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Richard Cowper: Special issue

Found In A Bathtub: Readers' Letters
The INFINITY BOX: Reviews

The British Science Fiction Association is an organisation for anyone interested in SF.

CHAIRMAN: ARTHUR C CLARKE
An Interview with Richard Cowper

You said in FOUNDATION 9 that you 'realised early on in life that the ability to escape is but to exercise the divine faculty of the human imagination.' Your books are adventure and, indeed, 'escapist' in many senses. You've said that the first draft of a novel almost always tells itself - that you can't wait to find out for yourself what happens next - but how much of the second draft has this conscious aim in mind, of producing something into which the sensitive reader can escape?

Richard Cowper:
For the second draft I'm constrained to let the craftsmen take over. The task is to clarify, to sharpen the writing, to give it more of a cutting edge. I'm mindful of C. S. Lewis's wise observation: 'Words are like pebbles, the more they are polished, the deeper they burn.' But, even so, I'm really writing for myself rather than for any potential reader. My few attempts at writing for a market! have all been dismal failures. So perhaps the true answer to your question is: I try to create something into which I can escape.

VECTOR:
Then you can't consciously aim for communication?

Richard Cowper:
First and foremost I aim to please myself. Experience, in the form of some fifteen novels, has taught me that if I do this I usually manage to please some other people too. That's just as well, for I write books which did not give me pleasure in the writing would be a grim sort of punishment and I'd very soon pack up writing altogether. But having said that I feel bound to add that I am profoundly conscious that I am in the entertainment business where those who live to please must please to live. Luckily I like entertaining.

VECTOR:
Your interest in constructing the minutiae of a story is obvious: the book of reference, the anecdotes, the places themselves. 'The Hartford Manuscript' is an example of this. What is at the root of your enthusiasm with this form of storytelling, and are there any books or authors who you feel may have encouraged or influenced you in this respect?

Richard Cowper:
It seems, by contrasts, from an objective view, I really could see that recent research in the Hartford Library and the weird material manuscript in 'The Haunted,' and there's no doubt that I am indulging my past for looking up history in that way - it may say I'm over-indulging it at times. But I can't honestly think of any writers who has consistently influenced me in this respect, unless, perhaps, it was M. R. James in his 'Ghost Stories Of An Antiquary.'

VECTOR:
You produce all of your work in longhand, written in your distinctively neat script, and then have the final version typed. How did this manner of writing come about, and have you ever tried to change it?

Richard Cowper:
I certainly hope it is a liberating factor. Nevertheless, I take your point that it could be sold against you in your writing in that there is too little impetus to explain. Or is it, as I tend to suspect, a liberating factor?

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It must seem very old-fashioned and quaint to write s.f. (of all things) with a fountain pen. But when I started out, all those years ago, writing books in longhand wasn't considered particularly odd or eccentric. Besides, during the War, a pen and notebook was as part of the equipment, whereas a typewriter (that I have come to cherish) certainly would have been the other aspect of the matter is, I suppose, the part of me which delight in drawing and painting. Writing neatly and legibly in longhand is a sort of ap to that side of my creative nature.

VECTOR:

Can you describe your writing technique? How does ideas become story? You told me about Colotay and the role in one of your ideas pod about the old man and the boy. How did it all fit together?

Richard Cowper:

After that introduction in which the general s.f. "A Quiet Guy Of Our Own" popped up, I felt put my original view. This is what it says: The Story of the Tale: Post-Disaster story of old man and boy (apprentice) who wander the countryside as elder equivalents of medieval story-tellers. Tom, Tom the Piper's son, I recall coming across that name in 1976 (it has been written about two years previously) and suddenly seeing a clear mental picture of a steep, wooden hills, cornfields all up and down, many rivers, I spent about an hour during the first sentence and then gave the tale its head. I know it sounds more than a little precious but the truth is I simply followed those two in my imagination, watched them, listened to them, and wrote it down. There was no question of struggling to get things into focus. From the second sentence the story unfold itself effortlessly and clear at a 16th Century Book of Hours. I certainly didn't start off with the idea that Tom was doomed. That just happened.

VECTOR:

You seem to like to break your work up into various parts. There are even two Richard Cowpers, one who writes comic prose and the other who writes about paranormal areas in serious, compelling prose. What do you think is it that draws this dichotomy desire in comprehension what you do? How much of it especially the comic novels like Of Mockers, PARTS APART and the (unpublished) PROFUNDUS is simple inner compulsion, an outpouring of mood?

Richard Cowper:

I would deeply like to write an s.f. novel in which the disparate elements of wild comedy and dark tragedy are perfectly blended into a compelling whole. I think I am within striking distance of it (say in modestly) in two of my 'straight' novels — PATH TO THE SEA and PRIVATE VIEW. But so far, in my s.f. it has eluded me. I'm not sure why. So I think you are possibly right in ascibing my comic prolixity to a simple inner compulsion — it too strong for me to resist — to come to fictional terms with a world in which, to borrow a phrase from Pastel, 'man is so necessarily mad, that not to be mad would assume another form of madness'.

VECTOR:

It has been remarked on that when writers get together they tell more often about money than their writing — probably because much of them is so individually different in their approach to writing. But what is the essential difference in financial terms of writing?

Richard Cowper:

Well, here's an Illustration ONE HAND CLAPPING and SHADOWS ON THE GRASS took me two years to write and have together earned me about £4,000 gross. ONE HAND was published in the States. Neither have yet appeared in paperback. If they do I might conceivably expect to push that total up to £6,000.

THE TWILIGHT OF BARELY, on the other hand, has so far earned me about £10,000 gross (spread over 3 years) and so far, I'm happy to report, I'm earning money for several years to come. It's really as simple as that. For s.f. there appear to be a steady and growing market, particularly on the Continent. My UK sales supply me with my bread; France, Germany, Spain and Scandinavia being the most obvious. Hopefully the US will come up with some yarn to spread on the top. I have never been able to count on selling my work in the States where I am still regarded as a very English writer even though four of my novels have been made SF Book Club choices over there. I have actually had books rejected in America on the grounds they were 'too literary'. But every so often they seem to discover me all over again, which is nice.

VECTOR:

You've talked to me about doing some more Colin Murray novels, of taking a few years out of the sf genre and writing a few mainstream books. Is this yet possible, or do you think that the 'Cowper' persona still allow you to take such a break at present? If it will, what are your plans?

Richard Cowper:

It is simply a question of finance. By writing five of novels in fairly quick succession I bought myself the time in which to write the two volumes of my autobiography. I enjoyed doing them and I signed myself a fair bit of critical sugar, but from a financial point of view the were pure self-indulgence. Hopefully in another couple of years I'll be in a position to take a similar chance with a straight novel. I'd really like to do it because I have at least two such books simmering to get themselves written.

VECTOR:

Between 1961 and 1967 you, in fact, had no novels published. What was happening in your writing and personal circumstances at that time which resulted in this hiatus?

Richard Cowper:

In 1960, by mortgaging everything we possessed, we were able to acquire an ancient house in Surrey. 'Anonymous is no exaggeration — even the most bits were Elizabethan! It needed a lot of work done on it. This effectively knocked the couple of years, though I still manage to fit in a fair amount of literary journalism — most of it ephemeral. In 1963 I wrote my fourth Colin Murray novel (PRIVATE VIEW) which was rejected by Hutchinson on the grounds that it was pornographic (it wasn't). Next year I wrote BREAKTHROUGH and followed this up with PHENIX in 1966. Had PRIVATE VIEW for MAN ALIVE on it was originally titled) been published in 1964, I think it quite likely that I would have pushed with 'straight' fiction for several more years but nothing is over that simple. The prosaic form I've rejected were really just the surface evidence of a lot of stategic activity on the subconscious level.

VECTOR:

What personality traits do you feel have helped you most in accomplishing your desire to be a professional writer? How much of it was pure persistence 'against the odds' and in the face of failure? And how much do you still question your own abilities as a writer? (Which also tends to = do you often suffer writer's blocks?)

Richard Cowper:

I suppose I had to put a dogged independence at the top of the list. Rightly or wrongly, I've always believed that I could accomplish anything in life and went about the thing that way. But I have never hidded myself that I could be a popular SF writer, if for no better reason than that I seem constitutionally incapable of following up a success. "Son Of Clone" and "Son Of Clone Meets The Monster From Antares" all for ever remain among the great seminal comic classics of science fiction! As for questioning my own abilities as a writer, I do it all the time — up to the moment when I have to put pen to paper. Then, happily, I forget all that nonsense and continue to lose myself in the work in hand. I am probably fortunate, too, in that I have lot of other creative interests besides writing which I can indulge in on the side. This may well explain why (unwud?) I have to far managed to avoid those black block holes known as writers' blocks.

VECTOR:

In both of your autobiographical volumes, you have stated how much of a critical influence your father was. Can you explain in what manner his views affected the type of writer you became? Was his position as a celebrated literary critic a burden or a help in the early, formative years?

Richard Cowper:

He made me set my sights very high when I was starting to write (i.e. about the age of 17 to 25) and my chief aim was always to win his approval. I trusted his judgment implicitly throughout my literary
apprenticeship and, though I often contained my criticism sternly, in my heart of hearts I had to admit that he was right 99 per cent of the time. The one occasion when his judgment faltered and I chose to trust my own was when I knew I had finally heard to stand on my own two feet. The standards I adopted through him have been of inestimable value to me ever since.

But being named 'Smalltown Wally' was not much help as far as getting into print was concerned. My father was an out-of-fashion and had so many Grub Street anomalies during the last ten years of his life that the connection was probably a positive disadvantage. Anyway, all my early work was written under pseudonyms, I adopted 'Wally' only after my father's death in 1957.

**VECTOR:**

*What is your response to criticism, and how do you go about evaluating which voices you might listen to and which you can discard? And has anything ever made you genuinely contemplate giving up your aspirations as a writer?*

Richard Comper:

There is a sobriquet of various critical voices in the real world - for reasons which we wouldn't go into here. But it's a fact that most good critics have always been far more generous than good writers. Even good reviewers are pretty thin on the ground.

The good critic is one who has a true - almost instinctive - sense of literary excellence, which has been acquired and proven during his voyages of exploration among a wide range of critical writing. He also has the ability to write well himself and the gift of communicating his enthusiasm to his reader. He must be able to communicate that sense that he could substantiate every one of his value judgments even though he had the space in which to do so. There aren't very many of those around today, we know.

Nothing has ever made me genuinely contemplate giving up writing.

**VECTOR:**

*You've too well known to the general reader to retreat as a critic. Can you recap upon the origins of your critical interest (including your role as English teacher) and your future plans in this regard?*

Richard Comper:

Well, for seventeen years I sweated my kegs by teaching adolescents how to write English and how to appreciate works of literature - mostly the English classics. Doing it almost certainly taught me more than I ever taught my pupils. I approached the at work always from the point of view of an aspiring fellow practitioner and repeated whatever I found something particularly well done. As a result I'm now pretty deeply imbued with literature and it is hard to show up from time to time in my own writing. This doesn't worry me in the least, but it occasionally leads me open to attack from reviewers who seem to think that S.F. by its very nature should only aspire to any intellectual level much above the melodramatic.

Such criticism as I have written in S.F. has usually been produced in response to editorial request. I enjoy doing it but I find it hard work - much harder than writing fiction for instance, I have no immediate plans to write more, though for the last couple of years, I have been teasing lightly with the notion of doing a couple of full-scale retrospective essays on the works of Ursula Le Guin and the early writings of Ray Bradbury. It would be an opportunity to commentate some of my own enthusiasm. Whether I'll ever get round to it is a different matter.

**VECTOR:**

*You are an admirer of Ursula Le Guin's work, and your own ONE ROAD TO CORALAY displays similar preoccupations to keep free from fear and drive towards verisimilitude; progress being measured in spiritual rather than in material terms. What do you look for in a work of fiction? Where do your aspirations lie, and on what does it locate?*

Richard Comper:

First and foremost I demand that my imagination be fully engaged by the Writer's vision. We (or she) must make his/her fictional perspectives real to me. It has been said, more usually, that a novelist's main task is to tell the truth as only a liar can tell it. We heighten, we dramatize; above all we select. And we succeed in (all by reason of the intensity with which we project the images, the ideas, the dramatic conflicts which go to make up our stories."

I suppose I would have to say that my own enthusiasm is kindled in direct proportion to the intensity of the imaginative experience I receive from the work. I want a novel to go on reverberating in my imagination long after I have put the book down.

**VECTOR:**

*In ONE HAND CLAPPING you expressed the joy that you used to receive when in "communication" with nature. It emerges in your work, this pantheistic streak, but just how vital is it?*

Richard Comper:

Ah, now we're getting very close to what really makes me tick as a writer. It will not have escaped your notice, with practically every book or story I have ever written - and that includes the comic satires - deals with moral issues of one sort or another. I have a very clear concept of right and wrong but I would be hard put to stipulate it into any ethical concept. And this, I believe, is what a rather sneaky review of ONE HAND CLAPPING called my "pantheistic predilection." Maybe it is because I live in landscapes, in the shifting patterns of light and shade, in water, etc., on land and hills, a sort of moral absolute of which I cannot argue and reflections in certain aspects of human behaviour - to love, to transcend, generosity of spirit and so on. I do not want to sound bombastic in the path of absolute incomprehensibility. It doesn't work. I tried my best.

**VECTOR:**

You have said that you often had to compromise "to a point" to survive. What type of compromise do you mean making, and which do you find necessary in your writing?

Richard Comper:

Well, part of me agrees with Chesterton that 'anything worth doing is worth doing badly,' but there is another part which insists that it's even better to do everything as well as one can. Several times in my life I have rejected the well-meaning advice of publishers and agents to other books I have written in order to make them more readily 'saleable.' In the long run I think I was right to do so. I cannot accept that a sale of half a million or so copies is automatic proof of a book's excellence - of whatever kind - seem to me to have little or no bearing upon literary worth and it is that which I am chiefly concerned with. Naturally I would be delighted if any of my books happened to become a best-seller, but, as far as I am concerned, any such outcome would be wholly fortuitous.
VECTOR:
And which commodities, in a more general sense, do you refer to?
Richard Comper:
Going into teaching when I wanted to be a writer - that was a compromise. Teaching allowed me periods of up to ten weeks in the summer in which to write my novels. It also allowed me to bring up my family in modest comfort. Most important of all, it took the pressure off me. I could write to please myself, I did not have to compromise except myself that I bore very little money out of writing. The general outline I have, I think, bearable in that I have been able to go on 'doing my own thing' even though I am now a professional.

VECTOR:
This attitude of 'doing your own thing' seems to reflect itself in an overt hostility towards the sort of power-fantasy that is concerned with Galactic Conquest and social experimentation. That you have, in fact, paralleled in two books, CITY and PROFESSORS. Do you feel purely and simply give adequate terms to the blindness of this 'ends justifies the means' philosophy?
Richard Comper:
In a word, 'no' - but they are the only tools at my disposal. If you were as successful in my work as I to the modern writer, but, alas, it hasn't. The philosophy behind such a novelist as me being injurious to one another. Once upon it is in a more than a recent power-fantasy - great and given - which is it, the outcome of an attempt to project the capitalist business ethic into outer space. Yet much of the book, I f. of the past thirty years has some features this side, e. Blish's A CASE OF CONSCIENCE, Miller's A CANTICLE FOR LEIBWITZ, Dick's THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE, to name the line which spring in mind.

VECTOR:
As a recent review in VECTOR indicates, you have a strong sympathy for the work of George Orwell. How much do you feel that the search for an honest response to the world, which is at the core of his work, has to be re-casted by the writers that follow him? And just how relevant is he to today's world?
Richard Comper:
Orwell has long been one of my heroes - along with Blake, Keats and Cobbett. They all have one thing in common - their massive contempt for man and humankind. In Orwell's case, this could be expressed as a passionate belief that the moral collapse of the individual human being was the most precious and central of all the humanities, I agree with that. More than all I love his work. When he died I felt a tremendous sense of personal loss even though I don't suppose he exchanged more than a few minutes' childlike conversation with me in his life. What I miss was all that was passionate integrity, he brought to everything he wrote. You must tell the truth at all costs, he insists, while you have the breath left to do it. I do not think he was a great man, but he was something for - far over - a great human spirit. I supposed I feel about him rather as Chelton felt about Coupland: 'While he is out there, sheltering us all, I feel able to grow in my own full stature'. I wish I could believe that the kind of values he perpetuated were flourishing somewhere in Fleet Street today. I see no sign of it anywhere.

VECTOR:
Do you feel that this intense sense of integrity - something Orwell termed 'decent' - is missing in our current social climate? Is it still possible to tell 'the truth' (however you wish to define that) - I'll use it here as an attempt to strip all the hypocrisy and compromises we are forced into by our social matrix and, perhaps more important, is it possible to communicate anything that is such an attempt at honesty without falling foul of the labelling 'fantasy' or 'escapist', or even being called an 'obstacle' in the face of 'reality'?

VECTOR:
PIPER AT THE GATES OF DAWN is about the conquest of fear. But in the very end - and it is written in a Post-Flood world - you seem to way that this process of liberation can only be accomplished once the present technological age has been completely destroyed, and a return to a more simple style of living achieved. Is this a kind of pessimism in you, or do you really feel that Mankind is lost spiritually unless he gives up his present direction?
Richard Comper:
Can there really be any question that Mankind has not lost his way spiritually? Today we are drowning in the backwash of 19th Century materialism - the totalitarian state. I think we are in the same state left behind the - we need something to cling to, to have faith in, and all we are offered is a galvanic in the shape of the Great Coca Cola. True there is much more sophisticated technology but it drops five others in our laps. The moralistically sophisticated society becomes the more vulnerable to the, and the more threatened humanity feels. Because we can imagine things only in terms of secrecy, of financial gain or loss, we grasp at shadows. But I do not think that mankind is capable of 'giving up' his present direction. The whole house of cards is bound to come tumbling down about its ears. I think I will happen quite soon - probably in my own lifetime. Speculating on what my anger from the ruins is one of the things that keeps me working in the field of it.

VECTOR:
Would you say you were a pessimist in this one respect? I feel the whole process has a long way to run yet before it strengthens itself, and to think that it will all topple in our lifetime is perhaps an extreme view, even though it is within the scope of change. When you read books like Vonnegut's S/CANDIDE, written in 1959, and read of the Old World's Misfortunes, is our age really so different? Do you see a new society having any essential difference to the human condition?
Richard Comper:
Well, obviously I hope it won't happen, but I'm very much afraid that it will. I see too many contemporary parallels with the fall of Rome for my own peace of mind. And there are the signs that any sort of radical re-appraisal of the human situation (which alone might stem off disaster) is being made on a meaningful International scale. We are using up the Earth's resources which is just another way of saying that we are spending our dwindling capital at a rate which may have been all but unthinkably even thirty years ago: the global population continues to expand: our capacity for nuclear growth increases with each year; that we are ruining our food-stuffs, our climate, and our social environments with a single-minded devotion to the task which is like a colossal death-defying stunt distilling the age from Vonnegut's Age of Love is generally the sheer scale of our lunacy - that is the sort of embroiled acceptance of our own powerlessness to do anything about it. As 'ever Vonnegut believed he was capable of moulding political opinion - and indeed he did it to some extent through his influence on one or two enlightened publishers - but remember that in the end he had to flee for his life.

VECTOR:
You have travelled quite a bit in the last twenty years, but have always seen to have had a constant rapport with Cities. Do you think this is just the natural reaction of someone brought up in the country, or is it something else? It emerges, once again, in your books. The megacity is seen as a splendid, soulless machine full of automatons, amongst whom the hero makes his way. This is very much linked to the last question - do you see Cities as a regressive rather than a progressive step?
Richard Comper:
Some people love cities; others have a hate/hate relationship with them. I own to a hate/hate relationship. Few of the great men who have sung the City's praises would recognise the mistrustfulness which passes under the name. Parkers' Airfields and Dr Johnson's beloved London were mere villages compared to its grotesque sprawling megapolises. Like a sinister black hole they suck the country dry. In creating them we have lost everything and gained nothing. Who shall we blame? Is Caricaulder who was housed on 'machines for living in' (and, I suspect, saw man and woman as the machines to live in them) or all the rest and distasteful architects and town-planners who, locking their Master's genius, applied his
theories piecemeal in our Tower Hamlets and Tord Greens and their Continental equivalents?

Once upon a time towns and cities were organic creations, shaped by men for men to live in and constructed in the proportion of man's aspirations out of materials which were readily to hand. In them it was possible for men to feel overwhelmed but not overwhelmed. Today's great cities are what? monsters: bottoms of ferro-concrete canyons dotted with dingy cases of sub-standard housing and the odd, pathetic 'park', ankle deep in dog-shit. Well, yes, all right, I exaggerate, but not that much. I believe that the modern city oppresses the human spirit and dehumanizes those who are to pass their lives in such places. Taking a good look at the faces in a tube train during the rush hour is a salutary experience and, I think, a frightening one.

VECTOR:

Cities are also, I feel, amazingly dramatic demonstrations of the fact that simple human values can survive in the midst of a totally de-humanizing process. I am forever amazed by the small gestures of kindliness and understanding that still exist under the intense pressures of City life. Do you think that Cities might, indeed, be one crucial step - viewed as it were from the vantage point of one of Stapledon's LAST MEN, for example - in human development; an intense 'shaping' exercise, preliminary to a shift in spiritual emphasis?

Richard Cowper:

It's a nice idea and, for all I know, you could well be right. I hope you are. But what you appear to be saying is that human relationships can survive in sight of the City when, to my way of thinking, they should surely be enriched because of it.

VECTOR:

Is there an actual blueprint in the modern world for 'Carloy'? Is it a place you know and have visited? And is there a plan to write another Carloy tale (and if so, from what viewpoint, or is that begging the question)?

Richard Cowper:

If by 'Carloy' you mean the castle set in Brittany which I mention in THE ROAD TO CORALY then the answer is no - it is as physically immortal as the Abbey of Hautarre in THE CUSTODIANS but, like that ancient edifice it will not doubt prove to have certain features in common with places I have visited in France. If you mean the setting for the novel - the Somersea, Quantock Plain, or the Quantock hills and moors - then I suppose you could say they'd be extrapolated from a relief map and a general love of landscape for its own sake. Before writing THE ROAD TO CORALY I spent a day driving around the Quantock hills and moored my thoughts by imagining what it would look like after the Denge Mill. Mostly, though, I prefer to work from Ordnance Survey maps - giving a story a local habitation and a name seems to act as a prop to my imagination.

I certainly hope to write at least one more story in the sequence. I'm not sure yet precisely what form it will take but I suspect it will be set partly in the year 3798 (If THE GATES was ostensibly written in that year) and partly in the years 3018-3030. I should imagine it will have a multiple viewpoint but that will depend entirely on how the story develops as I am writing it.

VECTOR:

I know you have been asked to put together a collection of children's stories. Can you tell me a little about these (I believe they are ones you wrote many years ago in your apprenticeship), and your plans to add to them?

Richard Cowper:

They were (are) classical fairy tales in the Hans Andersen/Oscar Wilde vein. I think it unlikely that I shall add to them because I find the so difficult to recapture the mood (probably the word should be 'innocence') in which I wrote them.

VECTOR:

Which begs the question - how much does an exposure to various styles of writing change your own? How soon did you feel you had found your own voice? I am conscious, for example, that THE GOLDEN VALLEY is written in what I consider to be the same tone and quite certainly by the same person as the author of THE ROAD TO CORALY, but where, do you feel, have the developments occurred? You mentioned to me that you are more and more conscious, as the years go by, of the recurrence of certain images and phrases. Is it simply a matter of a growing awareness of the process involved?

Richard Cowper:

I found 'my own voice' quite early on, but it took me a long while to recognise it. During the war I wrote a lot of short stories and some of them were at least as good as anything I could write today, but overall the quality was extremely variable. I was peering the target with quick flashes. I brought me one or two bull's-eyes, some near misses, and lots of failures. Then, in about 1954-55, I finally learnt how to trust my own innate judgement. I discovered that I could pick out the phoney elements in my own prose. That was the real watershed for me. I was certainly helped on my way by having to spend so much time studying the Classics of English Literature and, in the early days, by consciously imitating the styles of various writers I admired. This taught me a great deal about how to use the medium to the best effect.

I suppose it's inevitable that as you get older you become more self-aware. Ideally a writer should be able to see everything after each time he sets out to write a new story, but I don't really think it's possible. Even a great natural genius like D. H. Lawrence repeats himself now and again in his later works, and if he does it how can we, infinitely less gifted mortals, hope to escape? But just being aware of the problem helps. So does iron self-discipline in the form of a steadfast refusal to be satisfied with second best.

VECTOR:

Has a closer contact with the sf world brought any noticeable change
In your writing, or your attitude to your writing? What, for example, do you look for in an onefold, and has that basically changed from twenty years ago, say?

Richard Cowper:

One positive, practical result is that I have been writing the occasional sf, sf stories or novels. This would certainly not have happened had I not been invited to attend a Milford conference by Jim and Judy Nash in 1972. I wrote "The Custodians" because I had an unpublished ms to look along to the second Milford in September in 1974.

I have never been an enthusiastic devourer of sf and I probably read rather less now than I did in the '50s. I tend to wait until my friends in the sf. would say "You really must read this - it's smashing!" It doesn't happen that often. Occasionally I will be tempted by a review or will buy a new novel by a writer I admire simply because I have liked something he or she has written in the past.

For the rest I've said on more than one occasion that I do not regard sf as being different in kind from other forms of fiction, though I'm fully aware that there are a lot of writers in the field who disagree with me. They lay great stress on the ideas. It is the sheer bluneness of these ideas, I think, which does, in fact, make sf. into a different species of fiction from any other. Perhaps it is my upbringing which predisposes me to wonder whether they are not taking the ideas at the expense of the well-known and interwoven elements of good 'straight' fiction (viz. language, character, plot, etc.) simply because 'ideas' are the things they themselves are best at.

The problem, as I see it, is crystallised in J. H. Duncker's dictum: "Only connect..." The intent in sf. must be made imaginatively kept in the reader, after him scotch the identifications, and this can only be done through the writer's skills in characterisation, description, dramatisation and so forth. Otherwise his reader would be better off getting the idea straight from a least book. So in any case I suppose I'd have to refer you back to that earlier question, when you asked what qualities I looked for in a work of 'straight' fiction. As far as I'm concerned they are no different for sf.

VECTOR:

Your splendid Foundation! of compiling a list of the thirty most influential books you had read up to 1960. That list has obviously changed a little. What sort of books have impressed your over the last ten years, and where do you sending interests currently lie?

Richard Cowper:

I wrote that piece for Foundation ten years ago this year, so there's bound to be something of an overlap. What shell a start? Salome's cancer: WARD fingers on in my imagination as does Garbo's Marques A ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE - two novels totally different from each other and totally beyond my own range. Non-fiction brings in Proust's VOLUME I AND THE ART OF MOTORCycles MAINTENANCE, Ortega y Gasset's THE REVOLT OF THE MAJES, Schuschnug's SMILE BEAUTIFUL AND A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED, Rosalind Poulter's THE SIXTH SENSE AND THE INFINITE HIVE, Pohl and Niven's SELECTED POEMS, Ursula Le Guin's WILD ANGELS, some stories by Bobb and others by Boser - I could go on. As it is I've probably left out someone who ought to be there.

Specifically in the sf. field I enjoyed Clark Paskin's A DREAM OF WESSEX, from Arthur MALACIA TAPESTRY, Alan Garner's RED SHIRT, Fred Pohl's GATEWAY and at least three of the books in Peter Nicholls' EXPLORATIONS OF THE MARVELOUS.

VECTOR:

You used to write poetry in your youth. Do you still try to express certain ideas in verse?

Richard Cowper:

Now more. Such poetry as I write now goes into my prose.

VECTOR:

Do you subscribe to the view that sf. as a genre, is closer than any other to poetry, in that it is image intense?

Richard Cowper:

Some writers are better than others at handling images and a few of these writers happen to write of, but that doesn't really make any more "poetic" than straight fiction, does it? Graham Greene handles images as well as any writer alive today and so for as I know he's written only one or two stories that could be classed as sf. Yet, having said that, I think I know what you're getting at. I have observed in certain of writers a remarkable tendency to wallow in purple prose - to pile on the adjective and associate around themmenly all over space. This tends some misguided people to believe they are in the presence of some poetic writing, but that they're really getting is a fest of self-indulgence, over-size mush.

VECTOR:

I believe you have been involved in several amateur drama productions. Can you elaborate upon that and indicate where you rates lie in the theatre?

Richard Cowper:

I've always enjoyed acting and producing but it is terribly time-on-energy consuming and I've given up since I left the teaching profession. I suppose a lot of novelists have something of the actor's habit in them. I'm a lot of contemporary dramatists are just shopkeepers and the other Peter Nicholls (some of it).
The Rest Is Dreams; the work of RICHARD COWPER

by David Wingrove

A genre in which emphasis is laid upon the immortality of the idea, it is all too often the case that the simple measures of literary excellence are neglected. It is rarely literary, and scarcer still are recognizable characters. It is a lack that has often been commented upon and which is commonly excused by the supposed excellence of a well-plotted story, an innovative concept, an established reputation. This is not to say that there is a total absence of stories within the genre, merely that the plethora of shoddy material is wont to deprecate the achievements of those few writers who are consciously striving to write to the very limits of their or no means inconceivable capabilities.

Any statement about the sf genre is bound to marked with the strain of generality, but it does seem that between the skilled, often indistinguishable of some writers and the clearly genial nostalgia of others, there is very little genuine compassion. This would seem to be confining to the lack of recognisably "human" characters (still ignore the aliens to avoid over-complicating matters), it would also account for the lamentable death of an honest moral tone in so much sf. There is a great deal of braggadocio moralising, but very little of the real thing. It is, I suppose, only my own bias, but I, like Mr Elliot before me, find that literary considerations cannot be divorced from moral ones when considering the worth of a piece of writing (1). Thus I am drawn to those writers who use the undeniably attractive landscape of the genre to explore their own personal moralities.

These writers fall into two camps: those who approach the moral issue by means of the intellect (an approach tempered by the emotions) and those whose approach is instinctively emotional (and, of course, tempered by the intellect). Alicea, Balfour and Ditch are notable examples of the former group, whose styles tend themselves to an obsessive focus that achieves its moral ends by providing the reader with the perspective of distances the view through the microscope. The latter group include writers such as Dick, LaClune and Cowper, whose close involvement with their characters provides an instinctive moral empathy in the reader. The distinction is that between observing and participating, a simple matter of immediacy.

Richard Cowper is a compellingly immediate writer and it is unsurprising that he should have entered the sf genre from without. He is one of the newer breed in sf, whose habitual concentration upon character, often to the neglect of ideas, finds an extension in more general, literary terms than normally granted a slightly sf author. In that respect I found it hard to look at the various literary personas of John Murray: Colin Cowper, the mainstream novelist; Colin Middelton Murray, the autobiographer; and Richard Cowper, the

In the second volume of his autobiography, Colin Murray tells of his first two abortive attempts to break into print. The first, BEFORE THE SNOWS was finished but never submitted for publication. The second, TIME TO RECOVER was entirely revised. But it was only a brief while after this, in 1954, that he produced THE GOLDEN VALLEY, which was eventually accepted by Hutchinson and published in 1959. (2) (3)

The first thing to say of THE GOLDEN VALLEY is that it possesses an immediacy of style that typifies Colin Murray's writing. The wishful, adolescent love story about which the book is concerned is told from a first-person narrative viewpoint throughout and in a tone which is, curiously, recaptured only in the two volumes of autobiography and in PRIVATE VIEW, the most recent Colin Murray novel (4). The mood of lost innocence and the sense of time-vagility inherent in the story of the narrator, Tony, make this one of Colin Murray's most moving books. It is highly readable, and even at this stage in the author's development there is the tendency, soon later in extremity, to let the dialogue carry much of the burden of plot exposition.

At the time of the book's publication, comparison was made to Algren-Paulin's LE GRANDE MAULINES (5) and there are, without doubt, parallels. In each the elusiveness of adolescence is perceptively drawn, and each has its own sense of irrevocable loss. It is, perhaps, the uniqueness of THE GOLDEN VALLEY, indicative of its author's insistant that the reader should become, in a sense, Murray rather than his passive and observed friend - that separates these books. As it is, both books move me considerably, recognising, at each does, something extremely precious in their pages.

THE GOLDEN VALLEY was followed in 1960 by RECOLLECTIONS OF A GHOST and in 1961 by A PATH TO THE SEA (6). A PATH TO THE SEA has the same raw honesty of emotion that was a crucial part of THE GOLDEN VALLEY: a switch to third-person narrative does not affect the intensity of the novel nor detract from its immediacy. To my mind, however, the importance of this novel is not that it is a progression in literary technique from its predecessor (it is, quite definitively, a far more accomplished piece of work, the prose - in Orwell's term - a window through which we can perceive the most intimate of the characters' thoughts), but, as Colin Murray himself puts it in the novel, "all brescia down", but that it states themes and discusses moral issues that are later to become the core of Richard Cowper's science fiction.

In the story Michael Regan, a young student in his twenties, meets and falls in love with his professor's wife, Mary Fonates, more than ten years his senior. Their affair and its tragic culmination is vividly described. In this, as in all of his best work, there is an artist's eye at work, observing the smallest detail and noting its importance in the overall scheme. The love affair is delicately constructed, a carefully choreographed development of mood that builds through an accumulation of impressions to a "moment of recognition" where the eyes of anger and beloved meet and acknowledge their consummation to each other. This "moment of recognition" is a crucial factor in many of Colin Murray's books, a moment when the characters are levitated from a mundane state of existence into a state of hyper-awareness. Love is one of its catalysts and ere another (7).

But, this apart, there are several rather interesting things in this book that I would like to pause to examine, if only briefly. They demonstrate quite nicely how the preoccupations of Colin Murray, budding mainstream writer, are not so different from those of Richard Cowper, experienced science fiction author.

A PATH TO THE SEA begins with a pre-cognitive dream and ends with a naked man being washed up on the Cornish coast, the latter incident almost a direct parallel with the ending of THE ROAD TO CORLAY, Richard Cowper's recent novel. The sense of 'presence' after death and the 'aura' the landlady, Mrs Sunny, senses about Michael and Mary are other elements that were to be developed in the first three Richard Cowper books. In A PATH TO THE SEA these elements are peripheral; they are allowed to as portents, feelings, thoughts and dreams. It is to Richard Cowper that we have to look to see the dreams become plot elements in their own right. This process of making
 literal dream symbols is, essentially, a definition of it (B), and the movement of the dream elements is from the wings to the centre-stage, (to become actual things in the fiction, explored in their own right) marks the creation of Richard Cowper. But the process is embryonic in A PATH TO THE SEA, more noticeable, perhaps; in retrospect, but still evident as a disturbing undercurrent.

Perhaps they share the insubstantiality of their dream and know it for what it is, but that knowledge must itself have been a loosening of the truth which they discovered over each minute of the day. Even when they spoke of the existence from which they have escaped, they spoke as travellers speak of soft lands which they once visited long ago, where things were done differently, and all seemed inconsequential, strange as some half-remembered dream. "(9)

Before leaving this novel to examine the genius of Richard Cowper there is another aspect of this novel that is perhaps just as important as the aforementioned undercurrents of dream and 'recognition'.

I suppose what I value most in people is generosity - not in the money sense - but a sort of willingness to give, to share. So many people speak their lives putting up fences, building themselves barricades. I suppose they're afraid of really knowing what it is they're afraid of." (10)

It is the first overt statement of this kind in Colin Murray's fiction: that blinding fear is the motivation of human action. This notion is co-existent with the character, Michael's search for truth and reality. This, indeed, is where Colin Murray's own reality is firmly anchored. Michael is not condemned for his lack of directness by Professor Fossler, but he is both sincere and, quite generally, recovers these feelings as Tony Braydon was variegated and found wanting for his activities in PRIVATE VIEW. The moral tone has nothing whatsoever to do with sexual codes nor with passions of behaviour, it has to do with essential honesty. To be again, to care, to share - these are enough. It is embodied in the single, fragile character of Michael here. Later, in CORYL, the concept is widened to encompass a whole sect in both books, whereby by coincidence or conscious design, there is the same contribution to - one to nature - a body to the sea.

The first three Colin Murray novels are essentially visualised and no doubt cost the author much in terms of emotional commitment. In the first three "Richard Cowper" novels (produced often or after sixty years) there is a sense that the rains have been poured down the author with no hesitation or reconsideration. Perhaps it is simply that while the fabric of society normally held in the late fifties and early sixties it was possible to write as "Colin Murray", but as the hectic present became a reality in the mid-sixties it was no longer possible to approach the moral issues in any other than science fictional terms. They are lighter books than the ones that preceded them and in them, as I have already intimated, the dream state becomes concrete, the notion manifest.

BREAKTHROUGH was the first of these early Cowper novels, its contemporary setting allowing a solidly recognisable backdrop for a story that drifts into the realms of the unfamiliar. Using Keats' poem, "The Fall of Hyperion" as a starting point, Cowper makes the Sky Children of the poem an actuality, pretending throughout the book to make their presence felt through the minds of Jimmy (our protagonist/first-person narrator) and Rachel. This device is to be used again in THE TWILIGHT OF BRIAREUS and THE ROAD TO CORYL, the out-of-body experience being used as a 'pavement' share the vision of the mind. It is a single aspect of Richard Cowper's approach to paranormal phenomena. Jimmy is the first at one line of protagonsits: the young and curious teacher who has a special gift of a paranormal kind), who drifts into a relationship with a young girl-tellawed with his tutoring and his grasp of 'real fly' unraveled and replaced by another. BREAKTHROUGH sets the archetype, and finds its best expression in THE TWILIGHT OF BRIAREUS with the fascinating Colin Johnson. There is not enough time to deal with each single case, and so I'll concentrate on the sensitive Mr Johnson later in this essay.

BREAKTHROUGH is also important for its connection with THE ROAD TO COILAY, for in the 'concretization' of paranormal elements via the Encyclopaedia-Visual Converter and through the person of Peter Klosser the two books share a common background. BREAKTHROUGH is set in the recognisable, situated world - an extension of the world in which Colin Murray's novels are set. But between this yet more and yet more comprehensible world and the pre-funded/past-futurized scenarios of THE ROAD TO COILAY lies a huge leap. It is still possible in the world of BREAKTHROUGH to achieve individual solutions to crises, to make simple plans for a determinable future. By the time of THE ROAD TO COILAY, there is only the possibility of a more single existence after the halo affect. In fact the change in emphasis is to begin with his next novel, PHOENIX, but that is moving ahead too exhilarating the attractions of Cowper's first offering.

If it is pursuing with the change in emphasis from 'the natural affecting the specific' to 'the unnatural affecting the general' (yet another tentative definition of it) that is inherent in this switch to the surreal, the moment of recognition should switch from the eye-such as a caressed love to the far more intense (if less emotive) recognition of will. It is something that occurs again and again in the books what Richard Cowper himself terms seeing through the eye and not just with the eye. The idea of a third eye or inner eye is implicit in this act of self-recognition. It is as an unconscious pre-requisite of a Richard Cowper novel that he should be 'different' in a way that is not immediately recognizable, even to himself. Jimmy Hewitt displays this throughout BREAKTHROUGH, trying to come to terms with something that even he finds laughable and incredible. But when he does come to terms with it he no longer suffers from the 'blank misgivings of a creature, moving about in worlds not realized' (111) but becomes acutely alive and aware. The visual and emotional immediacy of the story and the narrator's own inexpressible response to the events break down any hostility on the part of the reader to what it is. In terms, unfathomably metaphoric metalic and makes the fantastic and tangible, where the 'breakthrough' at the title is made by the Sky People, Aronson and Master, credible on a fictional level.

Again one goes throughout that intangible journey I touched Rachel's face with my fingers, and each time it was like hearing a child whispering soundlessly in the night. "(12)

The fantastic happens. It is copied with and assimilated. Once the dream has become real it is no longer and life goes on normally. It can still be seen and forgotten on time, last year, even after the end of Rachel, made part of a nightmare long past. It is possible in BREAKTHROUGH, in PHOENIX, the book that follows, the process is taken a stage further, where the unembellished cord of the dream state stretched a little thinner, a little tighter.

PHOENIX displays the second line of Richard Cowper's prologues: the young man who is all I within the educational system at the time begins, a kitten. It is certain respects, as before, the young man of this story but titles, 'The backs, a genuine freak - the last romantic'. My spiritual home is the eighteenth century' (132). Like his other counterparts, his 'difference' from others is something purely internal, something he only vaguely, if at all, recognizes. In this story his internal difference is made manifest by allowing him to escape his own time by means of suspended animation and emerge in a far simpler future world where he is evidently different from all others.
is BREAKTHROUGH displayed certain abilities in theme to the more recent CORLAY, PHOENIX is as near to a "dry run" as could be wished for. Bard is tired of his own age (2325 AD) and, following an unsuccessful love affair with an older woman, he gets to take a "SAU" for a period of three years—until he attains his majority and comes into his inheritance. This is all conveyed in the first forty pages of the novel, ending as the needle sinks into Bard's arm and with his feeling that he has made a grave mistake.

Part Two of the book opens lyrically, and it is immediately obvious that this is a single-word style novel—we have left only a few pages back—but more barbaric but with a charm that is undeniable. It is a world that is two thousand years old, that has suffered a declining plague and reverted to barbarism, to a culture that is as one and the same time attractive and repulsive. There are genuine spiritual values alive in the world once again, but there are also repressive forces counterbalancing the inherent freedom and spirituality. PHOENIX is a study of the spiritual implications of the Plague, of its aftermath, the Inquisition, and of the cult of our innate Sense of Community. In certain cases, this spiritual entrenchment is far greater than the cultural and material. It is an image which, in both cases, emphasizes the dream state. And yet there are dreams within these dreams. The characters believe they are dreaming at first, but in the course of the story it is proved to them that they are not. This undermines our own disbelief, our innate hostility to the events relating, such in the same way as we undermine our reluctance to accept the idea of the paranormal.

And when Mithrys looks into Bard, it is similar to that moment in CORLAY when Jone looks into the mind of Thomas of Norwich and sees the fugitive figure of Carver and "the Old Days before the Dreaming," before Carver emposites the Plague is reactivated after being "buried," Carver, survivor of the Plague, returns to dream, but whereas Bard is given the choice to return to his own age and change it, Carver/Thomas has no such choice, for he does demand a body. In PHOENIX is Bard and Mithrys who eventually leave to journey to Aetheria; in CORLAY Jone makes the journey alone to Corla. It emphasizes that the cord has not yet been broken, the free-moving choice made: the fantastic can still be stimulated and "normal" life resumed.

PHOENIX is the best writer of those first Crown novels, and its influence much more evident in the second part of the book. As Richard Corben felt more at home in this less crowded future world, echoing Bard's feeling that "I was always out of tune with my own age, which is, I suppose, the reason why I'm here now." (14). In many ways it is a style of writing that is not so emerge in his writing until "Pipe: At The Gates Of Down" and CORLAY, pregnant with imagery and as wild as a cinematic still.

For one impossible moment he seemed to be flouting suspended in the quiet air above his own body, and then her eyes were holding him and the miraculous stillness had descended upon him like warm summer rain. Her eyes seemed to have become two gnarled windows through which he could see the whole world turning like a gray-green jewel in the darkness of an eternal night. (15)

Here, in PHOENIX, there is no real solution to society's problems, only individual solutions. It is left to CORLAY to extend this question to society in general and approach the quest of fear. Here Bard has his Mithrys, which is enough; the White Bird is its last development.

The problems of changing events, of altering the course of history by returning to the past has often been explored in, for Bard turns the opportunity in PHOENIX and decides to stay with the woman he loves, who corset his child, his future. In DOMINO this idea of altering the past is used as the central plot element. Christopher Bollman is in the same scenario mould as Bard, a young man engaged in taking his A Level's who gets involved in Astor Meetings and spiritualism and finds that the whole world revolts. He, of course, "differs" in a way in which he cannot recognize. His interest in genetics and the science reactions (DNA inhibition) to, in one streamr, to lead to a system of genetic programming and thus to a future society where a master-slave power structure has developed. Elements of this future society contact him to try to prevent this and what was at first seeming and easily becomes ambiguous and difficult. As a device it is as effective as the landing of the Martians on Marslett Cornwall, and we are, once more, led gently from page incoherence to credible acceptance of the situation. Christopher's feet are firmly planted on the ground at the start of this tale; he is a sceptic whose attitude to the whole concept can be briefly summarized; "I'm just plain gullible." But that acceptance of the "reality" of the events that are overwhelming him is accompanied by a recognition of the moral issues involved.

"A society will arise in which all humans are programmed for specific tasks and ruled by a self-perpetuating tyranny. There will be slavenumbers and the slaves, the living and the dead (the humanity, as you will agree); the programme of our degradations and the depths of our degradation are beyond imagination. For us the concentration camps of the twentieth century would be a trifle. We are the damned." (17)

It is noticeable that certain ideas are becoming slowly more articulate. "We are the damned" is an indictment of Harlequin's hedonistic "Brave New World" which fills, for all its spiritual panic, an acme to live in. It is nearer Orwell's vision of the future a leader stamping on a human face again and again. There is also the realization that reality could be "no more than a consensus of opinion as to what was said" (18). It seems almost as much a re-evaluation in the author as it is in the character, the development from an author's position to a stance where "maybe the reality was illusion." The rabid anti-rational and repressive and efficient rationality that Christopher exhibits in this novel, his abhorrence of the viewpoint that sees the Cosmos as a super-sceptical meacon set", to be the material of Richard Corben's next science fiction work, CLONE, but in the interim there is a fourth Colin Murphy novel, PRIVATE VIEW.

If the first three Corben novels lacked anything it was the sense of genuine emotional immediacy. PRIVATE VIEW, written some years before it was published in 1977, is compulsive from the very first page, its naked pain unrequited in any of the other books. Once again the author is the first person. One of the few things the author does not do is honesty involves the nagging on the most poignant of levels. It achieves an emotional pitch after just ten pages that most books simply fail to reach. There is nothing "special" about Tony Braydon and the only unsuitable things that happen to him are those sensations of internal perception that occur to us all from time to time. He is a young teacher, passionately involved with life and the simple acts of living, passionate of loving and a beautiful wife and a comfortable and enjoyable life. Tony Braydon is the closest Richard Corben has come to a godly character, a complex one of the novel, and as the novel unfolds there are numerous other characters that create a definite mood, the emotional style of this particular author, but here they are highlighted, brought to their full potential. It is not romantic, nor melodramatic it is all dealt with a calm naturalism. The swift transition from cold rationality to calm, to the gentle ending is a total achievement, as is the constant movement from human to machine and the use of a computer to create the narrator's past and then just as suddenly replaced, like a car's clock. And it again of the superficially depressing choice of which answers this is a very positive book, emphasizing that one can come to terms with tragedy, something that goes beyond THE SACR TO CORLA, and going to come to terms with something, it supersedes.
PRIVATE VIEW also illustrates another consistency in John Murry's writing, whether as Colin Murry or as Richard Cowper; his observation of young children:

"For me she was like that mirror in the fairy tale: through her I saw things come and go. Some I remember clearly, hundreds I must have forgotten, but she never remembered any. ... I suppose the very act of remembering entails an awareness of detachment, a sense of looking in from the outside, and she was always on the inside, living it, being the things she did, the things she saw. And now she's dead. I have to write it down, to see the words on the paper to convince myself yet again that it really is so. It just doesn't make sense. Light doesn't fall there when the candle's blown out — it's going on somewhere. And what is 'death' anyway? Or 'life'? for that matter? There have been times when I've been absolutely convinced that it's all some fantastic illusion worked with invisible mirrors. It was knowing Sue that first put the idea into my head, and then Mandy brought it back again. I mean she quite obviously didn't see the world I was seeing. Sometimes when I've been watching her I've felt I'm travelling on a course exactly parallel to life but a couple of paces to one side, and that between me and the real thing is a sky-high fence." (19)

It is another illustration of the author's mistrust of perceived reality; sensing that with the loss of innocence comes a distancing from 'the real'.

In dealing with an author's work in order of publication it is often noticeable how certain novels which, whilst written prior to other published works, do seem to appear 'at the correct time'. Thus it was that Richard Cowper's next two sf novels, KULDESAK and TWILIGHT OF BRIAREUS were both still 'doing the rounds' when CLONE was brought by Gallance. (20). It is an exercise in letting off steam, not only at beaurocratic madness and present technophilic trends, but also at the sacrosanct cliches of sf itself.

It marks an abandonment of many familiar trappings and throws the reader headfirst into the Candi-de-like tale of Alvin, an innocent of unnatural virtue. He is cleverly described in the early pages as having "an expression of near-idiotic bliss on his round guileless face" and is told (and taken to heart) "now you be good; and leave the others to be the smart cookies". (21). As he stumbles through the various processes that lead him to the discovery that he is part of a four-man gestalt, clones from a single egg, the reader is led through numerous comic episodes that are genuinely funny.

In a world where power-politics lead to slasher experiments in social manipulation (lots in Hyde Park, where the Ministry For Procreation finds new means of weeding out dissidents), where high Government officials make deals with guerrilla leaders that are financially beneficial for both sides and where 1984-style surveillance is commonplace, Alvin keeps his moral virginity intact and survives to become a super-elicited freak with enormous paranormal powers. It is a ramp that is not without its poignancy and it hits its satiric targets, laying certain attitudes open to scorn, demonstrating the buffoonery behind the apparent menace and the threat behind the apparently absurd.

It is a story about moral corruption in an over-populated world lacking in spiritual values; a world that has created intelligent ases and organisations to help people kill themselves (the Samaritans); that sees people as units to be experimented upon, where the Minister of Sociology can watch an experiment in mass slaughter and comment "I usually find it helps to think of it simply as high-grade animal protein". It engenders the thought that subjects like this are so horrific that they can only be approached in this satiric manner.

The comic strengths of the book are many: its riotous sending-up of terrorist organisations through the U.A.B. (United Ape Brotherhood); the present undercurrent of sexuality that embraces various combinations of Ape/Human/Machine; the coincidences that pile up like ratting rubbish in a strike-lorn city; the perpetual vigilance of man's that monitors conversations for licence/infraction/semasiology. These themes are shamelessly de-bagged and on occasion after occasion in CLONE situations develop where various of these factors inter-relate with hilarious results (my own favourite being the fate of the ape 'psy', Pinkerton with Hartense, and the resultant semasiological analysis of the sounds emitted). (22)

It was a successful experiment and did more for Richard Cowper's career than the previous three novels, and it is only with his most recent book, PROFUNDIS, that he has returned to this approach. But whilst CLONE was to bring him immediate recognition in the genre, it was more important for the fact that it opened a market for what is, to my mind, his most important work, THE TWILIGHT OF BRIAREUS. Before it, however, I'll deal briefly with the other sf novels that appeared from the pen of Richard Cowper in 1972 and 73, KULDESAK and TIME OUT OF MIND.

KULDESAK is an interesting book in several ways, and my own approach to this book is to treat it as a highly sophisticated metaphor rather than as a typical sf adventure. Man has gone down the cul-de-sac of placing himself in the hands of machines, safely en-wombed beneath the Earth's surface, passively acquiescing to the desire to become vegetables, to accept and no longer to question. But the book also shows a single man revolting against this dead end and emphatically announcing (as others did before him) "I am a man!". It has echoes of our own culture in it; the message that Richard Cowper constantly assiduously in his fiction - that we are heading in the wrong direction by kowtowing to the gods of technological progress, and that that path is only a Kuldesak that will lead to a world such as that he describes in this novel.

He uses the book, nevertheless, to tell the tale of Mel, a young 'roomer', and makes the setting sufficiently credible to enable the reader to escape into these pages. It is an unique experiment in Cowper's oeuvre, the background of the tale dissociated by time from anything overtly familiar; but it does express once again his optimism in Man's future and his scepticism about his present.

KULDESAK represents the rut into which Man has fallen now, and it is left to the alien and the paranormal to bring the men of this story to a state of possible transcendentalism. Man is man, this book pronounces, not because he can breed but because he has the ability to reason and to choose.

TIME OUT OF MIND appeared the next year and is, without any doubt, the weakest of all the Cowper novels. It is, nevertheless, an ambitious book that deals with a similar theme to that dealt with in DOMINO, of the future altering the past by returning to change events. A drug is discovered that releases unptopped psychic energies, and that besides being addictive is totally fulfilling. A Colonel Mogobian obtains a monopoly of the drug and begins to use it for his own mad designs. It is the nearest Richard Cowper gets to a mad scientist story, and its up-beat ending seems hurried. It does manage to avoid the flaws of time-travel paradoxes by only projecting Images into the past (the story begins with one such projection), but its real strength is in the language and use of imagery - always a strong point in these novels. It is didactically moral throughout and this perhaps detracts also from its overall effect. But amongst the maxims are a few items that express quite succinctly Richard Cowper's attitudes:

"And beware of pity. Pity is frequently confused with love, but don't you make the mistake of confusing them. Pity is a by-product of superiority; love demands total abnegation, total identification, total understanding." (23)

A familiarity with others of Cowper's young protagonists will give an idea of the Laurie Linton of this story, an Individual 'in an age when
the adolescent personality seemed to come mass-produced from the molds of the image-makers." (24) Laura joins NARCOS (the United Nations Narcotics Security, an organization set up to stop the drug exploitation of large multinational) and it is 1996 and all drugs are just as illegal as they were in 1848 in this book, with the Ministry of Internal Security (M.I.S.), the baddest of the story. It is, moreover, more of a detective thriller than any other Richard Cowper novel and the dialogue once again is used to carry the plot development, digging up the need for bald exposition. It makes it highly readable and compensates for the otherwise disappointing quality of writing. I can watch with this book if it is quite simply because it is the only Cowper book that I still tend disinterested, even if it has a number of compensatory facets (25).

If TIME OUT OF MIND is fast immediate and has for less impact than any other Richard Cowper book, THE TWILIGHT OF BRIAREUS, published the next year in 1978, that the most important impact of a Colin Murray novel: a richly poetic book that is for softer than anything that preceded it.

"So that...is added my previous glimpse of the unshackled hills as just another strand of the effective web that has been woven here, and, as I stumbled forward beside her up to the house, I had the wisest feeling that I was left in chaos living between two worlds, one real, the other powerless to be born." (26)

This echo of the Matthew Arnold quotation that prefaces the novel captures the mood that is present in almost all of Richard Cowper's books, the sensation of being 'at but not part of' the world. It is symptomatic of his technophobes, his misanthropy of the purely material. One feels that Calvin Johnson, the first-person narrator of this story is only a very thinly disguised version of the author.

Calvin is a middle-aged teacher of English, hopelessly marooned at the beginning of this tale and surrounded by the acute and social contemporary world of 1983 where the only grip is of internal stagnation and the 'tramp' - mundane existence. The 'tramp' is here defined as "School - A Levels - University - degree; pub at some sort; marriage, I suppose, Kids. Grow old. Die." (27) But this pattern is shattered by the occurrence of a supernatural 190 light-years away in Beta-tauri. The effect of this occurrence is not immediately felt, but it is discussed after a few months that the whole human population has become sick. Like the plague of PHOENIX and the Flood of CORYL, the col-o-SOL at R14 DFSK and the comic-horrible hallucosis of PROFUNDUS, it is a means of denuding the Earth, of halting its most advance and curtailing the reality of spiritual values once again. And when CORYL deals with the concept of least seam and freedom, BRIAREUS examines a much more grandiose idea: that of soul. Calvin is a man who never, until this last moment, realized his full potential; the normal reality that always associate with film is gentleness" says another character of him. (28). As the world attempts to come to terms with the direct result of the supernova, Calvin himself has to assimilate the most disturbing presence of another mind within his own. I have already mentioned the idea of 'passenger' in connection with both IRRESISTIBLE and CORYL, and it must be asked, 'what is the situation that this image holds for the author?'. I feel that it serves several purposes: most important of which is the need to reintegrate the 'dream state' within which these novels forge their own reality. But they are also demonstrations (and particularly so in this story, where Calvin's mortality is the signal for regeneration) that the real core are in the mind, that all important matters are resolved in the mind. There is also, of course, the use of subconscious links with other states of being and a poetic sense of the openness of all things, but these are subsidiary purposes. TWILIGHT OF BRIAREUS is the definitive explanation of this inner conflict, and is Calvin's movement away from the normal patterns of his life.

Richard Cowper finally devours all untruths and Calvin can no longer maintain the act, nor discount as negligible, nor indeed, can he accommodate to such monstrous spectacles to do in PHOENIX. To choose between living instable and the old 'sam' is the context that takes part in his mind, and his chosen to sacrifice himself (spatially unaccountably) in this old and new life harmoniously merge in this act of save-nce. The 'normal' cannot longer assume its valid hold and from the wreckage of the old world the new re-em of the 'fantastic' can emerge.

If BRIAREUS was the peak of Cowper's moral preface at this time, the novel that followed it, WORLD OFF APART, was on a different scale altogether: a comic novel that strongly enough deals with similar elements but in a much bolder, almost flippancy manner. But, as in the case of his other two comic novels, there is a profundity in this book that is not evident in the more аналити choices:

"One famous Christian museum contains a large room in which a working-model of the whole cosmos is set to exist. No one has ever seen it, but countless thousands of Christians have heard it. It consists of a great circular simplicity repeated in coded darkness." (27)

There is something of Kurt Vonnegut in that, and this tone is maintained throughout the novel. The story is that of George Crimp, parent, broadcaster and Senior Science Teacher at Bagholt Royal Comprehensive School who, in his spare time, writing a science fiction story about Zil Bryan, an impulsive Agnesian pedagogue who nevertheless possess mysterious though unsaid powers. Zil, in turn is writing a story about Calvin (known to him as Shogger) and Veru. This comic slapstick goes on. Richard Cowper the opportunity to parody the attitudes of science fiction writers for more directly than he was able to in CLOME, while Zil 's observations of Earth life viewed from another culture highlight the absurdity of many of our own customs, while putting toward concepts like Others (a strongly pantomhic concept that is god and a few things besides) and Hicity (which can be substituted in both sides of 'rants' theory is truth' equation, and a few things besides) it is a quite harmonious contrast between the mundane and the sublime. It is a dream and tragedy and the concept of a dream and tragedy (logically enough the starting point for PROFUNDUS. By using the comedy element wise, this it will very much in the same philosophical mood as the other books and George's conclusion that "the world inhabited was neither a gigantic confessional book nor that everyone in it is simply innocent." (30) is typical of a Cowper protagonist, and the avowed mystical revelation that "All time is now", we do exist but in a dream, whose dreams liehalf-always otherwise, our shadow, that we 'white' is another expression of this sensation of being caught between two worlds "one dead, the other to be born". It is an image that occurs too often to be given anything but this emphasis.

It was at this time that Richard Cowper's first short stories were being produced, but between their appearance in the US magazines and their appearance in the collection THE CUSTOMIENS, their author, under the third pseudonym, Colin Middleton-Murey, was released in the first of my volumes of autobiography, ONE HAND CLAPPING, which was published in 1976 in considerable critical acclaim.

One Hand Clapping is the story of John Murey's life from 1936 through to 1942, a highly personal account that unsurprisingly gives many insights into the fiction of both Colin Murey and Richard Cowper. I...
It is a perfectly crafted story and deserving of an award [35], with a strong congruity to the things observed and a sense of slow gathering symbolism, it is the denouement of his writing, ever-brightening with momentous descriptive passages, slices of raw-esque philosophy, and prose poetry.

"But how I read? What is it you read?" Tom sighed faintly. "I join myself to Tom. I build a bridge and walk to them over it. I take their thoughts and give them back to my own."

"And whadda taught you that, Dickie?"

"He taught me how to find the right keys. A different one for each person. But I believe there’s a master-key, Pete. One to unlock the whole world. I call that key the White Bird." (36)

Both of these are essential of the symbolism the key to prop 3 ideals lies in the space of his floor-playing to entice the guard in this way and to realize their ambitions, teaching them not to fear. The intervening of images is intriguing, the language is enriched with rich dialect and marvelous allusions to the basic elements of life, to the old man who was 'all elks like bricks in a brick works' and 'all hurrying on no death any long age' [37]. The overall effect is that this story has been experienced and seen by the reader, not just with the exciting tale that is it, but also in a new way for the writer. In the novel, the use of a long-weighed, subtle and pontilant that long-weighed shool of a brothelhood of men. It is the last factor that gives the tale its importance, that makes it the culmination of Cowper’s search for a tangible solution to Men’s corporate lack of spiritual (and hence, in his term, moral) value. It is in

Dwelly’s nonreality symbol and allegory [37] in the language of the romantic poet, and it is without doubt, a perfect combination. But if anything has been learned in the flight of the White Bird, it is not the stagnation creation of an image, poetic minded or a vision that must always be slightly out of reach.

As the conclusion of the story Petar asks himself: "why was it that men could not value things truly till they were gone?" (38), and it seems that the answer here is that things are still changing, that they are still moving toward their final, perfected state. And, in a sense, we may never arrive at that state, must never become mature. In a single, one final kind of ever-present in all of Richard Cowper’s works, that is this: that the characters are still on their journey and that it is only we, the ones who must reveal the scene of events. So it is that IN THE ROAD TO CORLAY we pick up the threads of Tom’s tale, eighteen years after the main story, and find that the almanac has made little progress and one is unhappily hunted by the Church Militant and their inquisitional arm, the Grey Brotherhood. The beast of the title is swallowed in hope, but within book Cowper, like the artist in PERSEUX, in a destination "never a place achieved thus fictional exploration of Robert Louis Stevenson’s saying."

That Richard Cowper is of that camp that is instinctively emotional (but tempered by the ordering process of the installers) is never better illustrated than in the pages of THE ROAD TO CORLAY. It is a circus book that carries the imagination and feeds the glutinous desires of both heart and mind. The setting is the Past-Flood world of the Seven Kingdoms, AD 3018, and tell all the almanac of the White Bird, Thomas of Northcliff and of Corver, a 20th Century scientist who, whilst in an ‘out of body experiment’ experiment finds himself trapped in Thomas’ mind. Corver is the link with the Pre-Flood, technologically world, transmitting the things he went through Thomas’ eyes back to his own time. It is the strange use of the ‘dream words’ in Cowper’s fiction, and the most compelling, incorporating the large use once before in PHOENIX of the woman from the past whose twin is found in the future. It is the movement between a near-contemporary society to one different and not by extreme time but also by extensive attitudes, that emphasizes the basic movement in the author’s mind between current volume and those which could conceivably replace them after the Flood. It is a problem of the installers (‘how can we bother the world we live in?’) that is being explained by ‘hauling’ what is right. The solution seems to be ‘clear at all cost and start again’, but the author is honest enough to know that starting over is a near-contemporary solution. For the problems are built correctly. It is for this reason that Bais’ second Industrial Revival, Han Kao is lost in PHOENIX, why Thomas of Northcliff must never reach CORLAY one, most important, why the past must eventually be inclined to past! It is fact that Cowper attacks in CORLAY, not the Church which is subject to that law; it is the reason why Gyre, one of the Grey Brothers and the Elfin of Fan in ‘Piper At The Gates Of Dawn’ must become the dubious
of Tom’s teachings in The ROAD TO CORLAY, his own account of fear as a simple to be placed before the people.

CORLAY is a beautiful book but, when all is said and done, one is left wondering how much of a solution this is and whether the author is trying to go too far. The story being parallel to the story of Jesus’ “fishers of men” and the prophecies issued by these teachers, but the true meaning of Tom is based on an entire on this mystical un-shockingly of the soul by the tones of the flute. The passionate portion that says to mind in this text only to the cry of the flute can be heard on how far?—In the story Corray is aware of this eruditionally tragic side to his fictive religion: the betrayal of the pater in the future is but feebly on no more than an expression of human weakness, of the primitive doubt in man’s heart that there are possible solutions to the antagonistic and changing forces surrounding from fear.

“He said true happiness is simply not being afraid of anyone at all. We called it the last secret.”

And though it is a secret that lies in this book, it is paramount to all other realities that, throughout the book, one cannot set this too high. The possible worlds of DOMINO lie there, heavy and burdensome, in the future.

As if setting such a sequel to CORLAY would invoke a realization of this inherent tragic element, Richard Corray has turned, in his most recent novel, to the peaceful realm of writing once again. PROOF AND INSTRUMENTS is, as the title suggests, a very profound and poetic romance novel, in its similarity to CLONE pronounced, in its distinguishing characteristics, in its imagery, in its maladaptive and sentient composure which destroys known civilization and then, with the aid of a novel captain, re-creates the Christ Myth using an Athenian mythos. The result is a novel that is perhaps better than CLONE, that combines the wit of the twentieth century with the profoundness of the twentieth and an understandingly attractive blend. The similarities to one of Henry Fielding’s picaresque adventures not only emphasize the choice of name of the protagonist, Tom Jones (1846), but also by the deep moral concern that both authors display in their comic novels. And though I am not sure whether PROFUNDUS will carry the test of time as well as Fielding’s novels, it is a genuinely funny book.

The encounter between generation and corruption is explored more seriously here and in CLONE than it is in any of the more serious

The necessity to be brief in an article and to distil fiction down to its elements is a dictating process. There is no way that this style can be conveyed other than by comparison with other writers and by the use of material or second hand. It is especially so in the case of writers whose excellence lies in their subtlety of imagery and in the precision of their sense, whose argument is upon the moral and not the truth.

Going back to my elevation of the Important Writers in the genre into two camps, I feel it is similar to describe the Ballard and Dibem that it is to convey the form of the Le Guin and Corray. The extensive use of quotation and concentration upon central themes in only a part of so much as it is here in this article. It only tells half of the story. The two strengths of a writer such as Richard Corray cannot be related, only experienced at a cumulative effect within a story or novel. And that, I am afraid, it is up to you, the reader.

I have tried to give the broad geographical outlines of his imaginary country, but the detailed explanation of those countries is a personal affair. The “idea” he was one to see in the city, basically unimportant to my mind as they are deeply literary devices. The true importance of his writing lies in its intangible sense of atmosphere, something that Orwell once termed the second great master for writing (47), mixed with an essentially political (47) moral sense of purpose. To say this, quite simply, that his writing asks questions of one that cannot really be answered in such an away or this, is to any something special of a writer. Which is the best recommendation I could give to any writer.

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[Page 16]
My Goodman of the Galaxy Books were recently analyzed in Fiction, the prestigious Critical Quarterly...

The reviewer was Mortimer Shread, whose acerbic pen has reduced many a reputation to tatters...

He commented on my unusual use of the full stop...

He says I've made a new art-form out of literary anarchy...

Overall, I think he was quite impressed...

HALF-LIFE

The life & times of Elmer T. Hack

Hey... you're Elmer T. Hack, aren't you? I've been wanting to meet you... I'm Marlon Ellington.

I'm compiling a mammoth anthology featuring all the best SF writers.

And I wanted to know if you ever wrote under a pseudonym...

You mean you want two contributions from me?

Not exactly... I've just received an unaddressed manuscript under an unfamiliar byline...

It was so godawful I thought maybe you were responsible for it...
Stephen R. Donaldson's epic fantasy trilogy, "The Chronicles Of Thomas Covenant The Unbeliever," seeks to break new ground in the genre; indeed, it accomplishes this to a degree. Tolkien-like fantasy insofar as the essential "historical" situation of "Land," with its noble leaders battling to preserve it against the evil (and essentially utterly deadly) attacks of Lord Foul the Black Magus, the 'principle of despair' — can be seen to derive from that of Middle-earth, it departs from Tolkien in two major ways. The first could be said to be "modernist" in content: Thomas Covenant, upon whom the eventual outcome of the great war to preserve the Land depends, is an almost exchanged nineteenth-century anti-hero, a man of "low" world broken by the losses engendered by his suffering fantasy — loss of wife and child, loss of livelihood, loss of human place in his society. The second deviation from Tolkien can be seen as structurally regressive: where Tolkien and Le Guin or McKillip, for example, create a whole world which we enter as we open the book, Donaldson enters "realistically" in our world and then transports his protagonist and us to the magic world of fantasy that is the Land. And by this play institutes his own "utopian" unfolding to suspend disbelief in that world. Shades of E. R. Burroughs.

"The Land" is an interesting place, however, and while I doubt Donaldson could create a Silmarillion — no one has created as rich an historical world as Middle-earth — he has managed to invent a convincing historical context for the half-century of strife in the Land which is the subject of his trilogy. The basic values which the Lords of Pendrune, the Lords of the Land, seek to preserve are values of pastoral mythology: it is possible the Land should remain a vision of pastoral beauty and innocence. The most difficult and dangerous thing for those in power to do, however, is to transcend despair in their worst moments of fear: this is something each will have to face at various times during the forty-seven years of battle which follow Thomas Covenant's first appearance in the Land. It's especially difficult because one of the greatest Lords of the Past did give in and nearly destroyed the Land forever in the so-called 'Devastation' in which he hoped also to bring Lord Foul low, but failed.

Covenant is brought to the Land by Lord Foul (and perhaps war-sharers by a force for good, but this could not have been used here) to introduce a possible hope in the Land while at the same time eventually coming to all to despise even more completely than they had previously thought possible. Covenant's wedding ring is white gold, the and of wild magic in the Land, a magic beyond even the control and power of Lord Foul, and if he can use this "wild magic" to fight Foul, Covenant could save the Land. But Covenant is a loser and though the power of the Land physically cures him when he is in it; he refuses to believe in it. He is a leper who is drawing the whole thing as an escape fantasy; it is not real — his sanity depends on that.

So, in his wanderings, he shares in many adventures, quests for power and knowledge, and makes the acquaintance and sometimes the friendship of many of the Land's people. Lord Mabnon — perhaps more than anyone else the Land's major protagonist in the story — From follower the Giant, Bannor the Bloodguard and others have their stories too, and Covenant does them justice, yet through it all Thomas Covenant, wrecked, moves to wreak loss and pain by his helplessness to act and his great ability to warp others in their acts in order to avoid committing himself as personal positive action against Lord Foul.

At the end of each volume, Covenant is returned to 'our' world but he is called back, the first time forty years on, the second time a few years later. During that time the Land is ravaged, the ordinary people are killed, savaged and ruined with the Land. Tolkien's Land is an upper class, therefore in this respect the magic must not to obey the orders of their leaders and be killed fighting the evil or simply by the evil, having its way as it conquers some part of the good place the fantasy is set; here, for example, during the "Pendrune War," the Womden leads his army so far that fully a third died before it ever reaches the battlefield where at last half the remnants fell, and this simply to draw the enemy's unwieldy forces into a trap. I suppose you either accept this fact to give up on high fantasy, or else this is the only choice again to us? Sure, the question can be asked, must there be great war and practically no human emotion in such worlds? Perhaps that's really two questions. At any rate, I don't believe this must be so, but the question is too vast to explore in a review). Covenant's own daughter, the result of a rape he committed during his first few days in the Land, is High Lord during his second visit but she, having fallen in love with him (why?) and then having been turned to impossible love by his desire to avoid committing himself to battle with Foul, falls through despairing hubris into Lord Foul's hands.

Finally, of course, Covenant, even he, is driven to fight for the Land he cannot fully believe in yet desperately needs. At the same time, however, how can he be so anti-climactic, how can he be so anti-climactic, how can he be I don't believe this must be so, but the question is too vast to explore in a review). Covenant's own daughter, the result of a rape he committed during his first few days in the Land, is High Lord during his second visit but she, having fallen in love with him (why?) and then having been turned to impossible love by his desire to avoid committing himself to battle with Foul, falls through despairing hubris into Lord Foul's hands.

Donaldson has shown in epic fantasy which holds your attention on the whole. He uses the negative power of fear more than the positive power of hope, but both are present to keep suspense high. By this I mean that what we see ahead will happen happens more often than what we hope will happen: this is one specific affect of the anti-hero as protagonist. Covenant is an intriguing fantasy protagonist, yes, but it is a bit much, quite a lot of course, he must forever torture himself with his thoughts of weakness, inability, fear and sickness, but as I began to count the number of times he reminds himself (and us) of his basic quandary as a leper, I began to wish Donaldson would have us to remember it on our own.

I guess I'm saying that Donaldson reveals his experience as a writer in a number of instances of over-writing (over-writing which implies a couple lack of trust in the reader on his part). Those could
not only be slightly shorter and much lighter, books could be a lot less ornate and obvious comparison on this level, as well as that of megalomania, is Le Guin's Earthsea Trilogy. Though his use of oracular language reveals a sincere love of language, his mastery of ordinary language discloses that he loves not wisely and not even that well, and that both he and his publishers possess a lack-syllabical editorial sense. I cannot find a really good example of simple error at the moment, but when Covenant Finally faces Lord Foul, we are told that Foul's presence 'reeked of death'. The implication of the phrase in context is that Foul is essentially foul-smelling, but 'death' means 'essential perfume of roses.' As I do not detect any here, this suggests to me that Donaldson thought the word rounded right and therefore did not check it out. There are many errors of this type, and many gratuitous descriptions which are far 'pastiche' and reveal something of a whim on his part.

Against this fault must be placed the often interesting handling of character-development and change (if an edifying especially of Bunnic, Fagin and Lamb and) the power of some natural descriptions (orfe suffering from the linguistic uncertainties mentioned above). On the other hand, although the philosophy of the work - a form of American humanism which tends to dwell because it is human-centric, unlike the Le Guin (which sees humanity as simply part of the process of the universe, not central to it) therefore the importance of the concept of 'balance' in Earthsea - is interesting, that is mostly because its presence is on the whole consciousness.

THE CHRONICLES OF THOMAS COWENANT THE UNBELIEVER is certainly head and shoulders above such a monstrosity as THE SWORD OF SHANNARA, but it is nowhere near the level of LORD OF THE RINGS OR EARTHSEA, or, to point to a fantasy which engages us entirely through the wit and linguistic complexity of its style, Brian Aldiss' glories THE MALACIA TAPESTRY. It is a pretty good read though not I think a work to read as those others and the fact that it is a first work suggests we may look forward to better work from Donaldson, if he can learn from his mistakes. Let us hope so.

Richard Francis
BLACK KROOFS VANISHES (Faber & Faber: London; 1979; pp. 192; ISBN 0 571 11280 7)
reviewed by Chris Evans

Let's start with a few quotes:

"Arthur left no more like his food, which was potatoes like white round eyeballs, and horrid grating bacon, lip-pink with one small white tooth in each rather."

"On the street it was still mid-afternoon even though it getting on for half past two. The sun was still high in the sky, many of the shops were still open; and people were bustling about. That's why we're not wearing evening clothes which happened before the pubs gathered momentum, when one sensed that the whole population, discrete but unanimous, were watching Notification."  

"Sheila was in the kitchen, sifting out the vegetables she'd bought earlier that day... it was the sort of job that could take her a surprising amount of time, as though the procession, carrots and onions lurked in the dark recesses of the shopping bag in a split of kitchen irritance."

"She turned to his window and smiled at him, or rather, gave him a detailed sketch of a smile, the expression evolved in a haze of tears."  

A peculiar book, this. Richard Francis has written his first novel in what can only describe as a rambling, rambling style, listing his prose with slang and idiomatic expressions. His cast are a stunningly ordinary and rather boring lot who spend a great deal of time eating, going for walks, or having inconsequential conversations with another. The book is written in a series of short chapters which are individually so light-hearted as to be almost inane, and I must confess that I nearly abandoned it after about thirty pages, simply because its surface action is so mundane and the character's interior monologues little more than gaff. What kept me reading was the author's style which, though frequentlyagrammatical and ramblingly punctuated and often concluded with domestic trivialities, sometimes possesses a weird sort of charm by virtue of the frequent appearance of coarseness yet not simple metaphors for us: "There was something about the sky, a lameness and self-sufficiency, which reminded him of cold dinners." It's a very English book, filled with all sorts of homely references which would be barely comprehensible to a foreign reader. I cannot, in all honesty, say that it is well written or that it has an original plot, but it does have a kind ofumbling eccentricity which makes it likable despite its deficiencies. The plot, by the way, concerns the disappearance of Blackpool and the subsequent attempts to find out where it has gone, although the author is less concerned with the actual mechanics of the story than with the reactions of his cast, which vary from surprise to outright indifference. Imagine an episode of Coriolanus of which deals with an obvious invasion, and you'll have some idea of the flavour of the book. There's even a character based on Edgar Wolting. What more can I say?

William Burroughs
NOVA EXPRESS (Panther; 8pp: 157pp: ISBN 0 986 003771)
reviewed by Andrew Darlington

Burroughs has been known to quote the dictum of writing being 'fifty years behind' painting - and through his own work he has attempted to close that gap, utilizing techniques assimilated from that sphere to visual. The technique of collage fragmentation and juxtaposition of language into odd, unexpected combinations of afterthought, originality. In the "foreword" note he proclaims the technique 'an extension of Brian Grinn's cut-up method' - but it could just as easily be read back as the Donor-crew's filling around the Cohler Volage in 1918. Another aspect of collage is its black-hole ability to draw the densities of dirt - non-rhymes, disc or feathers, nails and bits of feet's wall-paper into alternate universes, mostly delivered by from long on the Gallery walls. Burroughs adopt a simpler approach for language, drawing on the parallel cultures of N.Y., subway late. The complex, continually-shifting inflections of Bah-hippie jargon, the huge tortoise symbol of metaphors of junk-argot, the subversive intent of the inclusions forced into existence by the precarious herself-wound of menz-choos, the through with adorning hyper-speak and stick technical jargon. A composite of many writers living and dead.

NOVA EXPRESS is allegedly a Science Fiction novel - it says so on the blurb: 'Novel' as in new, "Express" as in fast, quick. But it's not strictly SF (despite the introduction of 9", a character whose eyes we erects a peculiarly of not either or, or). It is to a strictly novel in the sense that, say, Mailand would use the term. But that hardly matters - such categorisation is the tail of book-sellers and classed minds. The removal of all mental partitions and borders is a necessary prerequisite for reading Burroughs, but it's worth the effort: there's a million poems in NOVA EXPRESS and each one earns a Government Health Warning, as Bill Jenner like The Sublime Kid, the Noo Police, the Poo, the Planet People of Uranus (pronounced 'yooyun'), the crew people from a land of groov without mirrors, the Deep D-N-R and each one of them is lethal. Each one of them either a purifier or a mark in the apocalyptic Nova War for the destruction of the biological, the destruction of the very DNA of real that I'm. Completed by Burroughs in Tangier, 1964, and re-issued regularly since, this is more than a novel, and probably more than a painting too.

Gordon R. Dickson
reviewed by Brian Stablesford

The partial which provides the narrative core of this novel appeared in Analog in 1973, as was then the relatively straightforward story of an interstellar exhibition to Mars doomed to failure because it is run by politicians according to the principles of diplomatic and political expediency. Dickson has carefully fleshed it out, adding
much detail to do with the political chicanery on the ground and the
effects which the whole sequence of events has on the lives of those
touched by its consequences. It has, in the process, been transformed
from a two-dimensional novel into a richly detailed, multi-layered,
contemporary novel. The work of Arthur Hoidal does it no harm in terms of its
readability, but does it no good in terms of its didactic ambitions. I do not think that the secret of s/f's commercial success lies in aspiring
to the condition of mass appeal, and I don't for a moment think that
Gordon Dickson has consciously tried to move in that direction -
nevertheless, I fear that the result he has achieved is closer to mass
appeal historiography than any genuine depth of feeling

Dickson has obviously put a lot of work into this book, and it has not
been wasted - it is a skillful piece of writing, neatly executed.
Unfortunately, the characters are still rather wooden and the political
double-dealing introduced to repackage the plot serves to blur the
real issues of political morality even while helping to maintain
suspense. It is possible that Dickson was only trying to hit a bigger
and richer market than he can usually aspire to by putting in a few
touches borrowed from production-line best-sellers, but he has always
given the impression of taking the ideative content of his work more
seriously than would be implied by such a cynical strategy. I believe
that he really is trying to say something here, but it is nothing that we
have not heard before, and the vehicle he has chosen to carry his
message is not as well-assimilated to the job as he must have feared.
TIME WILL CALL is a good, solid read which will keep its readers
interested, but it will make no lasting impression.

Ursula LeGuin

PLANET OF EXILE (Victor Gollancz, 1979; 140pp; £3.99; ISBN 0
575 02956 6.) THE LAFTH OF HEAVEN (Victor Gollancz, 1979;
184pp; £4.25; ISBN 0 575 01385 0.) ORSIAN TALES (Victor
Gollancz, 1977; 170pp; £3.75; ISBN 0 575 02286 6.)

Reviewed by David Wingrove.

Perhaps it is superfluous to attempt anything more than a cursory
introduction to the work of Ursula LeGuin she already commands a
considerable audience for both her novels and short stories, and her
critical reputation is second to none. It is generally agreed that she is
one of the genre's finest craftsmen (if she'll forgive my the
allusion to the battle of sexual equality that still rages), and the
simple quality of her writing has won her both the intelligence
and the emotion. In the introduction to PLANET OF EXILE (reissued
in durable hardback form at long last) she defines the theme of her
writing as "Maurice's", an insight that helps the reader to understand
certain elements of her work.

Each of these three books is about磨Navigate of minds, of ideals, and
occasionally of a more literal kind. And they are not simply about
maurice, as has often been commented, but, as LeGuin herself remarks,
are far more subtle examinations of inter-personal relationships.
LeGuin writes about people - but what else is there? She herself has
stated "What good are all the objects in the universe, If there is no
subject?" and in the same essay ("Science Fiction & Mrs Brown")
she pushed the need for recognizable people in fiction - something sadly
missing in the bulk of science fiction. But before I go down into that
old argument of ideas versus characterization I'll focus upon these
three volumes.

While they evidence three very different stylistic approaches, the
differences in thematic content are not only skin-deep. In each of them LeGuin
explores the raw essence of her characters, and her writing possesses
the incisive quality of a surgeon's scalpel.

PLANET OF EXILE is LeGuin's second novel, first published in 1966,
though written in 1958. Much of it pre-figures THE LEFT HAND OF
DARKNESS in the stark qualities of its external setting, and there are
close similarities in the two books, commented by the common
background (paramount by many of LeGuin's books) of the "Amerind
All Worlds" - possibly the single vision of a genuinely harmonious
galactic confederation that so far presente posses. It is an adult
fantasy of considerable power. Its simple, highly visual style is that of
the story-teller, creating images in the minds of the gathered
audience; a future rooted in the medieval past with its fear of
"The idea also has a more sense of 'withdrawal' in this early novel
- something that it more exaggerated in LeGuin's more recent work where
the less of a sense (right in "Conversations at Night") creates a state of
humility."

"They withdraw."
"They lived always a little more humble, coming to value the simple
over the elaborate, calm over strife, courage over success." (p. 32)

And fitted against this image of the simplification of the ultra-
sophisticated is LeGuin's vision of un-civilised men who seem to be
"a fantastic child doing a step before, a step behind." (p. 32).

The contrasts in style and construction by LeGuin are made more
poignant by her choice of "bonding" material - telepathy in this case, as it is
between Gatty At and Bokani in THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS.
Its use as a genuine means of communication (in its trained service of
creating understanding and honest clarity and not in its modern,
erroneous sense of communication as absorption) between Ratley and
Aga is crucial. And, finally, as the two fill the simplicity of the
 elemental handshake allows scope for a final resolution, as the
old chief of the hills - a triumph of balance;

"To die, then, he must seem across the black changing landscape
of his boyhood, he must re-enter the whole world of storms."

It captures up that same mood of either by that is engendered by the
images of death's domain in Earthsea, by the land of storms in Left Manual
by the wall that guards the landscape on the anarchistic planet of
Anarhea in The Dispossessed. The undeniable poetry of this book takes
its cumulative part of the emotional, the cold, specified other of Ursula
LeGuin's imagination; a simple beauty that is all too rare in the genre.
George Orr has the power to dream "effectively," to change reality down to the smallest memory of the most mundane person through his dreams. The novel follows his attempts to handle this power and the abuse (kindly though the imagination) made of this gift when a psychologist, Dr. William Haber, tries to make the world a better place by channeling George's dreams. This home-ask gives LeGuin ample opportunity to deal with the obvious questions of morality such power poses, to lead the reader gently to the humane conclusion that choice is more important than the brave new-world of gray, peaceful, healthy, self-expansive people. The catalogue of "things come" by Dr Haber's personal guide and then given to the world is a last-incestive science fiction writer, living in Ursula LeGuin's vision. The catalogue (read page 166) is slowly compiled, reality livens through dreams, changes George Orr learns to stand alone and make an ethical choice. He is cured and tops his powers; the changes cease. It is very much a formula Phil Dick has proven on numerous occasions, but here LeGuin delivers it with a deftness of style Dick often-pityingly merangues. Orr does not stick to his conclusion by lessenin' he does not work out a solution 'by working' over does he 'reason it by using reason', he lets understanding stop at whatever cannot be understood and in the final pages we learn that Dr Haber, unable to live up to the words of Chuang Tzu, is 'destroyed on the battle of heaven' and ends his days in the asylum.

Which leaves me with the final of the volumes to hand, ORISIANIAN TALE, a book I find myself still for too close to as yet and thus I hope I'll be excused some subjective tone in which this last section is couched. Works that genuinely move me both intellectually and emotionally are rare and this volume (happier with THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS and THE DISPOSSESSED) can be placed in that category. There is not a weak story in this fine collection, and there are two pieces, "Conversations at High" and "An die Musik" which I consider pure art. The serial episodes have swaps aside in these roles of a fictional band and a series of characters are presented for our observation, naked on an empty stage. It is, in my opinion, LeGuin at her very best, excepting the necessities of genre convention to give us the blind man, Scottish, ungracious in his love affair with his life, sensitive to everything but the light, to give us Ladafar Goya, a grand composer whose talent must be buried beneath the circumstances of his birth, his marriage, his family, and finally to give us Pato, Zinda and Fressy, playing in their imaginary countries of childhood.

It is not sufficient to say, that Ursula LeGuin is one of the genre's best writers (gender being irrelevant) because she justifies (in the same vein of unioveling) the belief held by many that the genre has some worth, some importance, beyond being a provider of simplistic, trite stories ennuiing that continue to say very little and at considerable length. All these of these books say very much, say eloquently and with economy.

"He sat still a long time. Music will not save us, Otto Egerin had said. Not you, or me, or her, the big golden-voiced woman who had no children and wanted none; nor Lahamman who sang the song; nor Schubern who had written it and was a hundred years dead. What good is music?"

Name, Gates thought, and that is the point. To the world and its states and empires and factions, music says, "You are irrelevant!" and arrogant and gentle as a god, to the suffering man it says only, "Listen." For being saved is not the point. Music says nothing. Merciful, unsentimental, it dances and breaks down all the obstacles, the houses men build for themselves, that they may see the sky.

(pp 144/145, "An die Musik")

Arthur C. Clarke

THE FOUNDATIONS OF PARADISE; Gollancz; 1979; ISBN 0 575 02520 4; 256pp; £4.95

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid.

A new novel by Arthur C. Clarke is an event, but does this rate safely on his name? Is there anything within the novel's to live up to the reputation?

Reading anything by Arthur C. Clarke is an exercise in nostalgia for me these days. I had read the usual Asimov and Heinlein when I was younger, but it was 2001, the film and the book, that first turned me into a loving fan. Just as it eventually to be disenchanted with science fiction, so I quickly became disillusioned with the justified work of Asimov, Heinlein and Clarke. Hence my attitude as I approached this new novel. I wanted to enjoy it for old times' sake, but I rather doubted I would.

Apparently, Clarke has claimed that this is his best novel to date. I never pay much attention to such claims by authors and THE FOUNDATIONS OF PARADISE does not begin approach works like CHILDHOOD'S END.

It is, however, a far more ambitious novel than we are used to from Clarke, particularly of late. He has tried to invest his characters with some degree of humanity and does at least manage to flesh out the cardboard a little. He has tried his hand at a more adventurous use of language, sometimes even if the sun does seem to be constantly "wasting" in the early pages. Indeed, the prose does tend to vary wildly between the purple and the leaden, and some-where in there it is inevitable that the occasional felicity should creep in. For such small mercies, let us be deeply grateful. Particularly as it does not last long; Clarke quickly settles down to his more usual writing style, which never rises above the merely functional.

One of the things that has put me off Clarke is his worship of the bull-"all-lord-and-all god of Technology. Linked with this, though it was directly counter to his established reputation, is an astounding lack of vision. The main body of this novel is set in the middle years of the 22nd century; yet the world he describes is recognizably contemporary in structure and attitude, with the cold, beaten-down, 'futuristic' flourish.

Oh, there is the odd point of difference. Young people, it seems, have to do two years of social service, somewhat on the Chinese model. But rich, retired diplomat and celebrity (a Kissinger type) Rajalingha wins three of them in a state lottery to become his servants.
He is obviously a benevolent master, well loved by his servants and he makes it clear that servants are a rare privilege. Even so, the men little different from the privileged of wealth enjoyed by a good old-fashioned 19th-century capitalist.

There is, indeed, a lot of the 19th-century capitalist in Clarke. It was a comfortable, short-sighted age for the wealthy who could see nothing beyond the confines of society except as they knew it, and the benefits of material progress. Clarke happens to be obsessed with the virtues of technology, but only in so far as it will shore up our contemporary western way of life. We are presented with a world apparently freed of our modern world problems. Saturn power has been mastered, giving us cheap, clean power and no new problems. There is a world government, presumably seeking to create a new world order, apparently free of all the vast political troubles without generating any new ones. There is no mention of poverty or unemployment or anything like it, which is hardly surprising considering we are being told the concept of politics is in the air.

Yet for all these superb changes, and not a few lesser ones, on the sidelines of this story, this is not a very wealthy society. There are very few labour-saving devices that have been added to technology's repertoire; but the message seems to be that science can make things better for us, but not really different. It is a bland and comforting notion, and totally unrealistic. We have only to consider the seeds of changes that are predicted over the next few years with the advent of micropatterns to realize that advances of the scale Clarke predicts would have an incredible effect upon the shape of our lives.

It is clear that Clarke is trying for this, but the nearest he comes to a rather slightly sanctimonious and one-sided view of the world which is the beginning of the sequence of events that will lead to his vision of the future, becomes a problem for the late Viscount Morgan's thesis when he was a child, which in turn was the thing that led him into becoming an engineer. The incidents seem to come straight from "A Child's Introduction to Psychology", and the parallel is so blatantly unhelpful that it seems any import for even a plot it might have had. If we wished to see a reminder of the facts, this is just one more demonstration that Clarke is a master of mechanisms, not people. The first written of the book, where it at least manages in tumour off the ground, is further prove.

As an aside I would mention that I just cannot believe that a non-mathematician would write on such a thing at all. For this is the story of a man who murdered her father and was killed by his brother.

Nor can I accept that Chronicles starting from the first century after Clarke would include such details as the fact that a cat had nine lives, even if that was cost carrying a thing to his death. Nor do I think that four sentences can be thought of as: "My name is Viscount Morgan, I am Chief Engineer of Terran Construction's Earth Division. My last project was the O Brother Bridge. Now I want to talk about something inordinately more ambitious." (p. 53)

I would instantly capture the full attention of a top architect and the world's most famous journalist. Come to that, I don't really think that any industry would call itself Terran Construction And would a copy of the OBD and the Encyclopaedia Terran be brought to a man on alien computer to speak perfect English? The chance: If you are tapping from scratch it is not enough to define a word with a man's words in the same language, you have to point things out. Also, language is not just the words used, but the way in which they are used and the conceptual framework that underlies them. This information is not usually contained in a dictionary or an encyclopaedia. And while I am on about these three things, let Clarke have to make his paper more as an old film called something like Space Wars 2000 (p. 149).

These are more, wiggling little inconsequential point.

The book is crammed with things like these that accumulate into a general effect with the novel. It is all thought gone into small details, but these are all vital to the book as the larger concepts.

But to return to the plot: Viscount Morgan, engineer extraordinare, wants to build an elevator from Earth to a satellite in synchronous orbit. Unfortunately the ideal site is a sacred mountain on Taprobane. The scene is set for a dramatic clash of personalities and cultures, and particularly a science-religion clash. But Clarke backs away from this Off stage there is a legal battle and the Buddhist monks win. We learn about it from a gaming reference in a later dialogue. In fact, too much of the book is like Clarke actually acknowledges this. Some years before the main events of this story an alien spacecraft had flown past trading knowledge. This is one of the many oddities of a story that crop up in the course of the novel, in the manner of much contemporary SF. He concludes: Human civilization could never be the same. (p. 79). All the more remarkable, then, that we did not see any effects of this alien contact, or least not in Clarke's belated material response. Did we learn of the alien technology from these highly developed aliens? It would not appear so.

The aliens, however, did have one major effect: they brought about the end of most of the world's religions. A point Clarke tries to make very strongly:

"It had put an end to the billions of words of pious gibberish with which apparently intelligent men had draped their minds for centuries." (p. 88)

Yet the astronomer, Dr. Charles Goldsby, having declared: "Now that that which is effectively destroyed all religious faith, we can at last pay serious attention to the concept of God." (p. 84)
But not for ever, all is not yet lost for the range of technology. The Independent Republic of Mares is interested in the idea of the elevator in order to convince them finally, Morgan has no stage demonstration on Earth. This time he wins permission to use Toppham as the site of the test. And the scene is set, half-way through the novel, for the final battle of ideas. But, the time-honoured, kilometre-long thread of hypnopompism is to be lowered from a Weather Control satellite. And, as it descends, a freak hurricane blows up. Here we have all the ingredients of a tremendously climatic scene. Indeed, Clarke does manage to embed the scene with a fair amount of dramatic tension. Yet how much more effective would it have been had he described the scene, rather than letting it hang upon a series of figures that include such things as rates of descent, height and tension upon the thread. For example, the figures tell us that the thread is heading all over the place; but the people on the ground seem to be as little affected as by a stiff breeze.

The weather is all over when we learn that the storm was conjured up by Chom Goldberg, who has given up the Buddhist monastic to become head of Weather Control in this region. Moreover, he is not only a genius, but arguably it is revealed that he is mad. It is too much, springing this all on us without warning, I do not object to a mad genius, but Clarke should at least have played it by giving advance notice that Goldberg was head of Weather Control, and that he was mad. As it is, it appears to be some sort of blanket condemnation— as if his madness is a natural corollary of his being a scientist who turned to religion.

In the sections up to this point Clarke has created the framework for a really good, dramatic novel. The clash of ideas and ideologies, building up to this physical clash, with nature taking on the role of scavenger in the hands of the mad scientist, ending up with a nicely ironic conclusion as the storm blows some rare golden butterflies up onto the mountains, fulfilling a prophecy that tends the manta to abandon the mountain. It is easy to note this isn't the novel we get, because the book he did produce is so lacking in drama and convincing characterisation.

Take, for example, the central character, Morgan. He is supposed to be dynamic, powerful, unpleasant; or, at least, this is the picture you are supposed to build up from the testimony of other characters. I have read before that the character has more flesh than has been evident in Clarke's novels recently. Even so, Morgan is called an 'awful lot more than he is shown to be. Instead he appears to be a sort of boxer, all-business super-scientist, sf-written for the use of.

Capriciously, he is clever—whereas Clarke comes up with a problem, he puts the solution into Morgan's mouth. And he notes that he is right; but since Clarke also believes his right, and convinces the reader that this is not giving much room to anyone who might disagree with him, it seems at my point of conceitness, Morgan keeps distant all too easily, too gracefully, when the manta win their court case— he's not at all the character should be. In short, Clarke seems to be afraid to make his man as objectionable as he is supposed to be.

But back to the plot... The end of section 3, with the butterflies driving the Buddhist manta all the sacred mountain, marks a conventional break in the novel. From here on in, it is the old familiar Clarke back on old familiar ground; and hence more relaxed, Morgan is new-fangled to build his Space Elevator on Earth off all. There are no by-the-book passages about one-knot takeoff or the alien visitation. Characters like Goldha, the mad monk and Rajamangala drop quietly into the nuts and bolts work of building the

In passing, the objections of a 'crackerjack' professor about venturing are dealt with in rather perfunctory fashion, and we are through to the real meat of the novel. In the middle of building the Space Elevator all the teachers suddenly fall on one of the vehicles and a group of people find themselves stranded halfway between Earth and the satellite. Morgan's complaints about lack of drama here, this is the sort of technological drama that works in the film turned on it. It is A FALLOF MOONDUST reviewed, but none the worse for it. Where this sort of it is concerned, Clarke has few equals.

The big problem with THE FOUNTAINS OF PARADISE is that it contains at least two separate novels, and possibly two or three short stories as well. In squaring all that into the length of one novel he has sacrificed so much that every point lost out. A less mammoth work and care was needed on the early sections. And perhaps the final section, with a little expansion, could have stood as a novella on its own. Indeed it might well have benefited from that.

To conclude, THE FOUNTAINS OF PARADISE does have the makings of a Clarke's finest book but unfortunately the end product does not live up to that promise.

Reviewed by Chris Evans.

I was disappointed with this book. Compared with the wit and invention of MONDAY BARGAINS ON SATURDAY or the first section of ROADSID PICTURES, PRISONERS OF POWER seems somewhat saddled with plot and pedantry of imagination. There are, to be sure, some good moments in the book— the Strugatskys are intelligent and resourceful writers—but overall I feel that they had wasted a good idea on an unflattering story line.

Maxim Kamman, an explorer, is on Earth. He is stranded on an alien planet where he is adopted by the human-like natives who seem to assume that he has come from a remote mountain region and use his ignorance of their world to lose memory. Maxim soon learns the language, makes friends, and is enlisted in the Legionnaires, a select group of soldiers who are fighting a war against the degens for domination— their word for mutants. The society in which he finds himself is highly militaristic and the story follows Maxim's gradual discovery of how the masses are being manipulated by the ruling elite. The novel's title reflects its central image, for the people are indeed prisoners of power, their unnecessarily militaristic attitudes being artificially induced by the dictatorship. Maxim's travels among the various bands of natives before finally discovering the secret of the secret control, the authors packing back each layer of the plot—on top up to the last few pages

What failed to convince me in this book was the Strugatskys' imagined society, which seemed to be an outgrowth of a Twenty-first Century European state under a repressive regime to pass as an alien world.

While this may be to the Strugatskys' purpose on a symbolic level (by way of making it clear to the reader that the planet is really representative of pre-modern Earth), I value the integrity of the book itself in showing the reader's credibility and, off, we would expect some exotic element in an alien society. Equally disturbing to Maxim's adventures, which rely too much on coincidental meetings and improbable escapes from difficult situations to be convincing. If synthesized, this book's plot would read like a typical adventure story. There's nothing wrong with this, of course, as long as the author is only concerned with telling a settling good story. But the Strugatskys have serious palates to get nervous in this book which would have been better presented within a more credible storyline. As it is, an innovative set of characters wander through a science-fiction with too many pulp tropes and the result is an uneasy amalgam of the serious and the silly, as if the rest of 'Hamlet' had been plunged into a "Flash Gordon" episode. Better luck next time, common.
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