PAPERBACK INFERNO

Volume 4, Number 1 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas, Room 9, 94 St George's Square, Pimlico, London SW1Y 3QY, this issue containing reviews by Bill Carlin, William Goodall, Dave Langford, Ian Maule, Janice Maule, Chris Morgan, Brian Smith, Ian Williams and me. Less by me than ever before, in fact, which should please my critics but which arises less from their cavils than from the fact that in the past 12 months I've read so much SF that I can hardly read any more without going slowly round the bend. (The main reason for the increasing harshness of my reviews in previous issues being of course due to the amount of stuff I was reading, which codified itself into a vicious circle of steadily deepening dissatisfaction and a constantly rising "threshold of acceptance".) So it was either pull back now or eventually abandon the stuff altogether -- and I not unnaturally chose the former, which results in a welcome increase in the number of different viewpoints brought to bear on Our Favourite Literature, for without such vital differences of opinion criticism would cease to progress altogether and become instead a rigid and inflexible set of doctrines that would ultimately crush individuality and originality right out of existence -- a prospect I find quite unbearable. Debate, even vociferous debate, over values and standards is the cornerstone of criticism's survival, and if it doesn't materialise then we might just as well pack up and go home.

In the meantime, however, and as promised last time, I'm leading off with the magazine reviews....

BLOOD ON THE RACKS

This will, I'm sure, sound terribly old-fashioned, but I happen to believe that a novel should be conceived and written as a single, complete unit; something with a strong central narrative thread, with an overarching, all-embracing plot, and with a beginning, a middle and an end. Yet recently there seems to have emerged a tendency to write novels in stages, as novelettes and novellas that first appear in the magazines over a number of years and are then cobbled together between the same set of covers in order that they can be marketed and sold all over again. It's not a completely new trend, I know, having been around since at least the war (although there was once a time when it seemed to have gone away), but the one thing that such as Benford's _In The Ocean Of Night_, McIntyre's _Dreamsnake_, the Robinsons' _Stardance_ and others have in common is that they aren't "proper" novels: the manner in which they were originally constructed (and usually not much revised afterwards) precludes them from being anything more than a collection of subplots hung on the flimsiest of frames. The best of the breed, a very small proportion of the total, seem to have a certain amount of heart to them, a core of strength and meaning that enables them to in some way transcend their inherent limitations, but the majority are an artistic and intellectual mess: inept, third-rate and forgettable. And if you read the magazines, of course, you can see the damn things growing and mutating and sprawling out all over the place before your very eyes....

The only stories that Robert F. Young seems to have written over the past couple of years, for example, have been those about one John Starfinder and his telepathic, time-travelling "space whale" (artificial? organic? beyond the fact of its rescue from a spaceship scrapyard, Young either doesn't know or doesn't care), which might have taken him freebooting all over the known galaxy but for his being the sort of emotionally under-developed no-hoper who believes that if he could only meet and marry the girl of his dreams then everything would come up roses and life would be one continuous round of pleasure for ever after. (I remember feeling much the same when I was an adolescent, but soon grew out of it; for a supposedly grown man like Starfinder to still feel the same is ridiculous.) And, lo and behold, in the very first story ("The Star Eel", F & SF, June 1977 -- although at the time it looked like an unfinished one-off sold solely on the strength of his name) he found just such a girl, drifting around in space in a similar craft, except that she was much too young for him and had to be allowed to grow up before he could fall properly in love with her; and after trying to get rid of her ("The Haute Bourgeoisie", F & SF, January 1980) went back in time to place her in a school on Earth during the 1970s (why?) before -- supposedly sceptical of current cosmological wisdom, a strange obsession for a man as admittedly under-educated as he -- taking the whale even further back in time to discover whether the Big Bang was a real event ("The Mindanao Deep", F & SF, March 1980). The final story ("As A Man Has A Whale A Love Story", F & SF, July 1980) had him returning to collect the now adult Ciely Bleu, to find that (gosh, how unexpected) she's become the most beautiful woman in the world but that he can't have her because she's already got someone else so he heaves a sigh and sheds a tear and gets up to go but she falls into his arms anyway and off they go back into space aboard the whale.

The love element in this series, in other words, is pure schmaltz and tears, the sort you'd expect of a woman's weekly or a girl's comic, so trite and mawkish that it makes even McCaffrey and Sturgeon seem tame -- and for it to be still so predominant in this day and age is rather astonishing. One might be forgiven for thinking that, if the "revolutions of the 60s did anything for SF, they gave it real human characters with real human emotions and real human problems but, judging by this series -- a too-specific example, for sure, but think of all the other mid-to-late 70s stuff you've read which also dealt in the same quasi-adolescent and indeed quite ersatz emotions -- that's now been forgotten in favour of something that is at best utterly dishonest. The view of human relationships that it presents is that of a child not yet equipped to understand either his own or anyone else's feelings and, worse, isn't about to make the attempt to understand them either. I'm reminded, almost against my will, of Thomas M. Disch's "The Embarrassments Of Science Fiction" in Peter Nicholls's Explorations Of The Marvellous, in which he condemned SF as a disreputable and impoverished branch of children's literature -- and, reading these stories, it's difficult not to agree with him: an impression heightened by Young's device of allowing the whale to communicate with Starfinder only by means of mental heiroglyphs, which allows him to liberally sprinkle the text with all manner of cute little line drawings which don't actually clarify what's being said and, for all that they might be yet another move in the rather pointless game of integrating pictures with prose (presumably on the grounds that the readers are thought to be too lacking in imagination to visualise things for themselves), simply make the whole thing seem as though it's intended for those who have trouble reading without moving their lips.

It came as no surprise to read (in the editorial introduction to the fourth and last story) that the series is soon to be published in book form. One might hope that Young indulges himself in some fairly extensive rewriting of it before then -- certainly, the third story has absolutely damn-all to do with the main theme, and the series as whole lacks any coherent background, or even any background -- but, although I'd be happy to be proved wrong, I have an awful feeling that he won't. Thus is art sacrificed to the desire to keep the money coming in by writing something else -- probably another series of stories, and probably (oh God!) a second set about John Starfinder and Ciely Bleu and their go-anywhere, do-anything space whale....

And what, meanwhile, of the series that are still in progress? Well, there's George R. R. Martin's and Lisa Tuttle's stories about the forgotten colony planet of Windhaven, which at root appears to have been derived (in approximately equal measure) from Jack Vance's Big Planet (not much metal) and Ursula LeGuin's Earthsea

(lots of sea and islands), concerned in the main with the trials and tribulations of a bunch of hang-gliding message-couriers without whom the world's economy would collapse. The first story, "The Storms Of Windhaven", appeared back in 1975 and detailed the partial break-up of the quasi-guild system that had dominated the hang-gliding fraternity, and the second, "One-Wing", spread itself in two parts across the January and February 1980 Analog -- and those who hadn't read the first story would have found the second, full of fleeting and unexplained references to it, virtually incomprehensible. (I couldn't remember much of the first story myself.) Only in the second half did it slow down and begin to make sense, revealing itself as little more than an inordinately drawn-out hang-gliding competition (a whole two-part serial for that?) in which the non-guild fliers had to prove themselves against the guild ones and which the socially outcast male lead character (the "One-Wing" of the title) eventually won, just as you'd been expecting. The point of it all (if it can be said to have one) rests on the fact that, as with the first story, the majority of the dramatis personae are children or teenagers, with the result that, just like the first story, it's really no more than a heavy-handed and over-extended metaphor about Growing Up And Finding Your Place In The World, one so typical of the soul-bearing, self-examining angst that is these days so prevalent in America. On top of which it has enough plot-threads left hanging (the socially outcast male lead is gonna want some revenge on the man who beat him up, after all) that you know there'll sooner or later be a sequel. Come to think of it, this is perhaps how these quasi-novels get written in the first place: develop your idea to the point where you can say something about it, leave a few things deliberately unresolved and hope that the plot for a follow-up suggests itself in the fullness of time. Not so much a matter of finding new depth and meaning in your creation as of manufacturing it to meet the demands of a readership anxious (in it childlike dewy-eyed way) to know "what happens next" -- and while "One-Wing" does indeed tell us what happens next, it doesn't deepen our understanding of Windhaven because its theme, as itemised above, is exactly the same as that of "The Storms Of Windhaven". Apart from which the 5 year gap between the two stories will have inevitably led to some changes in the authors' tone and approach with the result that when they're eventually assembled between the same set of covers the book will appear even more uneven, even more unsatisfactory, even more messy and inept....unless, of course, they commit themselves to some fairly extensive rewriting in the interim. Cross your fingers and hope.

From which you might think that this build-your-book-in-bits approach is a purely American phenomenon. Not so; Keith Roberts, for example, has earlier travelled the same route with the brilliant Pavane and the confused The Chalk Giants and now, with "The Lordly Ones" and "The Comfort Station" (F & SF, March and May 1980, respectively), it looks very much as though he's doing so again. The setting for both stories is Britain in the messy aftermath of a politico-economic collapse, with guerilla bands roaming the countryside and lots of people getting shot for no very good reason -- but Roberts, true to his previous (if by now rather cliched) form, eschews such power-fantasy in favour of the struggles of the underdogs to cope with the catastrophe. The first story succeeded admirably: supposedly the personal journal of a mentally retarded lavatory attendant mainly concerned to keep "his" public convenience as bright and as clean as possible, it described with marvellous clarity and conviction his fumblingly maturing awareness of the chaos reigning outside his quiet, orderly, self-contained world and of his own inadequacy to comprehend it, ending with him about to step outside the convenience to meet a probable death at the hands of a gang of rifle-toting thugs -- an impression the creation of which required Roberts to perform a most delicate balancing act, getting you to feel pity for the character without actually pitying him, which would have destroyed the reader-sympathy he'd spent the entire story so carefully building up. And what do we find in the second story -- told in the omniscient auctorial third-person, about a renegade woman schoolteacher who runs across him on her aimless wanderings before being shot by a gang of rifle-toting thugs -- but that he survived after all, and apparently without a mark on him. It's patently obvious, therefore, that Roberts has chosen to develop a series from a story that by its very nature could not have supported a sequel except by a retroactive alteration to its ending -- which is just what has happened and which does nothing for it but destroy its original worth. Witless hypertrophy rules OK, presumably; bet he writes another sequel real soon. Ho-hum.

Pooh to the lot of them, really. The justification for writing such series

-- that if you've sold one story it shouldn't be too difficult to sell another about much the same things -- is a purely commercial one in any case (derived, no doubt, from the dear dead days of the pulps, when you had to hack the stuff out just to keep body and soul together), and any writer with any care for his art should know that commercialism is the absolute death of it. Writers have as much need for money as anyone else, yes, but this sort of activity, in which the desire to realise an internal vision or make a personal statement (which is what motivates the artist in the first place) has been replaced by with desire to pander to the limited sensibilities of a genre market (which, because it is a genre market, thrives on the security offered by the repetition of certain basic themes and plots) by calculatedly and cynically milking your invention until even you're bored with it, is inexcusable. Writers are not competing with each other to see who can sell the most books, they are competing only with themselves, striving to make each new story an improvement over its predecessor and in the process develop the range and variety of their artistic expression to its highest possible pitch. The writing of such series as the foregoing can in no way contribute to this aim, and will in fact actively hamper it to the point where the writer is all but incapable of further development. To put it bluntly, they are turning themselves into hacks -- and, dear God, doesn't SF have enough of those already without any more flocking to join their ranks?

2000 LIGHT YEARS FROM HOME -- or almost, anyway. Herewith a couple of letters that would have gone into Matrix but for the fact that there was no room for my replies as well. First up is WILLIAM BAINS:

'"Gernsback Delusion" pretends to be reviews of science books, but every one your reviews contains two or more fairly basic errors and countless omissions. Despite stating that you read the New Scientist article on massive neutrinos you obviously didn't read as far as the bit suggesting that neutrino mass closes the universe in time. Posing as a scientist makes this less excusable. You go on to ramble about the Drake equation, giving no hint of realisation that this is a mathematical fiction. You praise Dawkins for discussing "in considerably more depth and detail" E. O. Wilson's theories, neglecting to tell us how Dawkins mangled and simplified the original in his "discussion". And so it goes, the conclusion being that you're not competent to review science books -- and your reviews of non-science books are therefore likely to be just as flawed.'

I'd better point out (because he'll be Terribly Upset if I don't) that the above has been edited down from a tract so hysterical that it would make even Dr Goebbels jealous. However: I'm certainly no scientist and have no formal scientific training of any kind -- and thus, well aware that in reviewing such books I may make many errors and omissions, confine myself to straightforward descriptions of their contents and to statements of whether or not they succeed in communicating their ideas to the lay reader, such being the type of person for whom we're primarily writing: someone whose scientific knowledge is likely to be, for the most part, fairly rudimentary and haphazard (and probably derived at third-hand from Larry Niven et al) but who may wish to improve said knowledge anyway. The "Gernsback Delusion" column is thus intended to draw to their attention certain readily accessible tomes by which they may care to do so, although -- judging by the distortions you choose to perpetrate (claiming that I "rambled" about the Drake formula and that I "praised" Dawkins for his book when in fact I merely stated that Edelson's book contained some discussion of the former and that the latter happened to exist) -- this clearly isn't enough for you; presumably you believe that only qualified teachers should be permitted to expound upon such subjects and that anyone who attempts to learn something through their own effort should be shot out of hand as a heretic and a criminal. What really takes the cake, however, is your monumental lapse of logic in claiming that because I'm "incompetent" to review science books I'm therefore incompetent to review fiction, which is tantamount to claiming that an incompetent gardener is of necessity also an incompetent cook, and obvious nonsense: the subject-matter is entirely different, and comparison of the two is impossible.

Bloody hell, why do these blindingly obvious things have to be pointed out in so dumbly didactic a fashion? Does everything have to be served up with a handy little label before you can identify it for what it is?

But here's MARTIN PERRY:

'I was ~~interested~~, though not particularly surprised, to read Chris Priest's disagreement with the SF-as-entertainment philosophy of many American professionals in Vector 98, for this seems to sum up the attitude of the most vociferous of the BSFA's contributors. Is it really wrong to think of SF as entertainment? Well, to read Chris's article and the reviews in Vector and Inferno you'd certainly think so. But it's not only the fact that when I've read Inferno I come away with the unsettling feeling that 99·9% of all SF is worth less than the paper it's printed on. What is inexcusable is the fact that many of the comments made by you and your fellow conspirators are pompous, self-righteous, condescending and often downright rude. By now I'm painfully aware that you don't think much of the notion of SF as the literature of ideas, don't like Isaac Asimov or his magazine, and have strong and obviously well thought-out views on space travel. Shape up your act, Joe.'

(The second half of the above, relating specifically to Chris's article, will appear in Vector 99.) Your argument might have had more impact (and would certainly have made more sense) if you'd been more consistent in your definition of "entertainment". From your opening remarks it's obvious that you mean it as no more than escapism, something that can't possibly constitute The Whole Of The Law because it reads out altogether the entertainment that may be derived from the grace of the author's prose style, the interplay of his characters and plot, the ideas he puts forward....yet you later see fit to defend the notion of "SF-as-the-literature-of-ideas". You can't have it both ways; make up your mind. Apart from which most SF *is* pretty awful, in the main because it's still too much of a genre literature, dismayingly prone to the incest, self-plagiarism, complacency and downright lack of imagination inherent in such ghetti confinement. Remember, firstly, Sturgeon's Law, and, secondly, that what we condemn we've actually read; outside the walls the stuff is usually ignored entirely and would probably be condemned in even harsher terms if it wasn't. Not that we're particularly pompous, self-righteous or condescending; you should try reading some of the academic criticism that comes out of America. Nor do we conspire in the promulgation of our judgements, since diversity is the lifeblood of everything and a criticism that held fast to some arbitrary One True Way and threw out those who didn't would simply die of boredom. The establishment of valid standards is our common aim, yes, but we disagree most heatedly over the whys and wherefores of those standards, having our own individual stances and approaches and preferring to stick to them. You're obviously well aware of mine, but even so I don't comprehend your demand that I shape up my act, unless by it you wish me to abandon it for one that will cause you less aggravation -- in which respect I could as legitimately demand the same of you, and who's to say which of us would be "right"?

(A letter column of some sort may -- but more likely may not, although you never know -- appear in future issues of Inferno; but in the meantime I'd still appreciate letters (even copies of letters that you're sending to Matrix). Which will indeed receive a reply from yours truly.)

And now -- what we're really here for: The Books! (Bet you thought I'd forgotten, eh? No chance....)

Marilyn K. Dickerson -- LORD HAP (Avon, 173pp, $1·95)

Reviewed by Janice Maule

After an initial (50 pages) masquerade as a ghost story, this book shakes down into the historical romance vein, with the emphasis strictly on the romance. The style is that commonly associated with the genre -- utilitarian narrative with flowery dialogue -- and results in a novel that is competent without being in any way distinguished by a taint of originality.

The plot goes thus: Lord Humphrey Algernon Pettigrew (the eponymous hero) gets mixed up with a filthy Catholic horde plotting to overthrow Elizabeth I in 1585 and is bumped off in pretty short order. His ghost then hangs around the scene of the crime for four centuries until Caroline deVries (the heroine) drives off a nearby cliff. She turns out to be the reincarnation of Lord Hap's long-lost love, who was an innocent member of the treacherous band of 1585. Together they seek revenge on the descendant of Lord Hap's murderer. Gripping stuff, eh?

The subplots are insignificant, the characterisation nonexistent. The per-

sonae, although English, sometimes lapse into American slang -- perhaps they picked it up from the television. I can forgive that but I just can't believe that any self-respecting late 20th century businesswoman would come out with such lines as: "Each time you loose your rage upon me I feel myself shrink and wither as though your anger devoured my very being." Perhaps she fell on her head in the crash.

The most amazing thing about this book is that it hasn't been serialised in any of the woman's magazines, to which it seems ideally suited. Never mind, it may eventually turn up on ITV as another of their "Best Sellers" -- it's that nondescript

Chris Boyce -- BRAINFIX (Granada, 254pp, 95p)

Reviewed by Bill Carlin

After the success of his previous novel, Catchworld, I was surprised to see Chris Boyce abandon the epic theme of sophisticated space opera to tackle a comparatively mundane subject -- a conventional near-future thriller with lots of SF trappings. Set in Britain, obviously post-1984 because of the jocular references to Orwell's classic, it details the rise to power of an authoritarian regime through the use of advanced brain-control techniques. The supercomputer controlling everything goes badly out of whack in the best Frankenstein tradition, and things go from bad to worse as a conscience-stricken scientist tries to foil an evil politician's ruthless plans for civil order. All very unoriginal, you may say, but the pace of the story and the interweaving of the subplots keeps the novel moving along at a rare clip. In places Boyce experiments with new narrative techniques which don't quite pay off, and also reverts to the use of complicated brain/computer interfaces (much as he did in Catchworld) which provide only irritating breaks in the flow of the story. Not quite as good as I expected it to be, Catchworld's good points outweigh the bad and it should sell quite a few copies in Glasgow because most of the action takes place there (expatriate Glaswegians take note). But don't let that put you off; it's a novel well worth its price.

Richard Lupoff -- SWORD OF THE DEMON (Sphere, 224pp, £1·25)

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

Richard Lupoff has taken a handful of the deities from Japanese mythology together with some of their exploits, assembled them in a somewhat changed form so as to achieve a more or less continuous narrative, and presented the result as an original novel. Either he was assuming that all his readers would be highly knowledgeable of Japanese mythology (you are, aren't you?) or else he hoped that nobody would notice if he borrowed extensively without crediting his sources. Certainly, there's no explanatory note of any kind, so a lot of people are bound to think that the book is totally original.

Sword Of The Demon is a very unusual fantasy novel. Its chief concern is the development of Kishimo from a young woman without clothes, possessions, powers or even language to the status of a minor deity. (The mythologies call her Kishimojin, but Lupoff has invented and rearranged most of her story to suit himself in any case.) She meets the other major characters, is initially very awed by them, travels around a lot and participates in various exploits of an heroic nature. Not very many exploits, in fact; most of the book is taken up with sense-of-wonder trips, inscrutable confrontations and hallucinatory visitations, and there is remarkably little real action. The magical powers of deities and inanimate objects (swords, for example) loom large, and are shoved at the reader from every page, without explanations, in a take-it-or-leave-it manner. For example, most travelling is done on the backs of giant wasps, while several scenes are set deep underwater, where the protagonists manage to breathe, talk, eat, drink sake, etc., without difficulty.

The most impressive scene is a retelling of perhaps the best-known of all the Japanese myths, in which the disgraced god Susanoo (Lupoff calls him Susano-wu and makes no mention of his godhood) overcomes an eight-headed serpent by trickery. There is plenty of good imagery throughout the book, but it is over-long and too rambling, with the author relying on descriptions of sundry marvels to make up for the lack of characterisation or incident.

Arsen Darnay -- KARMA (Sphere, 366pp, £1·75)
Reviewed by Dave Langford

This is one of those books of hard-science mysticism: mechanised metaphysics. Bob Shaw dipped a toe into these murky waters with The Palace Of Eternity; Arsen Darnay goes further to make the tremendous splash associated with a belly-flop. Consider: two chaps called Aspic and Clark are karmically linked, which means they tend to hate each other a lot without any particular motivation. Aspic plans to detect people's immortal souls (somehow), and trap them (somehow), and load them with compulsions (again, somehow) so that in successive reincarnations they will get sexual kicks from plutonium and will therefore form a priesthood who will look after nuclear wastes. Clark, correctly, thinks this is a rather silly idea, but gives it the stamp of US government approval. Meanwhile, said US government embarks on a project to transplant human brains into missiles. Aspic and Clark quarrel over Evelyn, who happens to be karmically linked to them to them both. Near the nuclear waste storage site, where Clark is now boss, a wise old Indian chief says some pretty wise things. Aspic perfects his "psychotron", which duly catches souls (visible as pretty lights, a hitherto unobserved fact). Clark dies and Aspic catches his soul and locks it up. After many metaphysical adventures Clark escapes....and after 189 pages the vital far-future post-holocaust story is ready to begin. Suffice it so say that there are a good many mutants and such (one of whom was formerly the wise old Indian chief), that a "sensitive" palmist friend of Aspic's and Clark's recurs as the brain of an ancient but chatty nuclear missile, and that Clark gets lots of kinky fun flagellating Evelyn, now wondrously reincarnated as a giant telepathic rabbit. Good defeats Evil and, of the wholly revolting characters Clark and Aspic, the former becomes nice while the latter does not.

In between are chunks of padding (e.g., a full half page devoted to the detailed journey of a letter through the post), reasoning of the inscrutable "That's how it must be!" variety, awful attempts at "up-to-date" prose (even in America, do they really say "He refused to dialogue with her"?), traces of Analogish puritanism (cf., Darnay's story about his "plutonium priesthood" in that very magazine), and a fair amount of competent writing which at times made the whole ridiculous, lumbering farrago seem vaguely sensible. Until I foolishly allowed my thoughts to revert to that giant telepathic rabbit....

(Editor's note -- for those who care about such things, it's now the morning of Sunday, 10 August 1980, and the stencilling of the above review has taken me some not inconsiderable period of time, mainly because the phrase "giant telepathic rabbit" kept reminding me of last night's Late Night Horror Movie on BBC2: The Night Of The Lepus. To say that I spent the entire movie racked with laughter would be an understatement....the Flopsy Bunnies were never like this!)

Wilson Tucker -- THE LONG LOUD SILENCE and WILD TALENT (Coronet, 156pp & 188pp respectively, 85p each)
Reviewed by William Goodall

These two novels are copyright 1952 and 1954 respectively; both are SF thrillers, both are set in the USA in the 1950s, both have male protagonists who've been through the army before the main action starts, both are quite well written, and in both of them the first chapter is a flash-forward to an incident later in the story. Apart from that....

In The Long Loud Silence some unnamed enemy uses nuclear and biological weapons on the USA east of the Mississippi. To prevent the spread of plague to the clean states the army blows the bridges and establishes a heavily-guarded dead zone, shooting anyone who attempts to cross. Corporal Russell Gary wakes up after a binge to find himself on the wrong side of the river. The novel follows Gary's efforts to stay alive in a worsening situation, and the plot manages to avoid falling into a rut throughout -- even the ending isn't quite what you might expect. There are many nice touches which keep the book above average, such as this on Gary's seeing razed Chicago: "Chicago was ours....and our cities were not meant to be touched. Chicago was not at all like all those foreign towans that belonged to strangers"; and the contrast between "business as usual" on one side of the river and cannibalism on the other. Not a cosy catastrophe by any means; a good read.

Wild Talent is an ESP novel full of characters named after such 50s SF fans

as Walt Willis, John Carnell, Ray Palmer, Ken Slater, Groff Conklin, Jerome Bixby ....the list is almost endless. The telepathic hero, Paul Breen, is discovered by a government security organisation and put to work as a spy. Against a background of atomic bomb espionage Breen faces such problems as mastering his wild talents in time to save himself from liquidation by his bosses (who have decided that a telepathic spy knows too much), finding others like himself, getting the girl....the novel suffers mightily from genre expectations fulfilled as Breen tackles these problems armed only with his powers of telepathy, clairvoyance and telekinesis. It's not as good, in my opinion, as The Long Loud Silence.

Randall Garrett -- TOO MANY MAGICIANS (Futura, 252pp, £1·50)

Reviewed by Ian Williams

I have two grouches against this book, although neither have anything to do with the story. Grouch One is purely personal: Garrett's parallel world is based one the premise that Richard the gay neurotic barbarian (Lionheart to you) did not remain an absentee landlord with the hard work left to his much-maligned brother John but instead founded an enduring empire -- and I just hate to read anything good about one of the worst kings England ever had. Grouch Two is economic: £1·50 seems a rather excessive price to pay when you consider that the Granada edition of Frederik Pohl's Jem is about 50 pages longer and costs 25p less. (Futura's prices are becoming ludicrous; £1·75 for a Boring Scott Card book is another example.)

Having said all that, however, Too Many Magicians is recommended as jolly good fun. Chief Investigator Lord Darcy and his forensic sorcerer buddy Master Sean O'Lochlainn are called upon to solve a locked room murder at a sorcerers' convention, and the unusual murder soon develops into deviously complicated international espionage. The success of the book hinges upon Garrett's ability to do two vital things well: to make the setting detailed and real and to make the mystery relevant to that setting. Both are accomplished satisfactorily. The characters aren't particularly deep but the tale carries you along so quickly that you never really notice. It's a pleasing and enjoyable little book.

(Dare I, the all-powerful editor, dredge up yet another example of televisual coincidence? I mean, boss, it's still Sunday 10 August, and on BBC1 tonight is Anthony Harvey's magnificent The Lion In Winter (featuring, would you believe, Anthony Hopkins as Richard 1), one of my all-time favourite movies. The trouble is that I've only got a black-and-white set....)

Norman Spinrad -- A WORLD BETWEEN (Arrow, 343pp, £1·35)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

After an eight-year hiatus, Norman Spinrad returns to the novel with an excursion into Frank Herbert country, an engrossing mixture of Machiavellian intrigue and ideological conflict. From an Earth largely devastated by nuclear war, man has spread to more than forty worlds. While starships require years to travels between star systems, the worlds are linked by the Galactic Media Web, a faster-than-light tachyon -based system which is part communications network and part interstellar market-place for the most valuable commodity of all: knowledge.

The centre of the Web is Pacifica, verdant paradise planet. It boasts the greatest media expertise in the galaxy thanks to its government, a true electronic democracy. Via his own console, every citizen may vote in elections where the result is fair and known almost instantaneously, monitor news and entertainment channels, and access any piece of information on Pacifica. Political parties are unknown. The population is largely decentralised thanks to instant communication, and has formed a rich variety of sub-cultures in many different climates, from the antarctic wastes of Valhalla to the tropical dinosaur-ridden jungles of Godzilla-land. The sexes are held to be equal and individuality considered a good and proper thing. It's as harmonious a society as homo sapiens has ever created.

But there are serpents only too ready to intrude into this libertarian Eden. For 250 years, a politico-economic war has been raging between male-dominated Transcendental Science, possessors of the most advanced technology, and Femocracy, a fanatical lesbian matriarchy which rose to dominate Earth after is last nuclear war. No system visited by a Femocrat mission has failed to become a Femocracy itself, its men turned into docile breeders used only to continue the species; and, similarly, no system visited by one of the vast Transcendental Science ships call-

ed Arkologies has failed to accept an Institute of Transcendental Science, cease trading on the Web or launch Arkologies of its own. Domination of the media capital of the human galaxy is a vital step towards domination of the human galaxy itself, and each side will stop at nothing to prevent the other from gaining control. The appearance in swift succession in Pacifican space of the Arkology "Heisenberg" and the Femocrat starship B-31 signals the outbreak of a war fought by psychologists on Pacifica's own media net, their weapons propaganda and paranoia as they strive to divide and conquer by the oldest division there is: men against women.

In the forefront of the war are the leaders of the three factions. For Pacifica, Carlotta Madigan, government chairperson, expert in bluff and calculated risk, and her Minister of Media and lover Royce Lindblad, who feels his ego threatened by her actions; for Transcendental Science, Roger Falkenstein, utterly ruthless in his determination to win at any cost, and his wife Maria, growing ever more appalled at his compromising of the high ideal of Transcendental Science; and for Femocracy, Bara Dorothy, savagely man-hating ideologue, and Cynda Elizabeth, latant heterosexual, torn between the teachings of her culture and her deepest instincts.

Spinrad's absence from the novel has been long, but his return proves well worth the wait. A World Between maintains its narrative drive effortlessly, its characters move and breathe with a life of their own. The picture of two mutually exclusive ideologies, each trying to subvert those about it, has never been more germane than it is today. The possibilities of the media as a weapon of war and of technology twisted to evil ends also require little amplification. But the final message is one of hope, for the true hero is surely the planet of Pacifica itself (evoking, as it does, some lyrical imagery), and its message to us is this -- that there are always new beginnings to be made, that there are always new lessons to be learned from past mistakes, and that if mankind can put aside its prejudices then utopia is still within our grasp. The lubricants of a civilised society are compromise and tolerance, and any society which turns its back upon them is doomed -- and that is perhaps the most important lesson of all.

Frank Herbert & Bill Ransom -- THE JESUS INCIDENT (Futura, 405pp, £1·60)

I first read Dune at an age young enough to be impressed by the spectacle of the world it portrayed (and retain a vestige of that admiration to this day) and confused by the wheels-within-wheels level of its philosophical intrigue. Some day, I promised myself, I'll re-read it -- and eventually did, only to discover that what I'd first perceived as depth was in fact only the illusion of depth, created by the insertion of essentially meaningless pseudo-cryptic quotes from imaginary books and by the attaching of spurious and unnecessary importance to every word, thought, deed, gesture and inflection, about which the characters all spent so much time worrying that, apart from helping to inflate the book's page-count, they were effectively robbed of individual identity. (They had names and personal histories, yes, but such do not three-dimensional personalities make.) All of which might be entirely by the by if it weren't for the fact that recent, non-Dune Herbert novels have shown an increasing preoccupation with the same trappings; a preocupation whose pitfalls are amply demonstrated by The Jesus Incident, co-authored by theologian Bill Ransom, in which the depth inherent in its theme has been sacrificed to a manufactured "depth" of stupefyingly dull and indeed quite pointless plot intrigue. Ostensibly a sequel to Herbert's earlier solo effort, Destination Void, in which a ship full of colonists in artificial hybernation was sent out into space to manufacture a cybernetic intelligence while on its way to wherever (a plot rationalisation which struck me as ludicrous then, and still does now), and did so, finding on landing that the intelligence considered itself powerful enough to demand that it be worshipped as a god, The Jesus Incident is intended as an examination of the forms of worship upon which the colonists and their descendants are trying to decide, but hamstrings its discussion of free will versus omnipotent interference right from the start by choosing to embody it in a mammothly overcomplicated plot concerned with the efforts of the colonists to tame the violently antipathetic planet, the metaphysics-spouting activities of the planet's primary life-form, the manoeuverings of the various factions within the colony's leadership, and so much else that less than a hundred pages into the book you soon begin to suffer from a feeling of almost uncontainable mental bloat and by the halfway mark have abandoned altogether the at-

tempt to keep track of what's happening. From its limp, irrational and arbitrary conclusion, which throws out the idea of deciding how to worship as though it had been of no real consequence, it's evident that Herbert, far from knowing more than he was actually letting on (his standard trick), had no clear idea of what he was doing and was just writing to fill the pages, presumably in the hope that some clue or other might ultimately surface from the mess and provide him with the pointer he needed. But it didn't -- and if he couldn't work out what was going on then why the hell should we, the readers, bother?

Poul Anderson -- THE EARTH BOOK OF STORMGATE 1 (New English Library, 144pp, 95p)

Although I find Anderson's novels virtually unreadable, I can just about cope with his short stories (probably because a collection of them doesn't have to be read straight through as a complete unit). This collection, the first third of the original US edition, purports to be a chronicle of human expansion into the galaxy as maintained by the Ythri in their Stormgate archives (hence the initially incomprehensible title), and to that end is buttressed by a chronology of the Polesotechnic League and the Terran Empire (which differs from that published in the Nicholls Encyclopedia, but to which Anderson still won't swear, suggesting either that he doesn't care or that he doesn't know what he's doing -- neither of which exactly help my already low opinion of him) and comments interspersed between the stories by the Ythrian keeper of the archives. This last is easily the worst part of the book, a brain-numbing pidgin quasi-medieval as incomprehensible as it is asyntactical; here's a sample: "The Polesotechnic League we know of only in its decadence and downfall. Yet for long and long it was wing and talon of that Technic civilisation which humans begot and from which many other races -- Ythrians too, Ythrians too -- drew flesh blood that still flows within them." (And it gets worse as you go along -- apropos nothing at all, why is it that so many of American SF's supposedly intelligent aliens have trouble speaking in anything but the most fractured of English?) Then, too, some of the stories tend too much to the anecdotal, lacking adequate plots with beginnings, middles and ends; the best come towards the close of the collection, although for me their main interest derives less from their Machiavellian action-adventure intrigue than from the intensely capitalist/conservative biases that underlie them. And to think that when I were but a lad I was rather attracted to the character of Nicholas van Rijn....

Algis Budrys -- SOME WILL NOT DIE (Magnum, 283pp, £1·25)

This novel has a complex and confusing history: although Budrys's first, it was chopped up for magazine publication in the fifties and didn't see print as a complete unit until 1961, by which time some additional material had been added; and it then (I think) underwent further revision before publication in a large format Starblaze edition a few years ago. Certainly, the latter edition is the one reprinted here and, cliched though its post-holocaust recovery-from-barbarism theme has now become, it holds up remarkably well (probably because of its suddenly-acquired "topicality"; even the reasonably optimistic New Scientist has begun talking about when the bomb drops). Through a series of protagonists, all of whom are in some way related to or descended from each other, it describes the slow formation of a new nation-state from a chaos of armed, antagonistic and autonomous enclaves, framed by the account of the search for the man who was assassinated for the blitzkrieg-like methods by which he enforced co-operation on everyone but is rumoured to be still alive anyway. This frame, presumably intended to demonstrate how people will always yearn for a strong leader who will absolve them of responsibility even for themselves, is really rather disturbing, since underlying it is the assumption that strong men with guns who shoot first and talk afterwards are preferable to polticians and diplomats, who elsewhere in the book are depicted as lying and conniving thieves and cheats. Politics is a bit of a two-faced game, I admit, but is that reason enough for condemning everyone who engages in it?

Clifford D. Simak -- WHY CALL THEM BACK FROM HEAVEN? (Avon, 191pp, $1·95)

Reviewed by Ian Maule.

In the wake of Ettinger's theories of suspended animation, published in 1964, SF writers found a whole new topic to explore. This is Simak's response, first published in 1967.

In the year 2148 suspended animation is big business, with those who can scrimping and saving throughout their lives to accumulate enough money to buy the

process from the Forever Centre, the dominant company of the time. Fighting against the company for religious reasons are the Holies, whose main line of attack seems to be the writing of graffiti on walls, and who are vigorously suppressed by the company's security forces. As a result of internal politics, Daniel Frost, head of advertising for the company, is declared an outcast, one of the living dead incapable of accumulating enough wealth to buy freezing, and rejected by society.

From this point the novel degenerates into the pastoralism to which Simak is all too prone -- one that I call the "farming in Minnesota" syndrome. For all the quality of his writing, Simak lacks the "punch" necessary to make his novels truly memorable. As it is, only three days after reading Why Call Them Back From Heaven?, the back of my corn flakes packet seems more interesting.

John Christopher -- NO BLADE OF GRASS (Avon, 190pp, $1•95)

Reviewed by Bill Carlin

Changed from its original British title (The Death Of Grass), this novel has worn remarkably well over the quarter-century since its first publication. I remember first reading it in my early teens, mainly because Christopher's Tripod trilogy of juvenile novels had served as my introduction to SF, and I'm glad to say that revisiting the past was, in this case, much more of a pleasure than a chore.

Since in recent years the American market has been swamped by "disaster" novels I would prefer to see this one classed as a "crisis"; a sub-sub-genre which would serve to further distinguish the more refined British product of the 50s and early 60s. Christopher tells an exciting, fast-moving story which only lightly rests upon the central plot device of a mutant virus destroying the world's cereal crops. Like Hitchcock's MacGuffin, this is secondary to the effect of the crisis upon the central characters, and by the time the book reaches its climax we have seen the "hero", John Custance, transformed from a suburban commuter into a barbaric feudal lord. The picture of Britain the book presents is a gloomy one, with survival of the fittest as the only law, but somehow the characters remain real enough to retain our sympathy -- quite unlike the ruggedly individual buffoons of so many of today's Heinlein imitators. Restraint and brevity are the two major strongpoints of the book; clinical harshness is never allowed to devolve into fake horror and the conclusion, although downbeat, is logical. High-powered technology isn't much in evidence, so I don't imagine that it will sell a million copies across the Atlantic, but I recommend it highly to a British audience.

Piers Anthony -- THOUSANDSTAR (Avon, 294pp, $2•25)

Reviewed by Ian Williams

Piers Anthony sets up inventive, imaginative backgrounds and ambitious plots for his novels, but his resolutions tend to be too pat, too easy -- you get a good ride but are sat down with a jarring thud at the end. Thousandstar is less grandiose than usual but still suffers from the same flaw: too neat a resolution.

The plot has two sapients in an organised race to obtain a treasure, but I hesitate to call it straightforward as most of the first half, set in a spaceship, has its "action" taking place inside the mind of a male, deaf, blind blob that sense and communicates by taste. Trapped in the blob's mind is a Kirlian transferee (yes, it's part of the super-extensible Cluster series), a female human clone. About 30,000 words is devoted to the two beings' attempts to understand each other and to their different means of sensing the universe, mainly by flashbacks to their personal problems. It sounds dull, but is actually more interesting than the second half, when the odd couple have landed on the planet and have to strive against the other competitors.

Anthony works everything out very well: the blob's biology and ecological niche (which includes the most disgusting method of reproduction I've ever heard of -- it disgusts the blob as well, which is part of the plot) is cleverly related to the clone's social problems. It's fascinating, but altogether too bloody neat and artificial; and while the book won't convert anyone his fans will like it.

(Editor's note -- I can testify to the accuracy of Ian's last phrase since, for some reason, we received two copies of the book; and the attempt on my part to read the second left me incapable of reading anything else for days afterwards. Yes, this observation was put in to help fill up the page. So what?)

Fred Hoyle -- THE BLACK CLOUD (Penguin, 219pp, 95p)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

This, in its way a very minor classic, is noth overrated and underrated (it also sells steadily, this being the 14th Penguin printing since 1960). Underrated, for its innovative use of ideas since shopworn: the vast disaster backed with impressive physics, intelligence of credibly astronomical scale, near-fatal schism between science and politics, and the penultimate chapter's throwaway concepts of mystical intelligence still greater than the Cloud's, forced human evolution and (seed of Piers Anthony's Macroscope) the lethal possibilities of pure information. Hoyle blew his stock of ideas on this book and was never to produce anything as original; his later stuff often reads like attempts to rework parts of The Black Cloud. It's overrated, though, because paeans like the above omit the flaw that not only are the characters mere mouthpieces for intellectual argument, but the arguments themselves are badly presented. The Cloud out there is getting bigger, i.e. closer, without any sideways motion: therefore it is coming right at us. "Gosh, wow, incredible!" cry the learned astronomers as a young prodigy points this out. The prodigy then calculates the Cloud's ETA in six lines of elementary calculus: "Gosh, wow, incredible!" the top men repeat on assimilating this "astonishing calculation". We have little respect for scientists who claim to be brighter than those nasty politicians and then dodder around like this. It's a major theme of the book that scientists are much better equipped to run the world than politicians (though its hard to see how either the ability to hypnotise the silent majority or do quantum mechanics is much help in running things): eveil politicos might make themselves private disaster shleters when the Cloud obscures the sun, but good scientists impartially choose to save the very cream of humanity (i.e. scientists). Either way 700 million people die offstage; The Black Cloud takes place on the highest level with no vox-pop distractions. Finally politicians and the equally stupid military launch H-bombs at the Cloud, though scientists could have told them this was not a good idea. Real life is a foreign country to Hoyle: they do things differently there (BRUTISH POLITICIAN: "Jump!" NOBLE, IDEALISTIC SCIENTIST: "How high, master?"). The Black Cloud is billed as "a fascinating glimpse into the scientific power-dream", but remains very much a dream -- or possibly a nightmare should you happen not to be a scientist.

Frederik Pohl -- JEM: THE MAKING OF A UTOPIA (Granada, 300pp, £1·25)

Of all the SF writers of the 50s who've made comebacks in recent years, Pohl's seems to have been the most welcomed and the most acclaimed -- but for all that his recent novels have not been entirely satisfactory. The resolution of Man Plus was too perfunctory, the central character of Gateway was too shallow -- and now, with Jem.... Set in the early 21st century, it supposedly chronicles the discovery and settlement of the first habitable and inhabited alien planet (as per the title) but is lumbered from the start with two serious implausibilities. Firstly, the dividing of Earth into three distinct power-blocs (Food, Oil and People), a political "system" which keeps things simple but is entirely contrary to the increasing fragmentation, independence movements and search for national identites which have been constant factors in international relations since the war; and, secondly, it's highly unlikely that the resources-poor Earth Pohl depicts would devote such vast sume of money to the no-guaranteed-return basic research nevessary to build the tachyonic-transmission system used for interstellar flight. (The unspoken rationale for it would be that because man has screwed the Earth up so much he needs somewhere else where he can start all over again, but why not something more realistic, like asteroid mining and L5 colonies and all that crap?) Leaving this aside, however, the bulk of the novel is taken up with the trials and tribulations (but mainly the trials) of the 3 bloc-missions (but mainly the US-led one) sent to Jem, who spend most of their time either plotting to blow each other up or actually doing so, in between which they have fun corrupting and exploiting the (gosh, how convenient) three different alien species for their own ends. Eventually the Earth blows itself up and -- bar the previously-unmentioned other human colonies on other alien planets that Pohl decides to throw in at the last moment -- only Jem is left; and in the flash-forward (to six generations hence) last chapter he shows us the "utopia" that's arisen there. It's a clever satire of the normally ultra-conservative bias of such things, but really only points up what's been evident since about halfway through: the plot structure of Jem is so unbalanced that, had it been a first novel by a new writer, it would at the very least have been sent back for a complete rewrite. And for an old hand like Pohl, that's well-nigh inexcusable.