the characters have acquired too much emotional baggage, for a new reader to appreciate either of these sequels fully without having read what has gone before. This is even more true of the present book. To understand what is happening in the new US setting, and how each environment reflects the other, it’s essential to pick up the references to the situation in Britain. So if you don’t know this series, go out and get *Bold As Love* right away.

The final sections of the novel set up a return to Britain for another sequel and a new development. I’m looking forward to it.

**Sue Lange – Tritcheon Hash**

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

It is 3011 and, though a maverick, Tritcheon Hash is the finest test pilot on Coney Island, the all-female colony created light years from Earth when women had got fed up with men and decided to leave them once and for all. That is until Hash is called upon for a covert operation to Earth to witness how men have progressed over the millennium the women have been away and to ascertain whether reunification is a viable option. No sooner than she arrives, she's captured and her cover blown. Soon she has to confront her feelings for, of all things, a man. Can she remain faithful to her wife and children back home on Coney Island?

More to the point do we care?

This is a difficult question to answer. Certainly the first half was entertaining though not necessarily amusing: possibly, not being a woman, I missed the feminist jokes. However, by the time the action moves from Coney Island to the male-dominated Earth the plot falters. Having men and women separated by the gulf of space is a tricky concept to pull off, even harder when marketed as humour. But Sue Lange follows short of creating a fully satisfactory read. My major problem with this novel, other than the unsatisfactory resolution in the last 30 pages or so, is that the women in *Tritcheon Hash* are too vulnerable compared to the men. In an all-female world, women would take on the more traditionally male roles; this is evident in any all-girls school. Sue Lange tries to develop this idea with the central character of Tritcheon Hash, but ultimately flinches at the crucial moments. For example, Hash lacks skill in hand-to-hand combat against men and is emotionally weak. Why can’t we have more all-round strong female characters like Ripley in *Alien*? The women in *Tritcheon Hash* may be essentially peace-loving, but I can think of a number of women that would have beaten men to a pulp when necessary, including Queen Boudica, the Amazons, Maggie Thatcher (complete with handbag) and Sharon Osbourne (I feel a mother-in-law joke marching this way – in army boots). Comedy is often the best medium to deal with various issues, but Sue Lange doesn’t delve into the differences between men and women far enough. There are hints of perception and insight, but *Tritcheon Hash* lacks the necessary daring and intelligence to explore such issues to the same level as already shown in the Series II *Parallel Universe* episode of *Red Dwarf*.

Despite this I feel an odd loyalty to the book, possibly as it began reasonably well, though I think a number of jokes were lost on me. If they existed at all. I would be interested in how Sue Lange progresses as a writer, particularly as there are so few women working in science fiction. But if you want to discuss feminist issues this isn’t the best place to start.

[Available from www.metropolisink.com]

**Stephen Laws – Spectre**

Reviewed by Simon Morden

Once upon a time, there were seven friends: six of them grew up together in Byker, east Newcastle. They knew all about each other, all their hopes and fears, and they vowed to stay in touch forever. The seventh, Pandora, was a Cornish girl, newly arrived in the city to go to university. During the last week of the last term of the last year, the inseparable Byker Chapter simply fell apart, and none of them knew why.

Years later, Richard Eden is descending into a hell he believes to be of his own making. He's drinking too much, his wife has left him, and he's in danger of losing his lectureship. He starts to sink deep into a malaise that will end in tragedy — spending his nights in the imperial nightclub, his days hungover. His one connection with the halcyon memories of the Byker Chapter is the photograph of them all taken one drunken night. Except that Phil Stuart's image has now been magically erased.

Stunned, disbelieving Richard then hears of Phil's bloody murder. Derek is the next to vanish from the photograph, and it becomes clear that something ghastly is picking off the Byker Chapter one by one. Diabolic forces are at work, and though the erstwhile friends are scattered the length and breadth of the country, the local point of the evil is very close to home.

*Spectre* is the second of the Telos Classics (the first being Graham Masterton's *Maniac*), and classic it is indeed. First published in 1985, Laws has updated the text, added some previously cut scenes, and penned a second epilogue — though if you want the colour plates of earlier Spectre covers, you'll have to buy the hardback. Laws had, and still has, an excellent grasp of what makes people frightened, and here he uses his full arsenal to chilling effect. The sheer banality of the Byker Chapter's later lives serves to make the supernatural threat stilling them all the more shocking. Events that might turn out to be ridiculous or comical in the hands of lesser authors are written with skill, verve and above all, confidence. You're left with the unspoken conviction if this happened to you, you'd be scared witless — just like Law's characters.

Familiarity with the horror genre has done nothing to blunt the sharpness and originality of Spectre's twists and turns. The denouement is inevitable and gruesome, appropriately cinematic and pulls no punches. The only weak link is the somewhat convenient Diane. Whilst not a criticism of the character herself, her psychic sensitivity is a touch too hard at times: fighting hidden monstrosities and guiding others to look in the right places for clues are her forte. Having said that, without her, Richard and the others would have been slaughtered to a man, ignorant of the spell woven around them — and we wouldn't have the fine, fine book that is *Spectre*.

I thoroughly enjoyed the guilty pleasure of wallowing in this genuinely scary supernatural horror, and I trust you will too.

[Available from www.telos.co.uk]
Anne & Todd McCaffrey – Dragon's Kin

Reviewed by Pamela Stuart

Just what the fans have been waiting for: a book filling in one of those long silent gaps in the history of Pern. It is not clear which of the 'gaps' the story hails from — only that it is sixteen years to the next expected Thread fall, and many of the easier, shallower, coalmines are almost worked out, and the deeper, more dangerous, ones must be opened up. It is possibly intended for the younger readers as there is no 'love interest' (after all, the hero is only eleven! Turns old, but it will appeal to all fans whatever their ages.

The watch-wards have always been something of a mystery. They seemed to have started off as an experiment that went wrong when Kitty Ping and her daughter were developing the dragons. They are mentioned in most books as being present in the courtyard at night, acting as watchdogs, but apart from the fact that they are nocturnal and ugly, not much information about them has ever come out. Now we find that they can be blood-bonded to a handler, and used as a cross between a guide dog and a police-dog down in the mines, leading the way through the dark, and sniffing out bad air. They can also fly short distances at night, and go between. Unlike their dragon-kin, they do not suicide if a handler dies and can be re-bonded to someone else.

In this book, the hero, Kindan, loses his father and most of his family in a mining disaster, in which the watch-ward also dies. The mine-manager spends a whole year's earnings to obtain a watch-ward egg, and Kindan, as the son of a watch-ward handler, is expected to raise and train it. Poor Kindan had wanted to train as a Harper, but dutifully does his best to bond with the watch-ward and train it. No-one seems to know the full potential of these creatures and even the Harper is not able to find much in the Records. Luckily Nella, a young girl with a handicap her parents are afraid to have revealed, turns out to have a natural affinity with the creature and in helping Kindan with the training and studies, is finally able to help him follow his own destiny while her own life also changes dramatically.

While the young people are struggling with their unwieldy charge, the adults are engaged in plots and counterplots to ruin the mine-manager, and give the mine to his jealous rival. This faction is also against the presence of the watch-ward whose talents they scoff at, and never miss an opportunity to belittle the creature or its handler, while secretly sabotaging the workings.

This collaboration between Anne McCaffrey and her son has given us a really good tale, and it seems that there will soon be another, from Todd alone. I look forward to it.

Juliet E. McKenna – Southern Fire

Reviewed by Andrew A. Adams

This is the first of a new series by now-established author Juliet McKenna. It is set in the same world as her earlier Tales of Einarinn five book set (but with no indication how many will be in this series). Despite being set in the same world, you really do not need to have read the earlier series. Some of the events of one of the earlier books are mentioned, but a sufficient overview of them is presented naturally within the book as the main character is provided with the information. Those who've read the earlier book will remember the details without feeling bored by the exposition. Those who haven't get enough explanation to follow the current tale.

I found this new beginning rather more difficult to get into than her first novel The Thief's Gamble. The main problem is that the society of the Aldakeshin Archipelago is rather nasty. The main character of this book is one of the better ones of the breed but his attitudes still grate from a modern viewpoint. The narrative is written from inside his skull, as it were, and I think this contributes to the difficulty in becoming absorbed in the story, which is actually quite similar in initial structure to the first series: strange magical attacks from a previously unknown source. I have faith that McKenna will bring enough twists and turns into things to prevent this being a repeat performance, however. This similar starting point is probably (hopefully) a deliberate trick, playing with naive reader's expectation of a Belgariad/Malloreon repetition, pulling them into a false sense of familiarity before hitting them with the unexpected.

By about halfway through, the pace finally picks up enough to distract one from the nature of the society and of the main character (and we meet an old friend along the way). Here again, though, the old 'friend' is not a particularly likable character, which contributes to the disjunction between reader and character. The finale is predictable in terms of the society presented and does follow a logical narrative flow, leaving an interesting situation to be reconciled. The main thing that's needed is a viewpoint character that one can like and identify with sufficiently. Even Eilvak's tendency to amorality in the Tales of Einarinn was the likable rogue sort. Everyone in this one is a bit too harsh and lacking in modern sensibilities to be truly likable. A good read overall and worth persevering with but not as attention-grabbing as her earlier books: reach exceeding grasp again but then, as IMS once said about Babylon 5, if you never fail you're not pushing the envelope hard enough.

Richard Morgan – Market Forces

Reviewed by Paul N. Billinger

When corporate traders talk of 'making a killing' we assume they are talking metaphorically. But what if they aren't? What if you have to arrive at work, not only early, but with blood on the lines and the only way to gain promotion is to kill those above you? This is the future we are heading for in Richard Morgan's new novel, a departure from his first two, Altered Carbon and Broken Angels, in that it does not feature Takeshi Kovacs and is set in the mid-twenty first century, not the twenty-sixth.

England, and the world, is splintering; the 'haves' live in idyllic, gated villages and work in the City of London, travelling between them on near-empty motorways in armour-plated vehicles as road rage has become the norm for both recreation and career progression. The 'have-nots' live in rundown ghettos plagued by crime and drugs, where the main authority figures are the Ganglords. Chris Faulkner is a rarity; not only has he found a way out of the ghetto but he has been taken on by Shorn Conflict Investment, one of the most ruthless financial firms in the City, making money from investing in, and controlling, the many global conflicts and small wars. Being the high-flying new boy Chris is naturally resented by his colleagues, particularly the junior partner Louise Hewitt, with only the violent trader Mike Bryant potentially on his side. Chris has to continue killing to stay in the game, but he has a conscience: his wife Carla. As Chris's involvement with a
power struggle in Central America intensifies, and his relationships with all those around him become more unstable, he is forced to make some hard choices about who he is and what he wants.

Morgan's vision of the world, the way it works, and specifically England, is headed in depressingly plausible and although the political points he makes are deliberately unsuitable they can be seen as an extreme distortion that is all too easy to extrapolate from the current commercial squabbling over the reconstruction of Iraq. Morgan is very up-front about the politics even going so far as providing a list of books consulted (ranging from Chomsky, to Pilger, to Michael Moore, and covering topics from the future of capitalism to the roots of terrorism). Morgan also acknowledges the influence of films - specifically Mad Max and (the original) Rollerball - on his vision of the near future, and Market Forces could make an equally great film. Expect Matrix-style car chases and gunfights crossed with a classic post-apocalyptic look.

This is a very skillfully constructed narrative, needing no McGuffin to drive the plot: rather it flows naturally from the events and consequences of the characters' actions. That this works is surprising given the nature of the characters: nasty, scheming, psychotic, self-obsessed and with no restraining influences. Equally, they are almost all male and all dropped in from a Hollywood action flick. The few female ones are either trying to out-macho the males or are porn star substitutes. The one exception to the predominant female type is Carla who does try to break from the stereotype. The role of the UN throughout the book is underdeveloped with more needed about the motivation and methods of the embusmen, global civil servants altruistically trying to help the down-trodden despite being under-resourced and under-appreciated. It is only towards the conclusion that the author's control threatens to collapse with a frantically paced finale, that leaves a number of plot threads poorly resolved.

Morgan's first two novels gathered almost universal praise. Vector 229 was one of the few dissenting voices with Billinger and Mendlesohn describing Broken Angels as 'a depressing and soulless read', although they did comment that Morgan could do much better, and indeed he has with this book. The author is very sure of what he is doing, producing a book that has no pretensions to 'art' but is a stylish, frantically paced thriller with even the political polemic well integrated.

Christopher Priest – The Separation

Reviewed by Mark Greener

Twins Joe and Jack Sawyer return from the 1946 Berlin Olympics with bronze medals for rowing and Birgit - a young Jewish woman, the daughter of a friend of their German-born mother - hidden in their van. During the Second World War, Jack becomes an RAF bomber pilot, Joe marries Birgit, becomes a conscientious objector and joins the Red Cross. He's as much a 'hero' as Jack, saving numerous lives during the Blitz.

Although inseparable in earlier life, the twins are psychologically discordant. Jack is relatively insensitive to the world, Joe more empathic and thoughtful. Jack isn't told of the plan to smuggle Birgit from Berlin and their paths begin to part significantly at the Olympics. They diverge further once war breaks out. And as their life paths separate so does history. One twin experiences history as we know it. For the other, war ends in 1941 with a Red Cross-brokered peace agreement.

The Separation, originally published by Simon and Schuster as a trade paperback in 2002, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award and BSFA Award but despite this critical success, The Separation went out of print almost immediately. The small print run meant that many of us - myself included - couldn't get a copy. Priest bought the book back, and Galland republished it. And it's a good thing they did. Priest's work never yields fully to a single reading and The Separation demands to be read and re-read. My first impression is, however, that it could be Priest's most mature work.

The Separation is a complex, multifaceted, many-layered novel that defies simple summary. The novel’s ambition and scope in carefully unpicking the threads of the web of history is staggering. Indeed, many authors would be overwhelmed trying to communicate that complexity. (God knows, I felt overwhelmed trying to convey the book in a review.) Not Priest; his narrative style is crystal clear. He writes with a light stylistic touch that effectively conveys this often moving story.

This simple style augments the temporal and psychological ambiguities that pervade the book. You can read the narrative in many ways. Is the 1941 line an attempt at alternative reality following temporal fixation? Or is it the sense of an alternate history, the reality of a blurring of reality, a result of traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder?

The separation refers not only to the twins personally, but also to the demarcation between internal and external reality. Unlike many ‘alternative histories,’ Priest doesn’t rely on a sense of time as external to perceptions. He places less emphasis on the visible manifestations of altered history. Rather he focuses on human nature existing beyond and within time. Again, this helps drive the ambiguity. In common with an equivocal gothic, you never quite know whether the fantastic is ‘real,’ the result of psychological disturbance or both. Indeed, Priest highlights the subjective nature of time and experience lending the book a distinct Proustian feel.

Kierkegaard commented that life can only be lived forwards, but must be understood backwards. And one twin embarks on a protracted bout of bibliotherapy to understand the past and attempt to capture and codify time’s subjective nature. I found myself wondering to what extent is this a contemplation: a means of making the past more palatable, if only to himself? As all this suggests, this is a remarkably deep novel.

Unless you’re looking for escapism, the main reason to read historical and alternate histories is to gain an insight into current issues. The Separation counters the ‘conventional’ view of Churchill’s greatness. Priest readily encapsulates Churchill’s personality and, in particular, his restless energy, and larger than life presence. In doing so Priest raises some provocative thoughts.

Roy Jenkins concluded his masterful biography of Churchill by suggesting Winston was the greatest prime minister we’ve ever had. I can’t agree. And Priest challenges the convention, highlighting Churchill’s habits and martial tendencies. (Churchill was, for instance, largely responsible for the slaughter at Gallipoli.) Arrogance, self-confidence and martial prowess were, perhaps, the qualities that made Churchill a ‘great’ war leader (if that’s not an oxymoron). But Priest raises the provocative question about how long these tendencies extended the war. Priest seems to agree with the conclusion I drew after reading Jenkins that the war leaned Churchill a platform from which he could make his mark in history. If Chamberlain had attained peace in our time, would Churchill have become a minor footnote in British political history? Do we regard Churchill as ‘great’ solely because we defeated the Third Reich, rather than because he was ipso facto a great man?

I’d finished Martin Amis’s Yellow Dog a week or so before I read The Separation. Both are set in alternate realities, both deal
with the fallibility of perception and the impermanence of character. Amis has a linguistic virtuosity that Priest lacks. But The Separation might be the better book: it's deeper, more profound,

more thought provoking and ultimately more unsettling. The Separation isn't just a good sf book. It's a moving and powerful novel from one of the UK's leading writers.

Dan Simmons – Ilium
Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

"O brave new world. That hath such people in it." (Shakespeare, The Tempest, Act V)

People have grown so used to their sf in serial form that publishers no longer feel obliged to declare anywhere on a book that it is not complete. So it was with growing desperation that I read the closing chapters of Ilium, gradually becoming aware there was no space remaining to conclude the tale; this current volume is the first of a duo which will end with Olympus, published later this year. Not that there's so much as a 'To Be Concluded' after this volume's final chapter.

It's therefore impossible to come to any definite conclusions about Ilium right now. What can be said is that after six years away from the genre Ilium marks Dan Simmons' return to sf, wherein he made his name with the Hyperion and Endymion books. The approach is essentially the same: a fusion of hi-tech adventurous space-opera with literature's greatest hits.

Previously Simmons crafted a concern with the works of Keats onto the structure of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. This time it's Homer's Iliad and Wells's The Time Machine garnished with Shakespeare's Sonnets, characters from The Tempest and thematic ideas from Proest's A la Recherche du Temps Perdu. There is a lot going on and it takes a lot of pages to begin to get a grasp on events. A multiplicity of characters doesn't make matters easier – as the author acknowledges in his foreword, and by providing a four page dramatis personae. So many characters are there, and so many settings, technologies and ideas to introduce, that several hundred pages pass before Ilium begins to really ensure the reader with a sense of urgency. Imaginative, witty and intriguing Ilium may be, but it only becomes really engaging and compulsive in the final third.

Thomas Hockenberry, a 20th century American academic and expert on the Iliad, is essentially a slave to the Greek gods, who for reasons known only to themselves require him and other scholars to observe and report on the Siege of Troy. Hockenberry can't trust his own intuitions, but believes he has died and been recreated from his DNA sometime in the far future. Quite what the battle is that he is observing only gradually becomes clear, while the true nature of those taking the roles of the Greek gods is not revealed at all. Certainly they have an array of high technology which suggests their powers are not divine.

On a post-apocalypse Earth the remaining survivors live in luxury: a round of endless parties, sex and social gatherings, their every whim catered for by servants as they flay themselves from around the globe with no thought to the purpose of their lives. Harman, who is close to the end of his fifth twenty, and therefore soon due to ascend to the orbital rings to live forever with the post-humans [ami shades of Logan's Run], has learnt to read, walked part way through the Atlantic, and is on a quest to find the Wandering Jew. With his companions he wishes to extend his allotted life span [evoking ghosts of Blade Runner].

Starting on the moons of Jupiter a party of morovics (pacifist cyborgs with a fascination for Shakespeare and Proest) set out on a space voyage, which eventually leads to an epic ocean voyage echoing Hal Clement's Mission of Gravity, to discover the source of dangerous quantum interference in space-time focused on Mount Olympus on Mars. Our two main morovics, Mahmut and Orphi, have a bantering, platonic friendship which cannot fail to remind anyone of R2D2 and C3PO.

Much post-modern fun is to be had, and some of the inventiveness of the story is a sheer delight; though the little green men on Mars are perhaps just one bizarre wonder too far. Ilium seems much more simply an ingenious and boldly conceived entertainment than Hyperion, wherein the narrative and literary structure were woven together with more serious intent and poetic ambition. Nevertheless the book is a polished and remarkable romp filled with set-pieces which span the range between breathtaking and banal, with some sequences too close to Hollywood formula blockbuster fare for comfort. And perhaps our 20th century academic viewpoint character having a one-night-stand with Helen of Troy is a bit too much of a tongue-in-cheek wish fulfilment fantasy? Ilium doesn't appear to be the great comeback some have suggested, though we shall have to wait until 'Ilium Revolutions' to know just how good the whole saga really is.

Scott Westerfeld – The Killing of Worlds
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

First up, a warning: if you haven't read Book One of Succession, The Risen Empire (reviewed in Vector 230), then you need to stop reading this review now and go and read it. I'll see you in a couple of days.

OK, read it? Good. The Killing of Worlds takes up exactly where The Risen Empire left off and continues in an identical vein, which is to say juxtaposing some hardcore, hard-science, hard-vacuum Golden Age sf with just a little bit of griddle kissing and talking about feelings and sensitive stuff. This is not science fiction for people who don't really like science fiction. If you don't feel a slightly guilty thrill as the cutting edge of scientific extrapolation is heaped to a white heat over the Benson flame of a cracking story then this is not the book for you. If, however, (like me) you consider yourself a decently intelligent reader in need of some good old-fashioned pulp heroes then you've come to the right place.

As recounted in The Risen Empire, the Empire frigate Lynx was just about to make a probably suicidal last stand against a vastly superior battle ship of the cyborg Rix in order to stop them revealing the ultimate secret of the Risen Empire – a secret the Emperor is now prepared to sacrifice an entire planet to protect if the Lynx should fail (hence the title of this book). But now, as the Lynx battles both to complete its mission and to survive, light-years away upon the capital world of the Empire, Nara Ovhain – empathetic beloved of Laurent Zal, the Lynx's captain, and coincidentally (and most fortuitously) a disdained member of the Senate – is making some discoveries of her own that might just do the Rix's work for them. And about time too, since something is
seriously roten in the Empire.

Westferfeld has spent a not inconsiderable amount of effort setting up an interesting and believable stage for all this action to take place upon, a stage that many other writers might take...