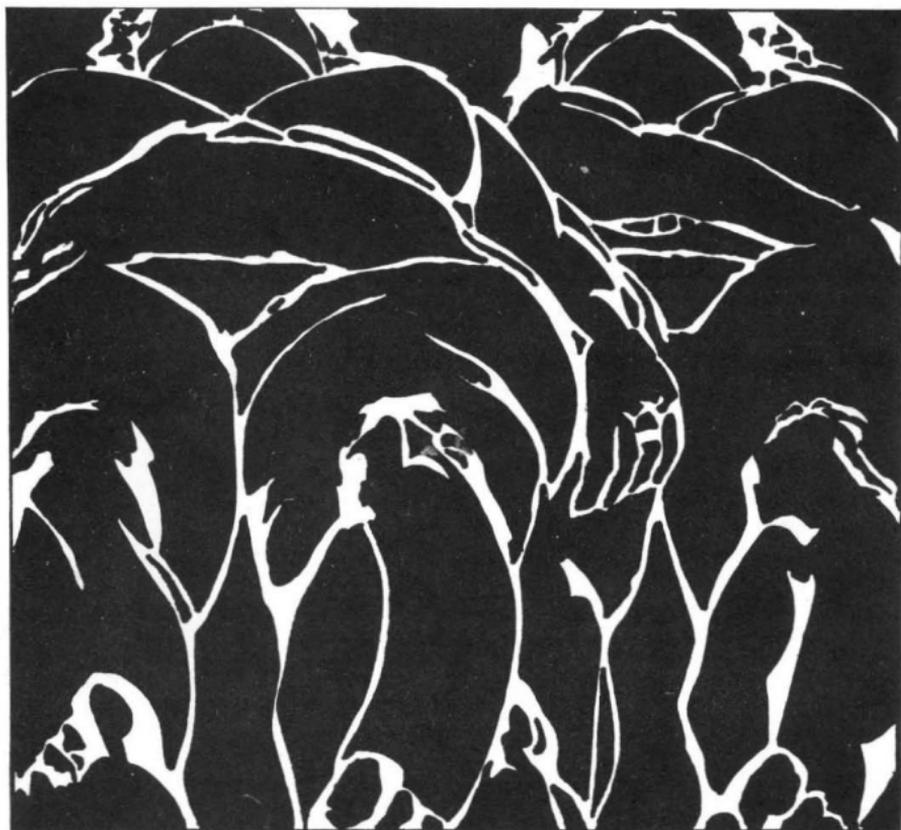


VECTOR

75p

Nº 99

The Critical Journal of the BSFA



bsfa

VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

EDITOR : KEVIN SMITH
10 Cleves Court, St Marks Hill, Surbiton, Surrey, KT6 4PS.

REVIEWS EDITOR: JOSEPH NICHOLAS
Room 9, 94 St George's Square, Pimlico, London, SW1.

Printed by the BSFA.

Thanks are due to John and Eve Harvey, who actually did the printing work, and to Eve for her help with the typing also.

The BSFA printing service is available to BSFA members. Please contact John and Eve for details.

John and Eve Harvey, 55 Blanchland Road, Morden, Surrey, SM4 5NE.

ADVERTISING RATES 1980

Back cover	£40
Interior - full page	£30
half page	£20
qtr. page	£10

All copy A4 or division for reduction to A5. Copy to be black on white, camera ready. Please leave a half inch margin all round. Quotes will be given for special requirements.

All advertising correspondence to:

Trevor Briggs
Business Manager
6 The Plains
Crescent Road
Chingford
London
E4 6AU

Tel. 01-529 3361, evenings only.

VECTOR is published four times a year -- in April, June, October and December -- by The British Science Fiction Association Limited.

ISSN 0505-0448

Membership of THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION costs £6.00 per year. For this almost insignificant sum you receive 6 mailings per year, containing MATRIX, PAPERBACK INFERNO and either FOCUS or VECTOR. MATRIX contains news and views of the science fiction world, PAPERBACK INFERNO reviews the newly published paperback books, FOCUS is about writing SF, and the contents of VECTOR are adequately demonstrated in the rest of this issue. Membership also gives you access to the various BSFA services, the new monthly meetings in London, and the wide world of science fiction.

All membership enquiries should be sent to the Membership Secretary:
Sandy Brown, 18 Gordon Terrace, Blantyre G72 9NA, Lanarkshire, Scotland.

Other enquiries and general correspondence about the BSFA should be sent to the Chairman (we have to find something for him to do):

Alan Dorey, 20 Hermitage Woods Crescent, St John's, Woking, Surrey, GU21 1UE.



The British Science Fiction Association

Contents

EDITORIAL

Towards a Critical Standard	Kevin Smith	4
-----------------------------	-------------	---

STANDPOINT

Guns of the Timberland	Joseph Nicholas	8
Book Reviewing, the Objective Critique	James Corley	10
That's Entertainment?	Andy Sawyer	12
Wu Li = Nonsense?	Dave Langford	13

BOOK REVIEWS

Bill Carlin, Alan Dorey, Steev Higgins, Paul Kincaid, Janice Maule, Chris Morgan, Joseph Nicholas, Brian Smith, Kevin Smith, Ian Williams	15
--	----

LETTERS

Robert Gibson, Martin Perry, Pete Lyon, Jonathan P.R. Palfrey, Phyllis Eisenstein	33
--	----

A R T

Gaynor Smith	Cover
D. West	7, 24

All contents copyright (c) 1980 individual contributors

T H I S I S S U E

Last issue, the letter column returned. This time it is showing distinct signs of life, and a couple of letters arrived from people in America -- Cy Chauvin and Alex Eisenstein -- too late for inclusion there. (This is the last page to be typed, which is why I can include them here.) Cy liked number 98, and Alex wrote a very detailed refutation of Simon Ounsley's article on Alfred Bester.

This issue also sees the introduction of a new, permanent section to Vector -- "Standpoint". It is similar to the "Talking Points" that Rob Holdstock and Chris Evans have introduced in Focus (though that doesn't mean it's not a good idea), but it is perhaps more controversial in intent. More about the rationale of "Standpoint" on p14.

The editorial is the first step on what might be considered a rather ambitious project: to derive a method of science fiction criticism that treats SF as part of the wider world of literature, not as a peculiar little section deserving of different methods. SF is a literary form, and cannot be exempted from a literary method of criticism. However, it does have qualities not found elsewhere in literature, and these qualities must be given their due weight.

This theme is taken up also in three of the "Standpoint" articles and some of the letters, making it the major emphasis of the issue.

Finally, this issue's end-of-page fillers are taken from Starstormers by Nicholas Fisk, published by Knight Books, which is apparently the first of a series.

* The ships were so big, so vast, so fast. Faster than sound. The noise reached *
* you after the ship made it. That was why there was never any warning. *

Editorial Towards a Critical Standard

In Vector 98, Chris Priest described two sorts of critics -- in his own words: "those who have discovered SF is literature, and have promptly gone barmy" and those who are "the crowd pleasers..., who shy away from criticism and call themselves 'reviewers'" -- and said that: "Neither kind of critic is worth a damn. They say nothing to the writer or the reader, and neither is able to join a larger debate." In the same issue, Paul Kincaid reviewed Writers of the Twenty-First Century, edited by Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg, found it full of "posturing 'critics'" of the first kind, and roundly condemned them and the book.

Chris provoked a response, which you can find in this issue's letter column; Paul did not. This would seem to suggest that SF readers instinctively find the 'academics' abhorrent, and feel no need to make further comment about them, and also that they are wary of attempts to make SF, both the writing and the criticism, more literate. There would seem to be a feeling that to make SF more literate is necessarily to make it less entertaining, a view represented by Martin Perry in the letter column. This is just not so, as Andy Sawyer explains in his 'Standpoint' article, 'That's Entertainment?' I can understand the concern; after all, the main reason for buying a novel or short story collection is to be entertained by it. The point is that there are different ways of being entertained. The most obvious one is for the novel or short to be a rattling good yarn, and this is most often what people mean by 'entertainment'. But it is only one way, and entertainment can be found in an elegant style, or in the wickedly accurate observation of human behaviour, or in the imagery an author uses, for example. The best books tend to have more than one of these attributes. I enjoy Leslie Charteris's The Saint because they are rattling good yarns told with superb style, and I enjoy Jane Austen because her style is marvellous and her observation deadly, though her plots are simple in the extreme. It is possible for an excess of one attribute to make up for the lack of another. The problem is to decide how to evaluate the various attributes, one against another.

In their articles, Chris and Paul dismissed both the 'academic' critic and the subjective 'reviewer'. By implication, the need is for a middle ground. I need not go into detail here to justify that statement, as the hard work has been done for me by Joseph Nicholas in his 'Standpoint' article, 'Guns of the Timberland'. (You could, in fact, go to that article now, and then return here.)

Joseph ends by calling for a theory of criticism that retains traditional literary virtues, but gives due weight to the peculiarly science-fictional attribute -- one I deliberately didn't mention earlier -- of "ideas". How this could be done or where we could most usefully start was beyond the scope of his article, he said. It is not beyond the scope of Vector, which seems as good a place as any to begin. The purpose of my editorial this issue is to start the ball rolling, and to set out the objectives that any critical standard must be able to fulfil. I am not, as yet, prepared to give an answer to the "how", but over the next few issues I hope to be able to present the views and ideas of a large number of people (i.e. you) on various aspects of SF criticism, so that at the end of it we should have a pretty fair idea.

What, then, do we want of our critical standard? The first thing is what we don't want; we don't want to be able to define SF. This might seem downright perverse in a standard being developed specifically to cope with SF, but there is a very good reason for it. This should be obvious when we consider the first thing we do want: the standard must be able to deal with SF as widely different as Ursula LeGuin's The Dispossessed, Isaac Asimov's Foundation trilogy, and Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and The Grey Mouser stories on a basis that is, a priori, equal.

Since the standard must have that wide a scope, it is but a little matter to widen it a bit more, so that it can cope with, say, John Fowles's The Magus and The Ebony Tower, or Doris Lessing's Shikasta and The Summer Before the Dark... or Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. Why not? Too often in the past attempts to find a method of SF criticism have depended on first defining SF, and then applying different criteria to those books falling into the category from those falling out of it. The major problem, of course, was, is and always will be defining SF in the first place. However, this should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the approach is, in any case, fundamentally unsound.

To take an analogy from physics: the Bohr theory of the hydrogen atom was a bodged-together affair of classical physics and arbitrary rules; it worked for hydrogen, but couldn't be extended to the other atoms. Quantum mechanics, on the other hand, does explain all the atoms (well, nearly), and can also be applied to classical mechanical systems because the quantum effects become negligible. We are looking for a 'quantum mechanical theory of criticism' which we can apply to any fiction.

In this context, the definition of SF can clearly be seen to be a red herring, and a pretty remarkable red herring at that, judging by the number of people it has led up the garden path. (Does this mean that SF includes mainstream? It might rather look like it, but the question doesn't have much relevance.)

The next requirement for our standard is that it be flexible in its application. By this I mean that it should allow for personal interpretation by the critic using it, which implies that it must allow for disagreement between critics, without endangering the structure of the standard itself. Essentially, we are admitting the subjective nature of criticism and incorporating it into our standard, rather than trying to eliminate it by use of a rigid set of rules.

Rigid rules would be downright dangerous, for both SF and the standard. It would be likely to inhibit experimentation by writers, for fear of being condemned, with disastrous consequences to literature. On the other hand, if experimenters persevered and produced works that broke the rules, but which were generally accepted as good, then the standard would obviously have failed. This is how we find ourselves today, with the traditional approach to criticism being unable to cope with SF, and a number of the best SF novels being denied their rightful place in the general literary establishment. Our standard should contain within itself the means by which to evolve to cope with new forms of literature. This would be impossible with a rigid, prescriptive standard.

We must remember, however, that admitting the subjective aspect of criticism does not mean giving way to subjectivity entirely. The requirement is for a framework within which subjectivity can be given a certain freedom, whilst at the same time being recognised for what it is.

A further flexibility we require is dictated by the variations in the intended readership of the critic. Quite obviously a forty word squib in the book review page of a daily newspaper is not the same thing as a two thousand word appraisal in Vector or Foundation, with the paragraph-long review in Paperback Inferno being somewhere in between the two. Can a single critical standard be put to three such different uses? The answer must be "Yes" if our standard is to be standard.

So, we are looking for a critical standard which is wide enough in scope to encompass all novels and short stories, whether SF or not, flexible enough in application to allow subjective judgement and constructive disagreement between critics, flexible enough in intent to allow its use for all types of criticism, and yet retaining an essentially objective framework.

Oh, is that all?

Quite likely the task is beyond the bounds of possibility, but there seems little point in trying for anything less. A critical standard that enabled one to evaluate,

say, The Fountains of Paradise, but was a little hazy about Rendezvous With Rama, and totally opaque with Childhood's End would not even be of use to Arthur C. Clarke.

However, we are helped in our search by an over-riding principle that is implied in what I said earlier -- that we must be able to deal with widely differing SF on a basis that is, a priori, equal. We are, in other words, trying to be fair to the book being criticised. Only by being fair all the time can we build a body of criticism in which individual critical pieces can be compared one with another, which can be readily interpreted by its readers, and which can be accepted by reader, writer and critic alike -- whether or not any particular piece of criticism is agreed with by all parties, an event most unlikely to happen. The moment a critic departs from fairness in his criticism -- influenced, perhaps, by a hangover or a rebuff from the author's mistress -- he destroys any confidence others might have had in his opinions, and undermines the edifice of criticism generally. Critics have a responsibility to readers and writers that does not permit sloppiness, vindictiveness or casual side-swipes designed primarily for show in what they write. (Vector reviewers take note!)

We have now established in general terms the objectives we have to meet with a critical standard, and laid down an as yet ill-defined over-riding concept -- fairness. However, none of this would enable someone to write a review according to the standard. In the next issue of Vector I want to expand on the concept of fairness and begin to construct the objective framework. In the meantime I want to hear your views on the subject; I don't want to have to do all the hard work...

Kevin Smith

M I S C E L L A N I U M S

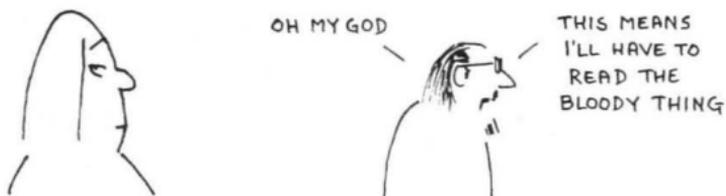
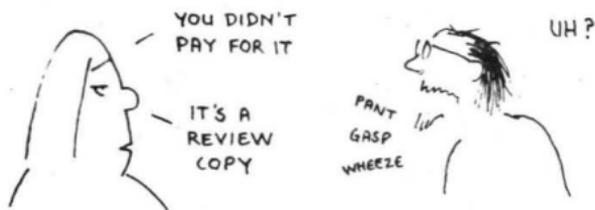
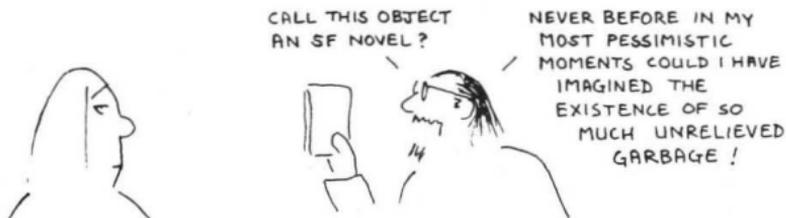
-- In which the editor chats about this and that in an attempt to fill the page.

Some of you may recall that the BSFA has on several occasions promised to produce bibliographies of SF authors for sale to the members. Having recalled this, you will instantly have realised that no such things have been produced. Be not down-hearted. Chairman Alan Dorey is working on the case right now, with the able assistance of Geoff Rippington, or perhaps it's the other way round. Be that as it may, a bibliography of Fritz Leiber is available. It was compiled by Chris Morgan last year, in time for Leiber's Guest-of-Honourship at Seacon '79, and contains listings of all Leiber's stories, articles and novels, and other information besides. It is 36 pages long, costs £1.50 (or \$3.00, which at today's exchange rate is a bargain) post free, and can be obtained from : Morganstern, 39 Hollybrow, Selly Oak, Birmingham, B29 4LX, England.

I went along to the Second Annual Omnibus Lecture a few weeks ago, to hear Our President, Arthur C. Clarke, talk about The Space Elevator, which he said was a pretty good idea even though he didn't invent it like the Communications Satellite. Actually, it is a good idea, and it is a pity he didn't use it better in The Fountains of Paradise, for which he was presented with his Hugo at the Lecture. It is also a pity that he tended to gloss over a few things, such as that it is still technologically impossible, or that it will cost four times the gross national product of the entire world (a strangely self-contradictory expression) to build, or that it would give the nation in which it is built undue influence or make it subject to attack to gain that influence, or that terrorists could have great fun with it, and things like that.

Make sure you look at the cover art of this issue carefully; it isn't just white lines on black.

* And as the heads turned, Vawn began to giggle. For on top of each female head *
* were the bonnets: and the bonnets resembled nothing so much as -- what was the *
* word -- brassieres, that was it, those things women wore in the twentieth cen- *
* tury. *
* * * *



STANDPOINT

GUNS OF THE TIMBERLAND

Joseph Nicholas

The basic problem with all SF criticism (and here I exclude the puffs that masquerade as reviews in the pages of the daily papers) is not that there isn't enough of it but that it all emanates from within the field. The pioneering studies by Blish and Knight, the histories (some more balanced than others) of Aldiss, Gunn and Kyle, the current plethora of magazines (which cover the spectrum from the ultra-serious, like *Extrapolation* and *Science Fiction Studies*, to the near-fannish, like *Perihelion* and *Thrust*) -- all were or are produced by people who, even if they didn't grow up on a steady diet of SF-and-nothing-but-SF, at least devote more time and energy to it than they do to other "forms" of literature. The result is, inevitably, a somewhat narrow view: less narrow than that adopted by the early critics, who held that SF could only profitably be measured against other SF, but still not broad enough to encompass the whole of the wider world of literary debate.

An obvious answer to this plaint is that the wider world of literary debate is too wide for any one critic to ever encompass anyway, and all one can realistically hope is that each has sufficient knowledge of any one aspect of it for the whole to be visible when their pronouncements are aggregated. Yet just how relevant to SF is that wider world of debate anyway? One often reads, in such as *Foundation*, statements to the effect that the standard armoury of literary criticism is not at all suited to the analysis and evaluation of SF's themes, tropes and metaphors, and to a certain extent this is very true. SF is, after all, supposed to deal with the general and the impersonal -- political ideologies, social crises, technological advances, global catastrophes, the metaphysics of consciousness -- utilising as the props for its discussion of these concepts what some might perhaps describe as a "convenient facade" of character interplay; and mainstream critics, accustomed to dealing only with novels of character, in which the "facade" is the subject, are hence virtually powerless to comprehend them, instead resorting to the labelling of the things SF contains -- time travel, aliens, hyperdrives, distant planets, L5 colonies -- in the mistaken belief that it is actually *about* them.

But then for SF critics to indulge in wholesale condemnation of mainstream critics as ill-equipped to appreciate SF is simply to reinforce the inverted paranoid snobbery typical of the ghetto mentality that has for so long bedevilled it. Examples of this approach -- which seems more prevalent in the States than Britain -- may be found in such semi-prozines as *Thrust* and *Starship*, where Charles Sheffield and (until recently) Richard Lupoff, respectively, devote whole column-inches of quite extraordinary doubletalk to attempts to "prove" that SF is not literature but fiction, and hence subject to entirely different criteria. One might charitably suppose that this attitude derives primarily from the memory of school English Literature classes (which, forcing an overconcentration on minutiae at an inappropriate age, can deaden one's appreciation of the prose art), but I rather suspect that John W Campbell's (unjustified and unjustifiable) notion that SF is somehow better than all other "forms" of fiction is actually to blame; but whatever the reason, it has nevertheless resulted in a regrettable and unnecessary philistinism which at its most extreme has given us the narrow-minded subjective prejudice perpetrated in the book reviews of Lester Del Rey and Spider Robinson and at its mildest is still too ignorant of the artistic process to be of any use. And the readers respond in kind, complaining bitterly about the literati and the academics who are now (in their words) swarming all over it, as though SF were but a ricketty old period table suffering from a particularly bad attack of woodworm and needing only the cleansing warmth of the ghetto campfires to restore it to its pristine condition.

Certainly, a great deal of the current spate of academic criticism is of little use or value. As Chris Priest remarked in *Vector* 98, it seems to have been written not

out of a desire to inform or entertain, but to impress, and as such is pompous, self-righteous and condescending -- and worse: the amount of time and energy wasted on making SF conform to whatever political ideology happens to be in vogue at that moment rather than analysing it on its own merits and demerits would be laughable if it wasn't true. In the introduction to his recent collection of essays, *This World And Nearer Ones*, Brian Aldiss attempts to excuse this on the grounds that, because the majority of them are too new to SF to properly comprehend it, they're still jockeying for position and perspective, but I personally think that this is the reason for their attitude: the ghetto walls have been breached in several places, new and untrammelled pastures have been revealed to public gaze, and (in J G Ballard's magnificent term) the *lumpen-intelligentsia* have come rushing in to stake out their territories and promote their reputations.

Not to put too fine a point on it, therefore, the current standard of SF criticism is nowhere near as good as it could and should be. To refer back to my first paragraph: the pioneering studies of Blish and Knight have never been properly followed up -- and, further, there seems a tendency to treat everything they had to say as Absolute Gospel, received wisdom which might at one time have articulated some important and influential viewpoint but which has gone unchallenged ever since. Speaking for myself, I believe that some quasi-continuous reassessment of past pronouncements upon the then-accepted "greats" of SF (as per Simon Ounsley's piece on Alfred Bester in *Vector* 98) is necessary to uphold critical standards; as art changes and (hopefully) progresses, so must criticism if it is not to be left behind. In fact, a case could be made out for the necessity of criticism to be always (and at least) one step ahead of the art that gives it its substance: not so much a parasite or a predator as the carrot or the goad that drives it on... One way or the other, I feel that the blame for the lack of follow-through on the early studies can be laid upon the too-specific nature of everything that's come after them: it seems too devoted to critiques of particular authors (and particular books) to spare much time for analyses of particular schools, movements, periods, themes, tropes, metaphors, or any of the more general aspects of the literature without which no viable critical foundation can be laid. The early studies were indeed specific in their approach, but mainly in order to propound (by example) general points; everyone since seems to have dwelt almost exclusively upon specifics and only accidentally or peripherally, if that, touched upon the general. (On the other hand, of course, it could be that Blish and Knight, having got there first, had an impact that could never have been repeated or equalled...)

Well, something has to change -- and in this respect it's interesting to note that the writers seem to be more concerned with this prospect than the critics. In a letter published in *Foundation* 18, Gregory Benford called for 'a theory which evaluates when the "SF reading sense" can be offset against "traditional literary virtues" ... a recognisable standard for judging when the trade-off between these two standards is legitimate. We need a way to decide when style, characterisation, etc. must give way to specifically science fictional purposes' -- a halfway house, in other words, in which a blend between the wider world of literary debate and the inverted paranoid snobbery of the ghetto can be forged. As Benford says, it's a tall order -- taller than you'd think, since the fingers of one hand are probably more than you'd need to number the critics familiar with both SF and mainstream fiction -- but (also as he says) we can at least make the effort. Come to that, I believe we *should* make the effort, we *should* try to formulate the theory for which Benford calls, for otherwise we run the risk of allowing the current situation to stagnate into a strangling *status quo* that denies all possibility of change and improvement -- not just with respect to SF criticism but to SF itself. How it can be done or where we can most usefully start is beyond the scope of this article but, to put it in a nutshell, the foundations have been laid, and have been waiting for us to begin building upon them for some time now. If we do not do so soon, then we will have failed in our responsibility to the literature we claim to hold so dear.

I read a book review recently. Frankly it was bad. It was just about as bad as you can get without ending up in front of a jury. Actually, a snappy lawyer with time on his hands could have made a fine libel case out of it, but it was an amateur review, probably written by a kid with no money in the bank and no marbles in his head. Not worth the trouble suing.

The review was of one of my favourite authors, a man I regard as the second greatest living British writer, and here was some opinionated fool saying his book was 'utter garbage'. With reviews of this quality being bandied about it made me wonder why I'd abandoned my own reviewing career -- after all, my own opinions were so much more valuable. Then I remembered it was because they'd stopped sending me books, maybe because I'd got into the habit of saying things about them which were close to libelous.

Very little science fiction creeps past the literary censors of the quality Sunday papers. From their coverage of other sorts of book, though, it's obvious that professional standards are very different from amateur ones. The amateurs believe in the stuff passionately and they want perfection. They want their literature engraved on tablets of stone, or at the very least written in blood. God help any hack who fails to match up to their expectations.

The pros are a lot cooler about the whole business. Freeloaders to a man they know that their invitations to the publishers' parties depends on something that can be quoted on the dust jacket. So book after tedious book is described as 'brilliant, astonishing, thrill a page,' and each reviewer selects one trivial tome a month to receive the accolade 'book of the year'.

It seems things were no better in the old days. Hilary Waugh once wrote a stomach-splitting character assassination of the pre-war literary establishment; it was called *The Roaring Queene* for reasons we need not go into. In it a thinly disguised Arnold Bennett declares he can deduce the contents and worth of an entire novel by reading only the first and last pages. Exceptionally he needs to read only the last page, but more often than not he admits he needs to read both the first and last. He sees nothing to boast of in this talent, after all Proust could successfully weigh up a book simply by reading the last sentence. And X, well X didn't even need to open a novel, all he had to do was glance at its spine on the bookshelf. (All right, I am too ignorant to recognise X's true identity, that's the trouble with these bloody idiotic romans a clef.)

Maybe Waugh was exaggerating, but it's not hard to imagine that many pro reviewers, faced with a never-ending torrent of boring drivel flooding across their desks, are going to confine themselves on doctor's orders to reading only the first and last chapters. And truthfully there's seldom any compelling reason to delve deeper than this. In the first chapter the characters are established and the plot is set in motion; in the last chapter the fate of the characters is revealed and the plot resolved. In between, the rest is just filling to make up the 60,000 words that hide-bound publishers still insist on despite the world paper shortage. This valuable time-saving exercise of not reading books explains why reviewers so often get their summaries of what the novel is about completely wrong, an art perfected, of course, by paperback blurb writers.

Assuming that the public prefers bad news to good, it's little wonder that the bland flattery of the pro critics has resulted in the near death of mainstream English literature. We can only console ourselves with the fact that it was never all that interesting anyway.

I have to say that there's no happy medium in reviewing, no balanced unprejudiced viewpoint. Back on the shabby pages of the amateur press valiant souls are doing

their best to keep science fiction alive and healthy by heaping vituperation on it at every opportunity. From this point on for 'reviewer' read 'amateur', the fanzine fanatics, the ones it's not worth taking to court.

I don't know whether reviewing, with its opportunities to yell yah-boo at writers far more famous and worthy than oneself, is essentially a corrupting exercise or whether it simply attracts people who are already hardened degenerates. It's difficult to tell. But in what other walk of life could a man who suffered from the dual handicap of being simultaneously a coward and a sadist find such opportunities for self-gratification? The reviewer is impregnable since it's the epitome of bad form for an author to mildly contradict or correct the lunatic ramblings of his critics.

I've known it happen only once when a friend of mine, who is incidentally far from a lunatic, reviewed for the first and only time the latest novel of a quite famous British author. Being inexperienced in the art he passed a generous and complimentary judgement on the book. He did happen to mention in passing that he had minor reservations about the large chunks of untranslated French, German and Italian liberally scattered through the work and which he'd been unable to understand. Fair comment, I thought, being basically an English speaker myself.

The author thought differently and dashed off a strong letter to the fanzine denouncing the reviewer's competence and comparing him unfavourably as a judge of literature with F.R. Leavis, who was presumably some sort of polyglot. It could have gone on for some time, I suppose, with the critic taking a quick correspondence course in Mandarin Chinese and pointing out that the author wasn't D.H. Lawrence. Unfortunately it stopped before that point. The hypersensitive author abandoned SF and went over to mainstream. The reviewer began writing fiction.

The lesson of this episode is that when writers do take offence it's over the most ridiculous and insignificant things; the review in question had been fair and overwhelmingly complimentary. When reviewers boldly state, as they usually do, that someone's latest novel is a load of dung, the proud author takes it all in the spirit of the game.

Of course SF can be a very incestuous field. And with some reviews in fanzines it's often difficult to tell if a bad reaction is due to some unfortunate incident at a Con room party rather than anything to do with the quality of the book itself.

In the natural ecology of literature, reviewers bear the same relationship to writers as rodents to a piece of stale cheese. Whether reviewers are predators or parasites is anyone's guess. One thing's certain: their opinions don't necessarily, or even very often, have much to do with the substance of the books they write about. Perhaps writers should console themselves with the cliché of prophets in their own age. Objectivity can only be reached after long exposure to the test of time. And if that's true then who can blame inexperienced critics for following Brian Stableford's example and never admitting a liking for any book written after 1900.

Of course I'm just saying that because Brian once wrote something extremely unkind about a novel of mine. So maybe it wasn't such a hot book after all, but which of us looks the most like Robert Redford?

A serious ending: we tend too much to take the good things for granted. Accepting all the failings and the petty squabbles there's one thing I'd like you to keep in mind, whether you're intending to try your hand at reviewing books yourself or whether you just read them. It's easy to put SF down and pick out the faults, easy to compare it badly with the rare classics of literature. But it's not a fair comparison; SF is a continuous, mass media, exciting way of life. It's escapism and it's a philosophy, it demands thought. Compared to most of the books that are written SF is pretty honest. There's some cynicism, some exploitation, but on the whole the people who write it and the people who read it believe in it, and with good reason. There aren't many things you can say that about.

Christopher Priest's article in Vector 98 mirrored, in part, concerns which I've been wrestling with for some time; ever since, in fact, I last gave up reading SF (something which is beginning to happen with monotonous regularity!) Chris's article is, in part, a heartfelt plea against a tidal wave of mediocrity which is engulfing science fiction. If I read him correctly, he sees that the recent 'boom' is in many ways artificial, created by the fact that almost anything with the word "star" in sloping letters on the front cover will sell, rather than by a genuine upsurge in creativity and originality. He attacks the intellectual shoddiness and cynicism of those who would suggest, in practice if not in so many words, that entertainment is a matter of keeping people soporific for an hour or two and that to approach such 'entertainment' with serious literary intentions is tantamount to betrayal of the Holy Concept "SF".

Such concern for the genre's chastity is attractive. Obviously, you might feel, you'd expect a literary purist like Chris Priest to make a fuss, but when it comes to reality... Well, unfortunately even that response doesn't work.

I don't think (and I'm not going to back up this statement because I haven't worked it out yet, but just call it a 'gut reaction') that treating a book 'as literature' means each reader taking a common approach to it. People want different things from 'literature'. I, for example, would probably take a more 'political' view than other people.

But there are certain aspects which can't be ignored. A book goes on the market packaged as 'entertainment'. Fair enough. If it was 'propaganda' or 'education' it would be another package. So we take the primary function of a novel as 'entertainment'.

Approach the problem from a different angle. Currently I spend a lot of free time on the periphery of local politics, going to meetings, reading up on particular issues, arguing, etc. When I read for entertainment I want to relax. I want escapism, a retreat from the mundane into dazzling worlds of... (cont. on p94.)

So why am I reading less SF?

After all, that should solve the problem. Just pick up the latest Anderson or Heinlein and away we go. But it's because SF for me is often not even living up to its own limited standards that I get increasingly dissatisfied with the genre. After finishing Heinlein's The Number of the Beast I decided two things: (i) that I had wasted public money on buying the thing for the library, and (ii) that I had had it with SF. I've retracted the latter view, but I find it deeply disturbing that a book which so blatantly had nothing to say should even reach publication stage, let alone, as I understand it did, break financial records.

To say, as some people might, that you can have 'entertainment' without 'literature' is stating the obvious. I've just finished reading a Tarzan book. Badly written, unpleasant racist viewpoint, unashamed propaganda, and it kept me turning the pages until I'd finished. But the trouble with the SF fraternity is that it seems to conceive of no higher level than Edgar Rice Burroughs. The simple point that an escapist tale of adventure might be written with a spirit of adventure seems to elude some people. (As an aside, I think this is what perplexes Simon Ounsley. Alfred Bester's books are written with this spirit. They remain standard escapist stuff but I think Bester tried to play with the conventions of the genre, rather than step outside. A valid approach, and one which, perhaps, more writers could do with.) As does the fact that SF might be more than escapist tales of adventure -- cf. Doris Lessing.

SF, or literature as a whole, can't compete directly with TV, the cinema, or comic

books. A good comic book is not the same thing as a good novel, and it seems to me a waste of time for novelists to write pseudo-comic strips. I have read a few good novelisations of TV programmes -- none of them in the SF field! -- adapted by people who seemed to care about what they were doing, but the inescapable point seems to be that each form has its strong and weak points and SF should concentrate more on the strong points of the 'literary' form -- the ability to stimulate and expand the imagination through the use of words -- rather than providing pale reflections of other forms, or providing just enough stimulus to start the 'hand to the wallet' reflex.

No doubt the writers and critics Chris castigates are sincere in their desire to give people what they want, and, after all, they have their livings to make, but I think there's every difference in the world between 'giving people what they want' and 'giving people what they want -- and no more!' Chris writes: "Entertainment is a high art." No serious artist gives less than his/her best. Currently, SF collectively is neglecting this -- hell, why not face up to the phrase? -- duty, and I hope that Vector readers support Christopher Priest and the people like him. Otherwise the SF readership is going to go down with a helluva clunk and there ain't gonna be another Gernsback or Hollywood-led boom for quite a while.

WU LI = NONSENSE? Dave Langford

"In the wide womb of uncreated night", it says in Paradise Lost, and what better description could there be of the formless potentiality of the quantum field? Ah, those masters of the seventeenth century knew a thing or two. The eighteenth, also: "When Britain first, at Heaven's command, Arose from out the azure main..." Thus James Thomson, and taking Britain to be a particle-antiparticle pair, the azure main as the quantum field and Heaven as that omnipresent unifying principle we hear so much about these days, it's patently obvious that the formlessness at the roots of the new physics was foreseen by our ancestors. There's some corner of a quantum field that is forever England. Or, wait a minute, could the Thomson quote be predicting the action of plate tectonics ("Heaven's command")? Food for thought there.

It is fashionable -- or such people as Fritjof Capra in The Tao of Physics and Gary Zukav in The Dancing Wu Li Masters say it is so -- to see deep and meaningful significance in similarities not always as convincing as the above. Like Von Danikens of the intellect (a basely unfair comparison, I admit), they assert that there's nothing new under the sun. The most popular connection is that between the mysterious cosmic energy ch'i of the neo-Confucians, from which all forms emerge, and the mysterious quantum field of similar habits. No doubt Bishop Berkeley would have preferred to equate the quantum field with the Mind of God, but God and Western religion as a whole are insufficiently fashionable today. In this general connection I can't help recalling another quotation, from Robert Benchley: "I think I am violating no confidence when I say that Nature holds many mysteries which we humans have not fathomed as yet. Some of them may not even be worth fathoming."

Not that I want to knock such a pleasant book as The Dancing Wu Li Masters (subtitled An Overview of the New Physics): I enjoyed it for the clarity and zest with which it presented the magic-show of modern physics. It's the oriental connection which seems dubious, and the dubiousness starts in the very title. Wu Li, we are told, is Chinese for physics -- literally, "patterns of organic energy", which seems rather a jolly thing to call it. But Zukav goes on to make great play with four "other meanings" ("nonsense", "enlightenment", etc.) which are spurious: first in that they're not other meanings of the same phrase, but differently written and inflected phrases which happen to have the same Westernised spelling; and secondly in that they've been carefully chosen from eighty-odd such "other meanings", making it not too hard to arrange the mysterious significances required. (Far be it from me to point out the comment on Zukav's reasoning implicit in the fact that Wu Li sounds a bit like

"woolly".) This is just harmless gimmickry, like the oh-so-subtle numbering of each section and chapter as number 1 (recalling A.E. Van Vogt's awful The Pawns of Null-A, supposedly inspired by Korzybinski's General Semantics and having all 22 chapters called "Null-Abstracts")... Perhaps the numbering is meant to show that you can start anywhere, but the narrative is sufficiently linear that I wouldn't recommend it. Indeed, though both Capra and Zukav mutter about Zen shock-therapy, the only scientific book I've seen using the method is Carl Linderholm's Mathematics Made Difficult, which lives up to its title by pitching you in at the deep end and then holding you under. As the blurb truthfully says: "As you read this book the ability to count, let us say, begins to haze out..."

Most of Zukav's book is an excellent popular-science work, but time and again there comes a painful creaking as the author shoeorns in some more popular mysticism. The phrase "merger of physics and psychology" appears often. The creation and destruction of particles is called a dance so that it may be likened to that of Shiva, and that of Fritjof Capra. Superlight quantum connectedness is the same as telepathy because telepathy "often appears to happen instantaneously, if not faster". The time-reversed view of antiparticles must of course resemble the states of timelessness or time-distortion experienced by meditating gurus. The student of physics will necessarily find value in Buddhism, and vice versa.

All this interesting but unilluminating stuff adds up to a remarkably small portion of the whole. For me it lessens the charm (while increasing the mass and strangeness) of a well-written book. For many others, it will no doubt form a major part of the allure. The practical truth is that while once upon a time mysticism and the occult would often appear with a modicum of scientific support (remember biorhythms, Kirlian auras, bending spoons?), the fashions have lately changed, and now it's science which needs support. Science today sells better when decked and tinselled with oriental mystery -- so whether or not Wu Li means nonsense, the title The Dancing Wu Li Masters is a damned sight more commercial than An Overview of the New Physics.

I wonder whether we should be worried about that?

STANDPOINT?

It has always seemed to me that there is a rather large gap in the contents of Vector and similar magazines between the articles and the letters. (I regard with contempt those who perversely insist on interpreting this as referring to the book reviews. It does not.) Articles tend to be written either by professional authors (which goes to enhance the reputation of the magazine) or by reasonably well-known fans. Though this will generally result in well-written articles there is a danger that the ordinary reader will feel them to be somewhat remote from him, that they are something to which he cannot aspire. Letters, on the other hand, come from the readers and thus serve to establish a level of reader participation in the magazine. The drawback with letters is that they are generally written in response to previous letters or articles, rather than being original in themselves.

Where, then, does this leave the ordinary reader (again I use this rather patronising term) who feels strongly about some aspect of SF not previously discussed in the magazine, but who doesn't feel confident enough to send a full-blown article to the editor?

In Vector, now, it leaves him with "Standpoint".

I am looking for short articles (a maximum of two pages, or 1500 words) about any aspect of SF. They need not be 'balanced'; indeed, in 1500 words it is very difficult to be balanced. In some ways, the more one-sided and controversial the article the better. Articles may be written specially for "Standpoint". They may be converted from long letters -- as with Andy Sawyer's "That's Entertainment?" this time. And I may ask for particularly good "Standpoints" to be expanded into full articles. Because, actually, article writers are fairly ordinary chaps too.

BOOK REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEWS

Reviews Editor: Joseph Nicholas

Chris Morgan -- THE SHAPE OF FUTURES PAST (Webb & Bower, 208 pp, £7.95 hb, £5.95 pb)
Michael Moorcock -- ENGLAND INVADED (Star, 245 pp, £1.35)
James Gunn (Ed.) -- THE ROAD TO SCIENCE FICTION: VOL 1, FROM GILGAMESH TO WELLS;
VOL 2, FROM WELLS TO HEINLEIN; VOL 3, FROM HEINLEIN TO HERE
(New English Library/Mentor, 404pp, 535pp, 656pp respectively,
£1.50 each)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

In his Bran's Head booklet Science Fiction As Science Fiction (which could well have sunk without trace for all the attention anyone's ever paid to it), Brian Aldiss devoted a chapter to what, with his tongue only partly in his cheek, he called "Science Fiction's Three Birthdays", restating the views that held it to have been born in either vast antiquity, with Gilgamesh, or just yesterday, with Hugo Gernsback, or in 1818, with Mary Shelley's Frankenstein -- and not unnaturally poured justified scorn on the first two. Those who've read Aldiss's Billion Year Spree will know his reasons for picking the latter theory: because it was about that time that the concept of change, visible social and technological change fostered by the Industrial Revolution and the scientific discoveries of the day, and the idea that the future would be measurably different from the present first entered public awareness, and one can't help but agree with him. Certainly this is the theory upheld by Chris Morgan, whose book, subtitled "The Story of Prediction" and covering the fiction written in the period 1800 - 1945, is intended to demonstrate people's reactions to this and their hopes and fears for the futures their children would live to see.

The book is organised thematically, its chapters devoted to such subjects as war, satire, escapism, wish-fulfilment, dystopias, utopias, alien contact and, last but not least, serious predictions: those speculations which their authors intended to be regarded not as playful thoughts but as actual possibilities. These predictions are, not surprisingly, the only ones that (for the most part) have been in any way realised; those contained in the other chapters range from the sublime (the utopias and dystopias of Bellamy, Morris and Wells) to the ridiculous (the escapism and wish-fulfilment of more authors, most now completely forgotten, than I have space to mention -- although I particularly liked the sound of John Mastin's Through the Sun in an Airship). The trouble is, of course, that to modern eyes almost all of the "predictive" fiction of the nineteenth century, no matter how seriously it might have been intended, now seems ridiculous, and will be virtually impossible to read without smiling -- but they are nevertheless worth remembering and studying because they demonstrate that what we now think of as science fiction, a distinct literary genre with its own "rules" and self-erected barriers, was once an integral part of mainstream fiction, read and accepted as such by all and sundry without a murmur of dissent: a point which the book makes very clear.

The danger of a book like Morgan's, however, is that it can elevate these stories to a position of unjustified importance, ascribing to them an influence that they did not and do not possess. By far the greatest amount of SF that's ever been has been written since 1945 and the greatest number of SF writers that have ever been are alive today; and in the face of this those few nineteenth century writers who concerned themselves with the future are next to insignificant. Then, too, the book has certain specific drawbacks, most notably its tendency (perhaps as the result of a desire for comprehensive coverage) to merely summarise the plots of the works in question without devoting enough space to discussions of the social and technological

contexts in which they were written, without which we cannot understand how or why they came to be. The book also lacks a bibliography of the said works -- and while a comprehensive bibliography would have been near impossible, some sort of chronology of the most important or influential or enduring novels and stories would have been a valuable asset.

It's interesting, however, to turn to an anthology of the type of fiction Morgan discusses: Michael Moorcock's England Invaded, the second half of Before Armageddon (the first half of which was published under that title a few years ago and is now, alas, unobtainable), in which he wished to show how what was then termed "scientific romance" developed from a "messianic warning pamphlet" (in this case G.H. Chesney's The Battle of Dorking) to a "sophisticated moral fiction" (and in this he does rather score over Morgan, mainly because he can show whereas Morgan can only describe -- but their aims are different and such comparisons are invidious). It was originally intended to be published as one volume, and its split renders this second half woefully unbalanced, since two-thirds of it is taken up by Saki's excellent short novel When William Came (first published in 1913), in which an English gentleman returning from illness-interrupted travels abroad finds that in his absence the Kaiser's Germany has conquered, almost bloodlessly, an all-but-unprepared Britain, but that life is continuing virtually unchanged. Like many of the other, similar stories of its time (all inspired by Chesney), it was prophesying a warning and, as Morgan says, its restrained and unsensationalist approach imbues it with a terrible realism and believability. For me, however, the most interesting story in the book is Fred C. Smale's "The Abduction of Alexandra Seine: a Tale of the Twentieth Century" (first published in 1900): its science is rubbish and its chase-and-capture plot pure melodrama, but it has about it something that is popularly supposed not to have appeared in SF until the advent of John W. Campbell and Robert Heinlein in the 1940s, to wit, the acceptance of future technologies as given and their integration into the story without reams of plodding explanation. This isn't to say that Campbell and Heinlein were simply copying Smale (they'd doubtless never heard of him), but it is to say that their "achievement" isn't as revolutionary or as original as it's often claimed.

Heinlein of course figures in the titles of two of Gunn's The Road to Science Fiction anthologies, so one can see that he is ascribed such importance in certain quarters. But Gunn's capabilities as a critic have to be viewed with a certain amount of suspicion: on the eighth page of his introduction to the first volume, From Gilgamesh to Wells, for instance, he's discussing whether or not The Odyssey is "science fictional" enough to be counted as one of the genre's predecessors (and I was groaning aloud). Brian Aldiss has elsewhere (Billion Year Spree) identified this attitude as a species of bizarre colonialism: the desire to legitimise a recently created genre by extending it as far back into literary history as possible, subsuming into it anything that seems to possess remotely similar characteristics. This approach is more prevalent amongst American than British critics but is still hopelessly off the point; while one might reasonably state that the satires, utopias and wonderful journeys of the past are antecedent to SF, it is because SF has appropriated from them and not because it is directly descended from them. Gunn also propounds a rather Gernsbackian view of SF in general, claiming that it's mainly concerned with the triumphing of man over his environment via the powers science gives him and thus finding the justification to hit out at Aldiss's choice of Frankenstein as the first identifiable SF novel because it operates from the basis that there are some things man was not meant to know -- in which respect it's rather strange for him later to acclaim H.G. Wells as one of its three "true fathers", since most if not all of Wells's most influential SF was (in Aldiss's marvellous phrase) about hubris getting clobbered by nemesis.

What rankles more than this sort of inconsistency, however, is the avowedly American bias of much of the criticism which, particularly in the second and third volumes, concentrates on the American magazines to the virtual exclusion of everything else. One can't deny the fact that without them the literature wouldn't be as we know it now (which statement you may take however you wish), but he has a tendency to push them as The Whole Of The Law, which they most certainly weren't -- and it is one of the satisfactions of Morgan's The Shape of Futures Past that when discussing the

period 1900 - 1945 he devotes very little space indeed to the SF magazines: a refreshing counterbalance to the by now rather well-worn and repetitive stuff that continues to pour forth about Gernsback and Campbell and others of their ilk. Despite which, Gunn does have some useful and perceptive comments to make about the concerns of and influences upon the genre of they, Boucher and Gold, slotting them neatly into their historical and cultural frameworks -- although, like many an American critic before him, he seems uncertain about the influence of Moorcock and the New Worlds-led "New Wave", acknowledging that part of its inspiration was derived from a desire to extend the boundaries of genre SF but failing to realise that it also arose from a desire to create what might (for want of a better term) be called a "truly British SF".

With the choice of stories, however, Gunn is on firmer ground. Those reprinted in the last half of the second and the majority of the third volumes -- by Van Vogt, Asimov, Heinlein, Bradbury, Leiber, Clarke, Bester, Harrison, Ballard, Pohl, Delany, Knight and Russ, to name only a few -- do have the drawback of overfamiliarity, but given that the series is aimed more at the newcomer, the reader who has recently discovered SF and wishes to know more of its history and high points, than the already knowledgeable fan or critic, this is perfectly acceptable (not to mention the fact that the stories are excellent examples of the points he wishes to make, and excellent in their own right to boot). The first volume will perhaps be more enduring because of its reprinting of much -- by More, Campanella, Bacon, Kepler, Swift, Shelley, Poe, Haggard, Bellamy and Kipling -- that the die-hard fan might otherwise not read; a comment which applies equally to me, since it was Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter", included here, which made me go out and buy his The Scarlet Letter and Selected Tales, and I've been kicking myself for having previously ignored him. And if the book can inspire such then it can at least be said to have fulfilled a very valuable function.

Morgan's book could very well have the same sort of effect: as he himself says in his introduction, it is "not intended as a rigorous textbook" but is "to be enjoyed", and his own enthusiasm for his subject is ably communicated to the reader (this reader, anyway; I didn't care much for nineteenth century "proto-SF" before, but must confess that I now feel the vague stirrings of a burgeoning if unformed interest in it...) Of the books under review here, it's the one I recommend the most: a book through which one can browse at leisure or use as a working guide to the scientific romances of the nineteenth century. The Moorcock anthology does, as previously remarked, suffer from being only the second half of a proposed single volume, and the Gunn anthologies suffer from their (to me) inadequately reasoned critical foot notes -- but both are in their own ways enjoyable and illuminating.

Brian W. Aldiss -- MOREAU'S OTHER ISLAND (Jonathan Cape, 174pp, £4.95)

Reviewed by Steev Higgins

Brian Aldiss first attempted a pastiche of H.G. Wells 14 years ago in his award-winning "The Saliva Tree", and similar excursions have since been attempted by such writers as disparate as Christopher Priest and Karl Alexander. Moreau's Other Island, however, is more than simply pastiche or tribute. Its immediate predecessor in Aldiss's oeuvre is Frankenstein Unbound, which novel, like this one, followed up his arguments about the mythic force and function of SF in Billion Year Spree by an exercise in conscious myth-creation using established imagery and symbols.

Thus it is that we find Wells's The Island of Dr Moreau was more than merely fiction, but closely based on an actual case. With nuclear war imminent, the descendants of the surgically anthropomorphised Beasts are utilised as breeding stock in a new programme of experimentation under Mortimer Dart, an obsessive thalidomide given mobility by an exoskeleton and a motorised wheelchair with an impressive array of optional extras. Meanwhile the US Under-Secretary of State, Roberts, crashes in the Pacific when returning from desperate negotiations on the Moon, and drifts on his life raft to the island.

The Island of Dr Moreau was a very sophisticated parable. On its simplest level it was a masterly restatement of the Frankenstein theme of science getting out of control (still SF's most original contribution to our technological culture) and at the same time a Swiftian metaphor of man, himself struggling between his basic, bestial nature and the veneer of intelligence, with Moreau as an ambivalent creator. At its most profound, the Beasts are also symbolic of the horrors of our own subconscious, a point Aldiss restates on the first page of his novel when he characterises the Pacific, in which they are found, as the subconscious of the world.

It is the latter two themes to which Aldiss pays the most attention. Where Wells's Beasts were a single, undifferentiated menace, Aldiss's best characters emerge from among his, and are treated far more sympathetically. They are hopelessly confused as to their role, equipped with too limited an intelligence to cope with this crisis of identity and exploited through this by the humans. When they finally revolt, it is observed that "these actual beasts were advancing from the animal to the human", although the real meaning of this phrase might be "juvenile to adult". (Other possibilities are also suggested, such as when the Dutch overseer Maastricht declares: "I know all about the proles.")

Beast, child, both or whatever, Roberts, unsympathetic a hero as he might be, is a hero in the classic sense as he comes to understand the nature of the island and its experiment. From his retrieval from the sea (Freudian enough for you?), the novel can be read as a parable of his self-discovery. He is constantly having to throw out his self-deceptions as he progresses, finally discovering that the island is effectively his own subconscious.

By now Aldiss is leaving Wells behind, using the original imagery to write his own book. The theme which finally emerges with the discovery of the third stage of Dart's programme is one which has appeared a great deal in Aldiss's recent work, that of the yin-yang duality of human nature. In an article in Foundation 17, Aldiss described Wells's view of the scientific utopia of the future as characterised by having "less dogshit on the pavement"; in other words, all yang. The novel's final message is a warning against the continued opposition of the two.

Aldiss's gradual assertion of his own book over a pastiche or "updated version" is mirrored in the text itself. Ignoring the prologue, the opening chapters (especially the first) follow Wells quite closely, with the space shuttle Leda substituted for the ship Lady Vain and the novel's narrator being the only one of the three to escape the crash who survives the journey aboard the raft to be picked up. In its restrained first person narrative style it seems designed to be deliberately reminiscent of Wells without the obvious formality employed by say, Christopher Priest. Unfortunately, this ploy robs Aldiss of some of the richness of his best, unrestricted prose.

Indeed, the danger with this kind of thing is that the freshness can be lost through its "second-hand" nature. This poses problems for both the writer, who may find it difficult to sustain belief in the authenticity of its background and imagery than he would in that of his own creation, and the reader, who may feel he's seen it all before. There is little fresh in Aldiss's evocation of his setting; most of his description is mundane detail: "the air was fresh", "the sky was blue", "the harbour was constructed of concrete-filled sandbags". There is nothing characteristic about the island; for all its "feel" it could as easily have been in Antarctic as the Pacific. In the same way I found reading Enemies of the System much like watching a cheap TV production with cardboard sets, Aldiss's only apparent interest in his stock spacships and such lying in the way they could be used to place a bunch of "communists" in a position in which they could make idiots of themselves.

From both that book and this it seems that Aldiss may be growing more concerned with the message over the medium. This was Wells's eventual failing: he became impatient and ceased writing sophisticated parables like Moreau in favour of proclaiming the advent of his beloved scientific utopia in turgid non-novels like The Shape of Things To Come. Aldiss's deterioration is of a lesser order but, if it goes any further, it will be equally lamentable.

Marvin Kaye -- THE INCREDIBLE UMBRELLA (Robert Hale, 218pp, £5.50)

Reviewed by Janice Maule

This is a thorough example of how to write a book without using any imagination of your own. Simply select half a dozen out-of-copyright fictional creations which other people have laboured to make memorable and well-loved, and steal their characters with which to populate your "own" work.

Although this approach has produced some excellent novels (Exit Sherlock Holmes by Robert Lee Hall being a particularly good example) The Incredible Umbrella lacks the necessary ingredient of creative extrapolation, without which the result is merely a series of poor pastiches linked together by the flimsiest of plot devices -- in this case, the constant losing of the umbrella. J. Adrian Fillmore needs to return to his own dimension.

Marvin Kaye uses a variety of locations and personae, but the main emphasis is on the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and the Sherlock Holmes stories, and it is obvious that he has rather more knowledge of these works than of those which make only minor appearances -- but the former are more integral to the plot and the chapters concerned with them do contain a few amusing details (such as Arthur Conan Doyle's writing of Fillmore into one of his Sherlock Holmes stories). Since the book was originally published in three distinct parts it seems fair to suggest that several of the minor scenes have been included in order to glue the other, more significant, scenes together. Indeed, one of the minor scenes appears to have been developed for the sole purpose of allowing Kaye to make an atrocious pun.

It is unfortunate, however, that he was unable to make better use of the idea of the inter-dimensional umbrella. The book is neither comic nor clever and, lacking either of these qualities, will be of limited appeal even to collectors of the "new stories for old characters" genre. To the average SF reader wanting originality, excitement and a good story, it offers nothing.

Ian Watson -- THE GARDENS OF DELIGHT (Gollancz, 176pp, £6.95)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

I greeted Watson's first novel, The Embedding, ecstatically, but have reacted with progressively less fervour to each succeeding novel as it has charted his decline. In the end I could do little but decry someone who seemed to be doing everything in his power to keep alive all that was bad about science fiction's so-called "Golden Age". Watson has publicly adopted an anti-literature stance reflected in books that lack all literary qualities and, indeed, are little more than tedious lectures on some favourite theme.

I am not about to undergo a change of heart, to enter some private Cultural Revolution and come out praising the only saviour of modern SF. After reading his new novel, however, I am prepared to look with a little more favour upon what may follow from his pen.

The Gardens of Delight is not well written, but the failure here is not always the complete inability to turn a nice phrase that has marred Watson's work in the past. There are in fact sizeable chunks of this book that are actually over-written. Perhaps his chosen subject-matter demands this attempt at literary quality, since he has created a world that mirrors the fabulous triptych of Hieronymus Bosch and, just as the original painting was a prodigious imaginative feat, so to use it as the setting for a novel requires some poetry from its writer. But in his career to date Watson has not allowed himself to build up the literary arsenal necessary for such a conquest; the demands of this book run directly counter to everything he has stood for, and though he tries manfully to overcome his self-imposed deficiencies he does not quite manage it. Still, for the fact that he tries and, buried amongst the

rubble of his jargonese, achieves several surprising felicities of style, The Gardens of Delight is to be welcomed with at least some hope for the future.

Nevertheless, Watson still has a long way to go to make any significant improvement in his writing. The characters who troop dutifully through the carefully planned tribulations of Hell, Heaven and the Garden of Earthly Delights are as paper-thin as ever, all human depth sacrificed to make them mouthpieces for some easily-identifiable point of view. And when they have adopted a suitably dramatic pose for the next little lecture Watson wants them to deliver, all they speak is a gobbledegook that nobody in his right mind would ever utter. The philosophy that played such an important part in The Embedding and The Jonah Kit was the genuine article, well handled, but The Gardens of Delight reads as though he has simply picked up a primer on the works of Jung, and perhaps one or two other elementary textbooks chosen more or less at random, since the dialogue consists almost wholly of undigested chunks from this research. As for the plot: it is a neat little odyssey that takes the principal characters through each panel of the tryptych in turn but really acts as no more than a vehicle for Watson's metaphysical games with the idea of God. He doesn't even vary things with the odd red herring; you know that every time someone makes a brilliant deduction from little or no evidence then he is certain to be right.

Finally, I should mention that Gollancz have published The Gardens of Delight under their Fantasy imprint -- but it is no more fantasy than any of Watson's other novels, so could it be that Gollancz are involved in a desperate attempt to find a new audience for their wayward author?

Octavia E. Butler -- WILD SEED (Sidgwick & Jackson, 248pp, £6.95)

Reviewed by Bill Carlin

In a review of Octavia Butler's previous novel, Mind of My Mind, in Inferno a few months ago, I said that I was looking forward to her future development as an author of note. I can now report that some progress has been made along her road to eventual stardom, but I'm not at all sure that I like the direction the road is taking. For those who have followed her career this far with interest, I have, as they say in the best hospital jokes, some good news and some bad news.

The good news is that Zelazny's ghostly influence seems to have been thoroughly exorcised from her storytelling. The bad news involves a stagnant plot, which is more or less a rehash of the previous novel's, and a liberal sousing with literary saccharine in places where it has grown dangerously thin through overuse. Alarm bells started ringing in my subconscious when I first saw the book's dustjacket, featuring as it does a very nicely painted dragon, all pastel colours and cuteness. Dragons do not appear in the novel and in retrospect the coy little reptile may be intended to represent a serpent of some kind, but it still gave me a nasty turn. Had Ms Butler leaped onto the McCaffrey bandwagon in an attempt to cash in on the success of yet another, better-known fantasy author? I began reading with bated breath...

The author's favourite plot details, as usual, the love/hate relationship between two god-like mutants, one of whom is Doro, the anti-hero of the previous novel, pictured in an earlier phase of his eternal life. Anyanwu, the immortal wise-woman of an African tribe, emerges within the first few paragraphs as his lover and adversary. Setting off with him for the New World in 1690 with the dream of raising a flock of unusual children, she discovers that he envisions a future in which the stud farm has replaced the family unit. Inevitably, a conflict between the archetypal dominant male and the compassionate eternal female soon develops. Inevitably, Ms Butler employs the old showdown trick at the novel's climax.

Considering the period in which Wild Seed is set, 1690 - 1840, it's not surprising that it reads very like a historical fantasy which in parts seems a bad mixture of Margaret Mitchell and Mary Stewart. An occasional razor-blade of harsh realism juts through the velvet fabric, but never strikingly enough to convince that reader that

the author is attempting to say anything of importance. Hopefully she'll eventually purge the pointless chain of prequels from her system (this one is more confusing than enlightening) and move on to better things. Though she may be pandering to an audience who have enjoyed the formula of her previous books, to stick to such a course would be a disastrous waste of obvious talent.

Despite its faults, however, Wild Seed is a cut above most of the fare currently available in the fantasy market and provides an hour or two of straight entertainment for the undemanding reader. Strangely enough, I still have vague hopes that Ms Butler will blossom into an important writer within the SF field -- but I wouldn't stick my neck out after this one.

C.J. Cherryh -- HUNTER OF WORLDS (Orbit, 254pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

With one third and one first place in last year's Hugo Awards, the seemingly inevitable march of C.J.Cherryh towards the throne of Leigh Brackett shows every sign of becoming a stampede. This 1977 novel (its relative age in the Cherryh canon being betrayed by its three word title with the word "of" in the middle) predates and is unconnected with her Faded Sun trilogy, yet is in some ways its precursor -- certainly a similarity of spirit with the larger work is apparent. In an unstatedly distant future, man has developed starflight and encountered other intelligent races, with whom he maintains uneasy relations. But there are no racial power struggles to be found here. Man, the Kallia and the amaut tread warily in space on the sufferance of the all-powerful iduve, an ancient race which has abandoned its homeworld (largely, I suspect, to avoid destroying each other) to live aboard vast Voyaging Ships, which maintain intense clan rivalries. The story is that of Aiela, a Kallia conscripted into the service of the iduve ship "Ashanome" and then placed into mental linkage with another Kallia and a human to become a tool in the ship's vendetta against a solitary iduve, who is hiding somewhere in the galaxy. Aiela's task is a dangerous one, for his new masters are ruthless and unpredictable. Though uncertain of what is required of him, the penalties for failure (or for unwitting insult of the iduve) are made quite clear.

As an example of up-market space opera, it's quite successful. The plot wends its way fairly smoothly, though it is given no help at all by Cherryh's customary trick of inserting seemingly endless amounts of almost unpronounceable consonant-loaded alien words (often concealing quite familiar concepts), necessitating reference to the glossary at the back about three times per page. However, the major elements of the plot are nothing short of historical. The confrontations between Aiela and the iduve matriarch Chimele can be traced back to the 1930s stories "Out of Night" and "Cloak of Aesir" by John W. Campbell Jr, while Chimele herself is descended from Campbell's Sarn Mother and A. Merritt's Snake Mother (from The Face in the Abyss). The symbolism is no accident. Chimele is indeed a surrogate mother-figure for Aiela as he grows and adjusts to the larger, more complex world he will inhabit as a servant of the rulers of the galaxy. The novel thus reveals itself to be simply a maturation myth, together with some rather obvious asides on the pitfalls of anthropomorphism (just because it looks like you doesn't mean it thinks like you...)

But derivative though Hunter of Worlds certainly is, Cherryh's style is never less than competent, and does achieve some memorable peaks. The awful trauma of direct mental contact with a being whose deepest instincts and drives are almost completely alien to your own is particularly well conveyed, as is the predicament of the human, Daniel, beset by terror and confusion at the circumstances that overtake him. All of which, strangely enough, fills me with trepidation. The success of the Faded Sun trilogy shows that there is a ready market for this kind of book, and Cherryh is therefore in great danger of typecasting herself as a writer of merely above average space opera. Though she will never attain the stature of a LeGuin, she is capable of better things than this.

Reviewed by Ian Williams

I'm not really into cults and find the growing tendency, especially of Americans, to organise subfandoms around one author's work or series unhealthy, not to say juvenile. They write whole fanzines about the finer points of the imagined culture and take on names from the books. It's even worse when the author takes it as seriously as Bradley so obviously does: her immediately preceding Daw book, The Keeper's Price, was an anthology of stories about Darkover by her and some of the "Friends of Darkover", in which the Friends were noticeably more interested in the trappings than in what Bradley was actually saying. Although Darkover is a convincing world with a detailed culture, history, mores, ecology and so forth, since 1971 Bradley has been using its haunted, feudal, ESP-ridden landscape as a background for her commentaries on the psycho-sexual-social obsessions and neuroses of middle America. The World Wreckers (1971) dealt with sexual prejudices; The Heritage of Hastur (1975; the breakthrough novel for both popular and critical acclaim) occupied itself with homosexuality and love between men (not necessarily the same thing); The Shattered Chain (1976) was a more overt polemic about feminism and male reaction to it; and The Forbidden Tower (1977) was about group marriage (an oversimplification but not, I think, a distortion). Bradley, a good storyteller, managed to work these themes neatly into her Darkovan setting, integrating both with sympathetic portraits of flawed human beings -- unlike Anne McCaffrey, with whom Bradley is often unfairly compared, she can both write and think.

Her most recent Darkover novel, Two To Conquer, is concerned with two things. The first is the story, about the formation of the Compact limiting weapons to basically swords and knives (i.e. nothing long-range), which is historically very important to the series as most of the books are set long after this era. The second thing is the theme: rape.

On first encountering the main protagonist and viewpoint character, Bard di Asturien, I thought he would be the villain who finally got his just desserts. He's certainly pretty unpleasant: despite having honours heaped upon him in his mid-teens, he is neurotic about his bastardy and suspicious to an almost paranoid degree of everyone's motives. His attitude to women is even less wholesome -- they are just things to fuck -- and since his esper ability can compel them to his bed he is able to screw them indiscriminately (including even his betrothed's twelve-year-old maid.) He rationalises all this with the claim that despite their protests and tears they really wanted it all along -- and how many times have you heard of that being offered as a rapist's defence in a court of law? But Bard is, astonishingly, portrayed not without sympathy; Bradley depicts him growing and maturing as a human being, developing into a charismatic figure as he becomes involved with the political and military manoeuvring that surrounds the establishment of the Compact.

Set against Bard's psychosis is the destruction wreaked upon the face of Darkover and its women and children by the ESP-constructed weapons (horrors which the Compact is intended to end), a rape of the environment by which I presume Bradley is trying to mirror the rape of women. But if so, she fails because, for the first time in the Darkover series, she fails to blend her theme with her plot, and Two To Conquer is in consequence one of her least successful books. The alternating storylines of Bard's personal problems and the political manoeuvring relating to the Compact do not gell. One detracts from the other and the constant shifting of focus becomes an irritation. Bard's final, artificially (via ESP) induced insight into his own nature is unconvincing. The two strands of the novel battle continuously and neither wins. The medium is too obviously not the message.

Virginia Kidd (Ed.) -- THE EYE OF THE HERON AND OTHER STORIES (Granada, 251pp, £1.25)
Chelsea Quinn Yarbro -- CAUTIONARY TALES (Sidgwick & Jackson, 207pp, £6.50)

Reviewed by Janice Maule

The past few years have been marked by a significant influx of women writers into the SF field and a correspondingly large debate about the "role" of women in SF. These two books, both originally published in the USA in 1978, inevitably contribute to the discussion.

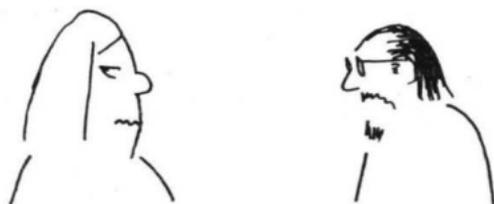
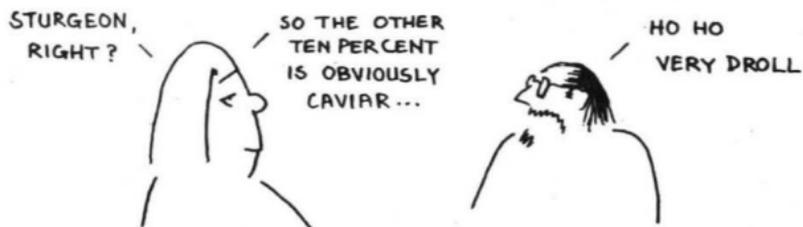
Virginia Kidd's anthology is a quite deliberate piece of trumpet-blowing, containing as it does six stories all written by women in which the central characters are also all women. The editor's introduction (which makes reference to the book's original title, *Millennial Women*) emphasises the authors' choice of "soft" sciences and the stories' human element, as though these qualities are to be found only among the work of women writers. Whether or not this proposition has any truth to it, such qualities do not, on the evidence of this book at least, necessarily result in good SF.

On the positive side, however... No-one can doubt Ursula LeGuin's ability as a writer and her novella, which gives the anthology its name (presumably because it was felt that she would sell better than a collection of patently feminist stories), takes up over half the book. It concerns the colonisation of a planet by two groups with fundamentally opposing philosophies and takes as its theme the proposition that acceptance of one's cultural and societal background should be a conscious decision rather than a submission to the inevitable; that it should always be possible to walk away. But it is scarcely one of her more distinguished pieces: the plot is predictable and the characters, although distinct and memorable individuals, are too sharply divided into goodies and baddies -- despite which the story is saved from itself by the decoration of its narrative with those small touches of descriptive imagination at which LeGuin excels.

If only the remainder of the collection could match up to even this below-par LeGuin. The best of the rest is the Joan D. Vinge novelette, "Phoenix In The Ashes", incredibly aptly named since the stories preceding it are such as to make this rather average tale seem positively interesting. Considered in isolation, however, it is no more than a pot-boiler centred on a Moslem-type community in a post-holocaust America: the plot is uninventive and uneventful and the characters as dull as the life they lead. Of the remaining four stories, one is incomprehensible, one a piece of feminist propaganda, one has no SF content at all and one would be more appropriately placed in a children's anthology. They have in common male characters who are weak, selfish, uncaring and stupid, and they all lack any real understanding of the ways in which to entertain the reader.

As evidence for the case that women have something special to contribute to SF, The Eye of the Heron and Other Stories fails dismally to convince.

By contrast, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's Cautionary Tales, a collection with no overt messages to push, could well convince doubters that the "feminist" SF writer does have some worthwhile contribution to make. At first, her style can make the going difficult -- the reader's initial impression is that the meaning is so subtly woven into the narrative as to be inextricable, but with familiarity this feeling vanishes, and one can begin to appreciate the atmosphere so well conveyed by this selfsame style. Most of the stories are, as befits a volume with such a title, imbued with an air of menace, and have above all a strong visual sense which adds plausibility where it might otherwise be lacking. Some of the characters, rather than representing real people, have a more symbolic role to fill, but this in no way detracts from the value of the stories as a whole. The messages are conveyed by indirect means, through the example of the personae; women are treated and behave as equal to men throughout. There is no propaganda, no heavy-handed emphasis on one sex at the expense of the other, and the book is all the better for it.



Reviewed by Bill Carlin

Casting my mind back to last year, when I read Gateway for the first (and only) time, I can vaguely remember thinking that it was undoubtedly the best novel that Pohl had ever written. Somehow it managed to capture the essence of the wry, sardonic humour that lies at the heart of his best short fiction while tempering it to suit the on-going boom in high-technology space opera. On the whole it was an enjoyable, well-written book -- but never destined to be a classic. It had nevertheless already won the Hugo, Nebula and John W Campbell Memorial Awards, so I resolved to keep my mouth firmly shut while awaiting further developments. It came as no surprise to learn that a sequel was in the works and, as expected, Beyond The Blue Event Horizon sticks to very much the same formula as its progenitor.

Robin Broadhead, now almost entirely free of his crushing guilt complex -- the curing of which took up 50 percent of Gateway's plot -- is living the life of a rich man on Earth while his hard-won wealth sponsors an expedition to a "Food Factory" constructed by the mysterious Heechee on the edge of the solar system. His motives for doing this are to increase his personal wealth and, less superficially, to foster his hope from the black hole in which she became entrapped during the last half of the first novel. So much for one subplot. The other concerns the expedition team (which includes a twerpish adolescent girl) and its involvement with an orphaned teenage boy found wandering around the ancient Heechee hardware like an amnesiac Tarzan-of-the-spaceways. The boy talks about his relationship with such curious creatures as "the Dead Men", who turn out to be the recorded life essences of Gateway prospectors listed as missing, and "the Old Ones" who, we're led to believe, might just be the vanished Heechee themselves. With a fortune guaranteed if they can be the first to discover the inscrutable architects of the Gateway asteroid, the team enlists the boy's help and flies off towards the novel's climactic scenes before anyone has the chance to say "Take me to your leader".

It may seem like the stuff of low-grade space opera when thus encapsulated, but Pohl adds some stylish trimmings in the form of several curious nimir subplots. There are, for example, a wave of strange fever epidemics closely linked to the functions of the orbiting factory, a scattering of veiled stabs at the hypocrisy of the American Dream, an ex-nazi who threatens world safety simply by dreaming, and an anthropomorphic computer program punched out in the image of Einstein which doubles as Broadhead's scientific adviser and psychiatrist. Hard science is important to most of the proceedings, but Pohl makes even this palatable by having the marvels of the universe explained to his adolescent laymen in terms well within the intellectual grasp of an 'O' Level physics class; and pulls off the trick without making the reader's teeth grate.

Though generally well-written and equally as enjoyable as its "mother book", an element of untidiness creeps in at the tail-end of the novel when the Heechee make a brief, solitary appearance to provide a convenient solution to Broadhead's black hole dilemma; and the present lie of the land suggests that another sequel might well be looming beyond the horizon. If you liked Gateway then Beyond the Blue Event Horizon will strike you as marvellous -- but everyone else had better run for cover before the parade begins.

Robert Silverberg -- LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE (Gollancz, 444pp, £6.95)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

"If you can't be great, be big!" is an adage whose propounder I can't remember, but at present there seems no shortage of such big books, all with hundreds of pages, casts of thousands and highly-detailed imaginary cultural backgrounds. As a means of escape from the grimy spectre of ordinary everyday reality, such novels are hard to beat, and the awfulness of our current reality is now bringing them out in droves. Even authors you wouldn't normally expect to turn out such tomes are clambering

aboard the gathering bandwagon -- even Robert Silverberg, who gave us the gritty, incisive intricacies of Thorns, Downward To The Earth, The Tower Of Glass, Dying Inside and Son Of Man, and who might thus be said to be almost re-embracing the understanding action-adventure approach he threw up to write such novels.

Despite which Lord Valentine's Castle isn't quite as fast-paced or as plot-choked as such might make it sound; for all its length, and perhaps as a consequence of it, it's actually a very leisurely and slow-moving story. Set on the giant planet Majipoor, it concerns the adventures of one Valentine who, as the book opens, wanders into the far western city of Pidruid during the festivities of the new Coronel and who, discovering a natural aptitude for the art, joins a troupe of touring jugglers. With no past to speak of but caring little about it, he is troubled by strange dreams which, properly interpreted, prove that he is in fact the dispossessed Coronel, his mind transplanted into the body of another with the usurper having taken over his own, and set him off -- in the company of an expectedly motley bunch of friends -- to recover his throne and title. Adn, after a series of mishaps and side-journeys along the way -- threatened with death while performing in the reservation of the Metamorphs (Majipoor's only true indigenes, hounded from power by the waves of human and alien settlers that landed fourteen thousand years before); nearly drowned in a sea dragon attack while sailing to the Isle of Sleep -- many of the book's names and titles, and indeed the book itself, have the texture one usually associates with epic fantasy) that he is who he says he is; delayed in the Labryinth, the central government complex, while seeking an audience with the Pontifex, the true head of Majipoor's lackadaisical government; and many other minor incidents -- eventually does so, discovering at last that his dispossession wasn't, as he and everyone else had originally thought, the result of a plot by one of Majipoor's other, lesser, rulers but masterminded by the Metamorphs, wishing by their misrule to drive the human and alien settlers into open war with each other and thus regain the planet for themselves.

A big, sprawling, colourful novel, then -- but it has its drawbacks, not least the essential predictability of its plot. More serious is the fact that the longer the novel grows the more bored Silverberg seems to become with it (and, writing in the Summer 1980 issue of Starship, he made explicit mention of the weariness that overtook him somewhere around its halfway mark). This first sect-on, detailing Valentine's entry into Pidruid, his joining the troupe of jugglers and his tour with them across part of the continent of Zimroel is the best because the whole thing is clearly as fresh to the author as it is to us (but not that fresh, since Majipoor is essentially Jack Vance's Big Planet writ even bigger, with even, at one point, a hing of the other Big Planet, Showboat World -- and, bowing further to his "mentor", Silverberg even goes as far as describing things in vaguely Vancian terms, with an appropriately skewed sentence construction): seated at his typewriter, he can clearly see and hear and feel that about which he's writing and, through his prose, make us see and hear and feel it too. As the story progresses, however, his internal vision begins to fade gradually away and his descriptions of the planet's multivariant races, cultures and geographical features become increasingly perfunctory and uninvolving -- and at the end, when we should be overwhelmed by the thirty-miles-high Castle Mount with its rings of separate cities of several million inhabitants each which Valentine has to scale to regain his title, all we get is a flat and unimaginative list of names and statistics, and thus see and hear and feel nothing. This crucial final sequence also lacks any and all plot tension: one would expect Valentine's progress to become harder and more hindered by his enemies the closer he gets to his goal, but instead, with everyone rushing to swear allegiance to his cause, it actually speeds up, with the inevitable result that there's no real climax, just a long-drawn-out sense of let-down.

Bar one belated final twist in the very last line -- in which Valentine, having spent the last half of his journey towards Castle Mount telling his companions how he'll improve things for everyone on Majipoor, intimates that the regaining of his throne was enough after all (a nice contrast to the incessant and oh-so-unlikely altruism of other writers' heroes wh've been caught in similar predicaments) -- Lord Valentine's Castle is, in sum, ultimately very disappointing. I

naturally can't presume to know Silverberg's motives for writing it (although I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that he did so with the current vogue for escapism-via-big-books-designed-for-the-long-empathic-read well in mind) but, speaking for myself, I think it might have been better if he'd written it at half its length. It might thus have lacked a good deal of its intermittent colour but (by concentrating Silverberg's attention on a much smaller canvas) would probably have compensated for it by a very necessary increase in depth -- particularly in depth of character: Valentine, starting as a complete innocent, a Parsifal-like holy fool, is supposed to grow and mature as an individual as the story progresses, but its length negates this utterly. Without such depth, no novel can ever be truly memorable; and, as it stands, I have a feeling that in five or ten years' time Lord Valentine's Castle will have been forgotten by all but Silverberg addicts and completists.

David F Bischoff & Dennis R Bailey -- TIN WOODMAN (Sidgwick & Jackson, 182pp, £5.95)

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

Messrs Bischoff and Bailey have assembled a surprisingly good novel from a heap of really old, hackneyed SF elements. Antipathy between telepaths and non-telepaths, for example, is a fairly common theme, although here it is particularly strong -- most humans feel some hatred for the telepathic minority, who are made to feel different from and inferior to everyone else -- and particularly well-handled. Almost as common is the idea that only the telepaths are capable of communicating with an alien intelligence -- in this case, a sentient spaceship which the human authorities have rather perspicaciously named "Tin Woodman". A highly talented young telepath, Div Harlthor (the names of all the characters in this novel make them sound like refugees from 1950s' Ace Doubles) is sent out from Earth to communicate with the ship, which is orbiting the star Aldebaran. He not only contacts it but joins with it, physically and spiritually, becoming the symbolic heart for which it has been searching.

Having set up this combination, however, the authors can't think of anything to do with it, and the bulk of the novel thus concerns another hated and despised telepath (actually an empath), Mora Elbrun, observing Tin Woodman from the starship Pegasus. The theme here is of Mora's struggles against the ship's paranoid captain, Darsen, a larger-than-life character who is totally unsuitable for command, which results in the temporary loss of her talent (another hackneyed theme) and the jeopardising of the ship in his mad, unauthorised pursuit of Tin Woodman.

Some segments of the story are marvellously exciting; others are merely excessively emotional or sentimental; others again are badly thought-out or insufficiently explained. Despite this, Tin Woodman -- the first collaboration between these two authors, although according to the blurb Bischoff has written several previous novels -- has more than enough good, and occasionally very good, ingredients to make up for its shortcomings.

Keith Roberts -- MOLLY ZERO (Gollancz, 224pp, £6.95)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

We in Britain have been lucky. From a relatively small community of SF authors, we have produced four or five good writers, one of the best of whom is Keith Roberts: quiet, unflashy, a user of ordinary language who never resorts to the high-flown "poetic imagery" that passes for literary quality among so many second-rate hacks, and whose control of the English language is so masterful that he is incapable of writing badly.

Roberts is also far from prolific, which makes a new novel from him very much of an event. I am pleased to report that Molly Zero is an event that well repays the wait. He has lost none of his skill in the interim; if anything, in fact, he has gained, for

in Molly Zero he employs that most awkward of literary devices, the second-person narrative, and carries it off with style. This is a considerable achievement, since the second-person narrative device is so rarely (and so badly) used that one's awareness of it tends to obscure the story behind it. Not so with Roberts, and it is testimony enough to his success with it to report that I was engrossed in the story by the end of the first page. With the second-person narrative he somehow manages to convey Molly's shifting perceptions and constant uncertainties with far more assurance than most writers manage with the over-used first-person.

The novel is set in some indefinite period in the future. Society has broken down but things are slowly being re-established. Though there are occasional mutterings about nukes it seems that the disintegration was due more to internal pressures -- "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold", as Yeats put it. Be that as it may, the end result is that Britain is divided into little enclaves, each jealously guarding its integrity. As the story opens, Molly is a pupil in a barracks-like school, beginning to chafe against the lack of freedom and in the end breaking out. What follows is an odyssey that reveals to her different aspects of her own character and of her society. She starts work as a shop assistant in a small northern town, but leaves to join a company of circus gypsies who alone seem free to move around the country. In London she leaves the gypsies to become involved with a group of disaffected young people who quickly turn to terrorism. As much a physical and spiritual odyssey, this seems to me to be a journey through recent history, as the small northern town and the way of life there is an echo of small-town life in the 50s; then, after a transitional period with the gypsies who may represent the free-and-easy life of the 60s, she falls in with the drop-outs of the late 60s and the terrorists of the 70s. Though this is nowhere explicitly stated in the book, it seems that Roberts is paralleling the social decline that he sees as leading to the breakdown that sets the scene for the world of Molly Zero.

It is undoubtedly a political novel, a warning voice crying in the wilderness about the perilous nature of our contemporary society. Yet the political stance adopted by Roberts is unclear; by rigorously presenting everything through Molly's uncertain eyes he ensures that the whole edifice is built on shifting ground. There are moments, as the true nature of the world is revealed to her, in which he seems to be advocating fascist authoritarianism as the only way out of our present mess, but at other times it seems more a warning of what might happen. And at the end, as he appears to have led carefully up to a situation in which Molly's surrender of personal freedom is the right and proper conclusion, he slips in a suggestion of rebellion.

This political ambiguity may anger some critics, but it is such a vital part of Molly's character that it seems to me to be one of the strengths of the book. There are weaknesses, principally in the plot -- for example, the extraordinary lengths gone to by the unseen rulers to deal with Molly are never satisfactorily explained. Nevertheless, these quibbles are minor and far outweighed by the strengths of the novel.

Philip Jose Farmer -- THE MAGIC LABYRINTH (Berkley-Putnam, 339pp, \$11.95)

Reviewed by Bill Carlin

Two decades ago, so it is claimed, Farmer first thought of writing an epic novel involving the entire human race as its cast, the famous and the infamous resurrected simultaneously on a single fabulous world. Given this story springboard, he plunged headfirst into the "Riverworld" series with gusto, clothing the basic premise in the barest minimum of scientific trappings and generally making a big splash with his customary outrageous enthusiasm. The original novella, "Riverworld", and the first novel, To Your Scattered Bodies Go, overflowed with vim and vigour but by the time the second and third novels drifted into the marketplace crass commercialism seemed to be damming up the once-sparkling tide. Here, at last, is the fourth and final volume of the series -- a long-awaited book which was originally intended to share the same covers as the third but was apparently too lengthy -- and the creative flow has dried to a trickle of vague interest linking stagnant pools of inane, episodic action that read like snippets from the Rover or Hotspur. If you're in the

mood for an uneven mixture of aerial dogfights (matching fighter aces of both world wars in an inconclusive, overlong contest), slapstick naval battles and a series of cameo appearances by new entires in Farmer's Top 100 Historical People chart, then you've hit the jackpot.

The plot, what little of it there is, rests heavily on the events detailed in the earlier novels. Tom Mix, Sir Richard Burton, Mark Twain and Cyrano de Bergerac, supported by a cast of thousands, paddle on towards the source of the river. King John and the reformed Hermann Goering continue to throw spanners into the works. Sir Thomas Malory, Gilgamesh and Arthur Conan Doyle are only a few of the characters to pop up in pointless walk-on roles. Fortunately, Joe Miller, the lisping prehistoric titanthrop of the previous novels, is still present as evidence of Farmer's talent for bizarre humour, and indeed provides most of the brighter moments within a magpie's nest of amateur Sufism, overt hero worship and Mississippi folklore -- all the things you'd expect to encounter during a typical day on the Great River.

True to his promise, Farmer does furnish a solution to the mysteries behind the Riverworld, tying up all the loose ends in "a sword-resisting Gordian know" -- but accomplishes this only by compressing a bewildering amount of action and intrigue into the novel's concluding chapters. The solution is an adequate one but hardly worthy of the series's epic theme; but then again, any solution would appear unsatisfactory when placed against such a backdrop. One can almost imagine the author's sigh of relief when the final page was reached and the chore was done. Now he can perhaps take his time and get down to the business of writing the short stories based on the Riverworld's most interesting characters and confrontations without having to worry about any of this explanation nonsense: it could only be an improvement.

Addicts and completists may choose to ignore my more negative comments (and undoubtedly will), but I advise them to wait for the paperback edition. Speaking as a Farmer devotee of many years' standing, I regard this as not so much a warning but as a helpful hint to fellow-sufferers.

Larry Niven -- RINGWORLD ENGINEERS (Gollancz, 354pp, £6.50)

Reviewed by Kevin Smith

I have an enormously strong suspicion that Larry Niven doesn't like people very much -- or at least that he doesn't reckon much to them. This is not so much that he never has any in his stories (though obviously that aspect cannot be totally ignored, and won't be). It is rather that the mannequins he uses in place of people are made to do the most remarkable and degrading things. Dave Langford, in Drilkjis 4, launched an assault on Jack Chalker for his over-riding theme of human degradation. Niven deserves the same sort of assault, though he is by no means as extreme or as obvious as Chalker. Where Chalker's characters undergo grotesque transformations into wierd creatures, Niven's remain human in form, but are made to behave in an animal way.

Let's see how this is borne out by Ringworld Engineers. To start with, the Engineers -- the people who built the Ringworld -- are Paks. (I'm giving nothing away by telling you this, as very early on Niven drops a huge hint that this is so. It is so huge that no-one who has read Protector can possibly miss it, though anyone who has not read it will never be able to guess in a month of Sundays. Why Niven refuses to spell it out until another fifty pages or so have gone by, preferring instead to let his hero think to himself that he knows the answer without ever actually thinking it 'out loud', is a mystery. Probably this is what Niven intended -- to give us a mystery -- though the mystery that allows half the people to guess the answer instantly and the other half to be none the wiser even after they are informed of it is a pretty poor sort of mystery.) Paks are supposed to be a very fast, very tough, very strong, very intelligent next stage of development of humans. We unfortunate Earthlings are mere immature breeders, unable to develop properly. What conclusions can we draw from this? That people cannot look after themselves; that there ought to be

someone to protect us when the going gets tough; that Niven considers people as they are to be inadequate.

Anything else? Oh yes. At one point the human hero, Louis Wu, is fighting for his life, when he suddenly rips all his clothes off and begins screwing one of his attackers. This is just what she wants, and sinks her teeth into his neck. What caused our hero to do such a ridiculous thing? No, not idiot-plotting -- at least, not such an obvious piece of idiot-plotting. What caused it were 'pheromones', such as what lady moths use to attract gentlemen moths from great distances. So here we have humans acting in a manner strongly reminiscent of moths -- that is, without free will, the intellect over-ridden by instinct. The same sort of thing happens in the transformation of people into Paks. The change is caused by Tree of Life, one whiff of which makes a forty year old human go mad to eat as much as possible of it, no matter what his intellect tells him. People are nothing but a bunch of knee-jerk reactions, according to Niven.

A final revelation of Niven's contempt for real people is his introduction of sex. Only Niven doesn't call it sex; he coyly calls it rishathra, and tries to obscure it a bit by defining it as sex outside one's own species (but within the hominids -- no perversions in Niven stories). Rishathra is immensely useful. You can use it to seal a bargain, to establish a friendship, to save getting pregnant when you're on heat (women only -- and another degradation), all sorts of things. Even having fun. But it never seems like fun; it seems very clinical and methodical and matter-of-fact. In its uses, rishathra is very like the ritual sexual mounting employed by apes to maintain a social hierarchy within a tribe. Once more, people are downgraded.

Do I need to do more to prove it? What rankles most, of course, is Niven's arrogance. It wouldn't seem nearly so bad if Niven gave the slightest impression of some pretension of knowing what he's talking about -- an impression he could give by good characterisation, or something like that.

I said at the start that Niven doesn't have any real people in his stories in any case. Can I justify that? Can I justify that! There are three main characters in Ringworld Engineers: Louis Wu is a human (too damned smart, of course, but human enough); Chmee is a kzinti, a species renowned for hot-headed aggression, and nasty with it; Hindmost is a Pierson's Puppeteer, which race comprises the biggest worlds in the galaxy. You would think, wouldn't you, that with three such diverse types to play with even Niven could always make them seem different. Not him! In their rapid-fire, smart-aleck conversations it is impossible to tell from the words and style of speech which of the three is speaking. Chmee is a very calmed-down, smart-aleck kzinti and Hindmost is a maniacally aggressive, smart-aleck Puppeteer, and both sound very much like smart-aleck Louis Wu. Niven says unto his characters, "Do this," and they do it, whether or not it is right for them so to do.

This is terrible. When I review a book I am looking to draw out the themes of the author, to try to find out what he intends with his work, to delve beneath the surface. With Ringworld Engineers I just can't do that. I am fairly sure that the theme of human inadequacy was not one intended by Niven (it is there nonetheless, and the more indicative of Niven's true beliefs because of that), but there is no other theme to explore. The book is entirely superficial. The characters, too, are wafer thin; they crumble as soon as you look in their general direction.

Well, we always knew that Niven was no Dickens. Is it then fair (harking back to my editorial) to judge him on the basis of themes and characterisation? He has never claimed to be a great literary writer, and his fans have always admired him primarily for his ideas and storytelling ability. To answer my question, no, it isn't fair. However, Niven lets us, and himself, down in the ideas and storytelling also. The plot is feeble, a mere series of events connected only by the fact that they happen to Louis Wu. The pace is pedestrian. And Niven has once again managed to waste, totally and absolutely, the magnificent concept of the Ringworld. It is a huge concept, and full marks to Niven for thinking of it, but he has now proved twice over that he is not a big enough writer to use it.

As for ideas, Ringworld Engineers contains nothing not in previous Known Space books. Its entire raison d'être is to close up the two obvious gaps in the series: what happened to the Paks, and why the Ringworld doesn't drift into its sun. Unfortunately, in doing so Niven opens up another gap or two, and changes some of the assumptions of the earlier Ringworld. (I refer you to Dave Langford's forthcoming review of Ringworld Engineers in Geoff Ripington's Arena SF for a more detailed consideration of these points.) Suffice it to say that even judged solely as entertainment (the validity of which approach I regard with some suspicion, but let that pass) Ringworld Engineers falls short.

Niven should have stuck to his guns, resisted the anguished pleas of his many fans, and ended the Known Space series when he said he had. It was, and remains, a nice concept, and for the most part he handled it well. But, as he has himself said (though perhaps not in so many words), it was becoming a corset into which a lot of original ideas would not fit any more, stifling Niven's creativity and denying the readers something, too. Have a heart, Niven fans; let the man do something new.

James Herbert	-- THE DARK (New English Library, 336pp, £5.75)
John Lylington	-- VOYAGE OF THE EIGHTH MIND (Hodder & Stoughton, 192pp, £5.50)
Robert Aickman	-- INTRUSIONS (Gollancz, 261pp, £6.95)
Ramsey Campbell (Ed.)	-- NEW TERRORS 1 (Pan, 334pp, £1.60)
Ramsey Campbell	-- TO WAKE THE DEAD (Millington, 317pp, £5.95)

Reviewed by Alan Dorey

The dividing line between SF and horror is usually quite clear. However, that between fantasy and horror is much less so, as is demonstrated by several of the above works -- although I hesitate to use the word "works" in connection with two of them, since they display evidence of neither work nor ingenuity. The Dark, by bestselling James Herbert, has all the originality of Frank Richards' Billy Funter, and both are pretty gross. (Herbert seems to have a penchant for monosyllabic titles: The Rats, The Fog, The Spear, not to mention those without the definite article at all, like Fluke and Lair.) An evil power, a claustrophobic terror, lurks within an old building and causes waves of madness amongst all who live in the vicinity, reaching out to deaden people's brains and drive them to a "frenzy of destruction". This evil, the eponymous "Dark", ultimately threatens to take over London; only one man and a bunch of oh-so-original people can save the day. Herbert pushes his story forward at a relentless pace, discarding plot, characterisation and literacy along the way, but making sure to include plenty of sex, violence and destruction. The sheer self-indulgence of Herbert's cobbling together of such exciting aspects of modern-day life as football hooliganism, lunatic asylums and seances is pitiful. The Dark is, in other words, formula writing at its nadir, and is best left alone. The whole thing was done with much more verve and style by Robert Holdstock in Necromancer.

The other book not worthy of the word "work" is John Lylington's Voyage of the Eighth Mind. Whereas The Dark at least hung together in places, Lylington's effort is simply dreadful -- a strong word but, I'm afraid, true. The basic elements of a novel are lacking: the characters never come alive, and are flatter than a hole in the ground. The story, concerning an individual's gradual awareness of the invasion of his consciousness by an alien, is so full of holes, so jumbled-up and chaotic as to be highly improbable, quite apart from being unintentionally hilarious. The alien is apparently an advance guard, sent to study the human race so that they may learn how best to attack us -- all good clichéd stuff, and the ending is but a Noddy version of the closing scenes of Kubrick's 2001. In these harsh economic times the book is, quite frankly, an insult. How many more notable writers have been rejected so that this dross may see the light of day?

To my mind, Robert Aickman -- an acknowledged expert on and author of several books about Britain's inland waterways -- is Britain's most accomplished fantasy writer, and Intrusions is a lovely collection of six macabre pieces, each carefully thought out and subtly written. "Hand in Glove" opens the book, and sets the tone for the

five stories which follow. In a traditional English country landscape, two girls set out for a picnic, only the path they wander down isn't quite the same on the way back. Strange materialisations introduce a surreal atmosphere, perhaps the odd heart murmur, and leave you almost completely unprepared for the ending. All the stories are set in the ordinary, known world, and are far more effective as a result, since the occasional unknown variable introduced into a familiar landscape (like the wide river which suddenly appears at the bottom of a suburban garden in "No Time is Passing") always seems far more strange than a completely fabricated environment. You might think that eventually one would grow prepared for Aickman's shading of the normal into the bizarre, but so well does he write that one's expectations are almost always confounded. Intrusions is a vital addition to any comprehensive book collection.

Ramsey Campbell is a young fantasy/horror writer from the North West of England whose reputation seems out of all proportion to his generally mediocre writing. But he does make a fine editor, as is shown by his lucid, interesting introductions to the authors and stories contained in New Terrors 1. The book, suggested to Campbell at the 1978 Fantasycon in Birmingham, is a varied collection, but is on balance well-stocked with good pieces, with an SF presence being maintained by, among others, Bob Shaw, Lisa Tuttle, Tanith Lee, Gene Wolfe and Cherry Wilder. Karl Edward Wagner, author of the "Kane" series of Conan pastiches, weighs in with a competent short, ".220 Swift", and Manly Wade Wellman gives us a piece of American folklore in "Yare". For my money the best piece is Kit Reed's "Chicken Soup", concerning a not-so-small boy with an over-protective mother: classic modern horror. I'd also mention Steve Rasnic's "City Fishing", which induces a feeling akin to Tom Disch's "Descending", and is in fact vaguely similar to it. He had a continuous chain of escalators, but Rasnic has a city; and the theme of a never-ending journey into its dark depths is nicely conveyed.

Campbell has recently published a novel, To Wake the Dead, but it is unfortunately not a good advertisement for him. One could offer all sorts of cruel puns on the title and its effect upon the readers, but the effort would not be justified. What rather infuriates me is that there is in it the seed of a good story which has been stifled by some truly pedestrian and lacklustre writing. Diana, a young girl, is the central character; making contact with the occult, she develops the ability to leave her body and engages in a whole series of tediously weird experiences. There are plenty of hooks intended to "excite" the reader, such as the subliminal sex that appears every 25 pages or so; but the story doesn't seem to know where it's really going, and blunders about from Victorian mysticism to Nazi Germany and back again. The novel is by no means badly written, but it is rushed in places, overlong in others, and generally dull. It is perhaps a pity that Campbell appears to be not quite as adept at editing his own work as he is that of others.

Still, two out of five can't be all bad. There should be some pleasant reading in here somewhere.

Another book we were intending to review this issue was CAPELLA'S GOLDEN EYES by Chris Evans, but unfortunately somewhere between Joe Nicholas and James Corley the Post Office managed to dispose of it. Our apologies to Chris and his publishers, Faber.

(This apology service is extended to BSFA editors only.)

* "...Where do meteorites come from?" "Space," said Vawn, in a bored voice. *
* "Look, I'm hungry --" "That's it! Space! So that tells you one important *
* thing about meteorites!" said Ispex. "What important thing? Is anyone else *
* hungry?" Vawn said. But Tsu said, "Go on!" "It tells you," said Ispex, imp- *
* ressively, "that meteorites are spaceworthy!" *
* * * * *

Letters

"Lit. Crit. Syndrome"

From Robert Gibson

"Chris Priest's article rightly attacks the 'anti-literature' 'SF-is-entertainment' viewpoint, but he seems to be insufficiently aware of the snobbery which provoked the inverted snobbery which he condemns. The lit. crit. syndrome is not just an academic disease, it is a fashionable habit of thinking which infects and restricts almost all criticism.

"To give one example: the Rules say that a good novel must have three dimensional characters. The fact that this Rule is 99% true should surely lead one to study and appreciate the rare exceptions, in the same sort of way that scientific enquiry may proceed by the examination of apparent anomalies. But no. E.R. Burroughs is ignored by serious people because his characters are made of cardboard. Never mind that they are living cardboard -- archetypes in a sense -- and that they, together with the stupid plots of the books in which they appear, provide an unparalleled opportunity to examine the unaided and isolated essence of storytelling.

"If a book with cardboard characters and stupid plots can fascinate, there must surely be something about it that is worth discussing -- but the Rules say no. If the author's legions of imitators all fail miserably to imitate him properly, surely that means that the author had something special -- but the Rules say no. They stop the reader from thinking: 'Who put life into these stereotyped characters? The author didn't. I, the reader, must have done it myself. Why did I take the trouble? Because the book incited me to do so, somehow. But how did the author achieve this "incitement quality"? That is the subject for investigation!"

"I might start the investigation here by giving a clue as to how character and quality may infiltrate past the Rules. I quote from Herbert Read, The True Voice of Feeling: Studies in English Romantic Poetry (1947), p 123: 'Two verbal images, side by side, are more than two distinct perceptions: fire strikes between them ... and you get a third quality which does not belong to either image separately.'"

Robert Gibson, 74 Turners Hill, Hemel Hempstead, Herts, HP2 4LH.

** I was at first inclined to think that Robert had misunderstood the nature of the 'Rules' and was complaining about the existence of such nasty and restrictive things. This is not so. His real complaint is about the dogmatic acceptance of such 'Rules' by reviewers and critics, and the rigid application of them to every work of fiction. I could not agree more and (though this may seem surprising to you) neither could Joseph Nicholas, as you will see if you read his short article 'Guns of the Timberland' in this issue of Vector. The origin and nature of the 'Rules' are quite simple: good books came first and the 'Rules' were, and are, an attempt to define the qualities that made the books good. In other words they are an empirical distillation, not an arbitrary imposition. The use of the 'Rules' to condemn books is to be frowned on; they should rather be used to decide why a bad book is bad. Try as we might, the initial

decision as to whether a book is good or bad is likely to remain largely subjective. Personally, I can't stand Edgar Rice Burroughs -- and the 'Rules' just happen to back me up...

From Martin Perry

"I'm sure [Chris Priest's article in Vector] will cause some controversy. I must admit that in my opinion there is (ultimately) no such thing as objectivity in the criticism of any work of art, and I am worried that attempts to make SF in general more literate and academic will muck it up. I know what I like and so does everyone else and that is really just as good a measure of a book's worth as any. It means, for one thing, that I could read and immensely enjoy The Mote in God's Eye (not a marvellously well-written book) without worrying about how many oxymorons it contained or whether or not it concealed some deep, allegorical statement about entropy.

"During a recent Time Out Of Mind, in between some stuffy remarks by Michael Moorcock, Fred Pohl said that he thought the best type of SF is that which combines elements from traditional, hard science fiction with the lessons learned from the experimentation of the New Wave, and if Gateway is anything to go by then he seems to be right. (Or don't you like that one either, Joe?) Certainly, no amount of literary embellishment can substitute for a lack of imagination, and that is one reason why SF is a literature of ideas.

"When I buy an SF book with my beer-money, I do want to be entertained. Its capacity for entertaining me is in fact what drew me to science fiction in the first place and, literature or not, I'd hate to see that side of it go."

Martin Perry, 2 Wessex Drive, Hatch End, Pinner, Middx, HA5 4PY.

** [The first half of Martin's letter appeared in Paperback Inferno
** Vol 4 No 1, being concerned mainly with that rather than Vector.] I am concerned about Martin's apparent belief that a book is less likely to be entertaining if it is literary. The point about the 'literary content' of a book is not that it has to be noticed to be appreciated, but that its presence enhances a book whether it is noticed by the reader or not. The Mote in God's Eye would have been a far better book if the characters had been more real, for example, and this could have been achieved without losing any of its imaginative content. Anyway, why should those who delight in spotting oxymorons be deprived of their little pleasures?

Paraphernalia of SF

From Pete Lyon

"Apropos Chris Priest's crie de coeur in the two recent Vectors, I completely concur with his expressed morality and aesthetics on the issue of 'literature'. I'm neither a neo nor a BNF, nor indeed anything, but I would just like to say my tuppence worth.

"In addition to the 'anti-arty' school of fan he identified, there is the type who delights in listing and collecting. These anal retentives happily reel off plot, protagonist, author and publisher or third rate works with great intension, thus reinforcing, nay exalting, the limitations (self-imposed) of the medium. The paraphernalia of SF is fiercely protected by many fans as it is familiar, comfortable and undemanding. Just the opposite should be the case. Subverting these expectations is not deemed entertaining and therefore any work seeking to stretch the parameters of the genre is identified as threatening.

"I draw and paint. The most common response to my humble efforts (and it is not avante garde, I can assure you) is definitely reactionary. There are far more exploratory works being written than painted in SF. Such a high premium is placed on superficial trappings -- slick technique, exotic sexist females, magnificent technology with virtually no attention being paid to content or implication. I myself have shamefully submitted to these pressures. Priest's critique applies doubly to my chosen field. The readership of SF may be 'intelligent and diverse' but these same people, I suspect, gave up on SF's visual manifestations long ago, regarding it as shallow, juvenile and merely decorative -- with justification."

Pete Lyon, 2 New Row, Old Micklefield, Leeds, LS25 4AJ.

Quality of recent Vectors

From Allan Lloyd

"I was quite pleased to see that Mike Dickinson has resigned as editor. I'm afraid that the three issues which he edited were just not to my taste. I like Dave Wingrove's Vectors very much and hope that the next editor will get back to intelligent discussion on SF. Surely humour belongs in Matrix, and articles about 'how I published my first novel' or 'life is hell being a publisher's reader' should be in Focus. Some of the book reviews have been O.K. (your own and, outstandingly, Roz Kaveney's) but please could somebody shoot Joe Nicholas. He manages to offend me with almost every word that he writes, and this despite the fact that I mostly agree with his opinions. I can understand why the BSFA is getting so many angry letters from people who actually like Heinlein, Asimov and Anderson. The BSFA used to have a sense of responsibility (God, I sound like a retired colonel) and being abusive and insulting to popular writers is not criticism. You seem to be having a purge (John and Eve going too) so could not Joe be removed by popular opinion."

Allan Lloyd, Quebb Cottage, Eardisley, Hereford, HR3 6LP.

** Allan was also kind enough to suggest that I should apply for
** the position of Vector editor, not realising that I already had. The man has such impeccable taste that I am sorry to disappoint him with the news that Joseph is staying on as reviews editor. It seems sensible to have control over hardbacks and paperbacks in one place, and I don't especially want the extra work. Besides which, Joseph and I Have Plans For The Reviews. Of course, one way of diluting his particularly acerbic style of reviewing would be for lots of people to volunteer to write the reviews, in both Vector and Paperback Inferno.

"Tiger! Tiger!"

From Jonathan P.R. Palfrey

"...It's clear that [Simon Ounsley in Vector 98] is criticising an apple for not tasting like an orange. In Tiger! Tiger! Bester does some things magnificently, other things crudely or not at all. Simon doesn't like the book because, not being attuned to its virtues, he naturally looks for (and fails to find) other virtues which it wasn't intended to possess. Probably he'll never learn to appreciate Bester as I do (just as I'll probably never learn to appreciate Moorcock as he does); but he has asked, explicitly, for enlightenment, so here I am joining the queue of those attempting to give it to him.

"The first analogy which comes to mind is that of skiing. Let's

assume that you're a keen skier about to head downslope. What are you hoping to get out of the experience? You are not expecting to explore the psyche of your instructor; you are not about to dwell reminiscently on the comparatively tedious uphill journey you've just completed. You're there to enjoy pace, excitement and sensory stimulation, unless I'm much mistaken (which I could be, never having skied in my life).

"So it is with Tiger! Tiger!. Bester has, very deliberately, started his man off at the summit and given him a push, and we're here to watch him cope with an unfamiliar slope at well over safety speeds. It's not a morbid fascination: I've read the book many times and I know he'll survive. It's a rapid-fire sensory experience.

"Bester doesn't explore anything in depth: character, scenario, or scenery. He doesn't have time. If you want pace, you must sacrifice depth, and this is a book about pace.

"To change metaphors in midstream, picture Bester sketching his story with rapid, heavy strokes of a very black pencil — if he gets it right, the result may be more telling than an oil painting, no matter how much more detailed and true to life the latter.

"It is, of course, true that the book could be better written, and is flawed as it stands — this is true of all books. The obvious flaw in Tiger! Tiger! is the first one and a half pages of Chapter One, which are self-consciously written and make the mistake of telling (not showing) us what sort of a man Foyle was before his ordeal. This was undoubtedly done to save time and maintain pace; but that short section isn't vital and could with advantage have been completely omitted.

"A less specific flaw is that Bester fails to provide a satisfactory resolution to his story. This is a very common flaw in SF, and Bester fails here less badly and more excusably than others have done (I certainly can't imagine a satisfactory resolution to such a story), but it is a flaw nonetheless.

"I regard Tiger! Tiger! as a genuine SF classic. What it does, it does well — not to perfection, but then I don't know of any perfect, or even near-perfect SF novels. It's a vivid book; a crowded montage of action, images and sensory stimulation, conveyed in a style which is, at its best, marvellously compact and efficient. It's a work of creative imagination. And yet the scenario is well thought out and consistent, and the plot is direct and to the point. If Simon can't appreciate these virtues, he is missing out; it's a book I've read time after time without failing to enjoy it or wearying of its imagery -- despite the lack of fine detail."

Jonathan P.R. Palfrey, 29a Priory Road, Kenilworth, Warwickshire.

SFWA Suite

From Phyllis Eisenstein

"You asked for an American view of the SFWA Suite, so here I am, a fan for 19 years and a pro for 11, all of which gives me, I think, valid credentials for examining all sides of the question. The view of the SFWA Suite as an elitist Authors' Club is far too narrow. Yes, it is a place for authors to talk to their author friends, but it is also a place where they can talk to authors they've never met. It is a place where a new writer can be almost sure of meeting some of the older hands. It is a place where business and shop talk can be discussed.

It is a place of retreat for those times when the authors feel lonely for their own kind, for those times when the authors don't want to be onstage. Taking a group of friends up to your room would be a good solution to the absence of such a suite, and some authors do exactly that anyway, but it works poorly at a convention of several thousand souls, where you're lucky if you see anybody for longer than it takes to wave and say, 'I'll see you later.' We all know, surely, that such 'laters' often don't happen at all. As for accessibility -- a writer locked away in a room with friends is no more accessible than one in the SFWA Suite. Some writers like to interact with fans most of the time; others prefer to remain aloof. Having or not having a SFWA Suite would not change this. I know of writers who, after being sociable for a couple of hours, have disappeared to their rooms and not come out again till morning. The existence of a SFWA Suite seems not to make much difference where these folks are concerned. Having babysat the SFWA Suite a number of times at various cons, I think my view is a fairly accurate one: during the day, SFWA members tend to drop into the Suite for a few minutes to check out who's there. Then they leave. There are long stretches in the daytime when the Suite is empty save for the babysitter (a very lonely situation). This often continues well on through the evening. After ten or eleven o'clock, people start drifting in. Anywhere from ten to fifty people may be standing around drinking by midnight or one in the morning. The crowd stays in that range for several hours. But the people drift in and out. The constituency of the crowd is ever-fluctuating. Rarely will any individual spend the bulk of the evening at the SFWA Suite (babysitters excluded). And of those ten to fifty people standing around drinking, perhaps half (sometimes more) are guests. Convention committee. Sexual partners (old or newly-acquired). Drinking buddies (old or new). Fans. People I've never seen before, never heard of. And crashers. Let me tell you about the many Scandinavian fans who crased the SFWA Suite at Seacon and drank up all the liquor we had bought.

*The point I would like to make is that writers don't go to cons to hide. The SFWA Suite is a rest stop for them, a place where known faces and/or familiar topics of conversation can be found with ease. A lot of writers see it as an oasis. But in spite of spending some time in the SFWA Suite, many American SF pros are just as accessible as Bob Shaw, Chris Priest, and Jim White. And those that don't want to be accessible can't be forced to be so. I have very clear memories of several secret pro parties that I was not allowed into when I was 'only' a fan. Yes, I was hurt by that. I wanted to sit at the feet of the mighty and absorb wisdom. Or at least entertainment. And the people who answered the door would say, 'Sorry, this is a closed party.' Prohibiting a SFWA Suite won't have any effect on that sort of thing. In fact, I think it would encourage it.

"Well, I must confess, I like the SFWA Suite. I always check in at least once an evening, just to see who's there. To hear the latest pro gossip, the shop-talk. To meet some writer I've never met before. To be talked into volunteering for some SFWA job. It's fun to be with other writers. To know that there's one place you're sure to find people who will listen to a writer's woes or triumphs with a sympathetic and knowledgeable ear. And then, after a while, I drift out to someplace else, because it's fun to be with other fans, too. I'm not the only author who feels this way, I'm sure."

Phyllis Eisenstein, 6208 North Cambell, Chicago, Illinois 60659, USA.

** In a sense the SFWA Suite can be compared to the fanroom (which is now a permanent feature of British Eastercons and was for me the highlight of Seacon '79) in that they act as places for authors or fans respectively to go knowing that there will be others 'of

their kind' there already with whom to gossip or talk shop. The difference lies in the fact that the fanroom is completely open; anyone can go into it at any time to find out what happens there, whether they be established fan, young neo, or professional author. Without any doubt, however, the SFWA Suite has closed doors to the majority of convention goers.

What caused most ire at Seacon '79, though, were the reports that some SFWA members were demanding that the Suite should be free of charge to SFWA, and free drink should be provided by the convention committee — an attitude of unbelievable arrogance, and one which, I am thankful to say, did not seem general amongst SFWA members. Possibly this apparent antagonism between British fans and American professionals arose because of differences between British and American conventions. It is quite possible, for example, for professionals at an Eastercon to have a quiet chat amongst themselves at the bar, whereas it seems right out at an American convention of any real size.

We Also Heard From

Geogre Bondar, who liked what Roz Kaveney had to say about Vonda McIntyre; Phil James, who liked the extracts from Asteroid Man; Jill Lyon, who would have liked her letter last time to have been in Matrix after all; and Andy Sawyer, whose letter became an article overnight.

Ten letters. "Could do better."

NEXT ISSUE

The next issue will be a special large size issue to celebrate 100 issues of Vector. This is not to say it will revert to Focus size, merely that it will have more pages. It is always rash to predict such things with the appearance of certainty, but Vector 100 should contain most of the following:

"Who's Driving the Bus?" -- Garry Kilworth looks at who decides what reaches the public marked as SF.

"Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Other Never-Never Lands" -- Joseph Nicholas looks at current trends in SF.

Alan Dorey look's back at the 100 issues of Vector. (Well, maybe 99 of them.)

Rob Hansen reviews two illustrated, large-format fantasy novels, and comments on SF illustration generally.

Past editors write! A number of short pieces from as many previous Vector editors as I can easily con into it.

"Towards a Critical Standard, Part II."

Book reviews -- from our ever-widening circle of reviewers. You too could be one; write to Joseph Nicholas and volunteer.

Plus: "Standpoint", "Letters", and other articles. (N.B. These are dependent on you; write something.)

And not forgetting the end-of-page fillers! I've a really terrific book as the source of these for Vector 100. I've been saving it, special.

Briareus Delta, a distant star, has exploded, emitting massive doses of radiation that hit Earth with apocalyptic consequences...

The Twilight of Briareus

£1.25 Published 9 May

Richard Cowper

Profundis is a massive submarine trapped for a century beneath the waves by the nuclear fallout above. Mad captain succeeds mad captain until the maddest of all takes the helm...

Profundis

£1.25 Published 10 October

Richard Cowper

Keill Randor is slowly dying from radiation, but he is determined to find the perpetrators of his warrior-planet's annihilation...

Galactic Warlord

Douglas Hill

80p (Piccolo) Published 10 October

PAN SCIENCE FICTION



OMNI

YOUR
PASSPORT
TO THE
FUTURE

SUBSCRIBE!

OMNI Subscription Department, 2 Bramber Road
London W14 9PB. I enclose £11.00 for a one year (12 issues)
introductory subscription to OMNI

Mr/Ms _____

Address _____

Payment must
accompany order

VR1

