

# VECTOR

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

149

95p



APRIL / MAY 1989

Swallows and Eddisons  
Breakdown on the Borribles

PLUS

Book Reviews and Letters

# VECTOR

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# EDITORIAL

DAVID V BARRETT



TOTALITARIANISM, INCLUDING INDOCTRINATION, MANIPULATION and censorship, seems to be an increasing trend in real life; I want to look at how this is both foreshadowed and exposed in SF; and consider how fiction must be a vital counter-balance.

Last Boxing Day BBC2 showed a programme about the *Reader's Digest* organisation. The over-riding philosophy of the magazine has always been to present to people, in digest form, the most uplifting literature, articles, how-to advice, and so on, with a stress on the individual lifting him or herself up by his or her own bootstraps.

You are responsible for your own life, happiness, success. You can make something of your own life.

Now on one level I can't disagree with this, but there's an insidious undercurrent which disturbs me. "It's The American Way. (And we'll show you exactly how to do it.)" One hundred million people around the world are told each month what to read, what to do, what to think, what quotes to quote, and how to improve their work power.

An Indian writer told of how, in the 1940s and 1950s, every home in his town would have the *Digest*. He and his generation grew up with The American Way as the way of life they should aspire to. Success, profit, making-friends-and-influencing-people (the latter aspiration somehow cheapening the former by association, to my mind), Coca-Cola, certain foods, certain proprietary medicines, certain modes of behaviour and speech and thought.

The director of the music section of *Reader's Digest* described how each boxed set gives listeners exactly what they will want to hear: each set is carefully made up of individual records, each of which has a carefully designed programme of music for particular occasions and moods.

It's the encouragement of uniformity which frightens me. Years ago I read an SF novel by Jay Williams, *Uniad* (if anyone has a copy they don't want, please let me know). The narrator is a tutor at a postal writing school, helping amateur writers improve their style, their plot development, their writing abilities. It's a laudable aim, and he's proud to do it. Until he finds that the school, and he, are grooming writers in particular ways, to write only in the manner the organisation... suggests? Or dictates?

When an organisation, or a strong-minded individual, sets up as a self-appointed guardian of the expression of other people's creative individuality, it's time to stop and question.

BBC1's Wogan on January 23 was devoted to a discussion between Ludovic Kennedy, Andrew Neal, and Mary Whitehouse on the moral quality of television and the launch of Sky TV — an important debate with many angles. But Mrs Whitehouse, with God on her side, resolutely refused to allow the others to develop their arguments; she made it difficult, by her constant interruptions, for them even to make any point with which she disagreed. This is the *modus operandus* of the moral majority: to take away the right of anyone who disagrees with them to put forward their belief. Mrs Whitehouse, while claiming to allow me freedom of choice, wants to limit my *field* of choice, to decide on my behalf what I should be allowed to choose from. Echoing Henry Ford's "You can have any colour you like so long as it's black", she is saying "Of course you can watch what you want, so long as it's A, B, C or D; but I won't allow you the options of E through Z."

On February 9 there was a court case which has received disturbingly little publicity considering its implications. A sculptor and an art gallery owner were found guilty of Offending Public Decency by displaying a mannequin wearing freeze-dried human foetuses as earrings. It's generally agreed that this piece of work was in particularly bad taste, but that is irrelevant to my point: a civil court (which means no expert witnesses and no proper defence, as are at least allowed under the Obscene Publications Act in the criminal court) sat in judgement of an artist's right to make an artistic statement which he

considered worth making, in the creative manner of his choice. The court ruled that this piece of art shocked and offended those who saw it, and so should be banned —

— but surely Art has to shock sometimes: one of the functions of Art is to make people think.

I'm not saying that creative artists should be above or beyond the law; I am saying that I am desperately worried when a centuries-old piece of common law is used to tell an artist what he may or may not do.

Last year there was a great furore amongst fundamentalist Christians over the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*; this year Muslims have burnt Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, and the Ayatollah Khomeini has ordered his religious aythos have taken it upon themselves to dictate to fiction writers what they may and may not write — and hence to us, what we may say and not read. There are plenty of examples of religious totalitarianism in SF, such as Heinlein's "If This Goes On..." and Gore Vidal's *Messiah* (which is not simply, as the *Sunday Times* called it, "a satirical fantasy"; it is a dire warning). Though set, usually, in the future, such works are commentaries on what their writers could see happening right now.

Rushdie is of direct interest to SF readers; his first novel *Grimus* was SF, and there are reckoned to be SF elements in his later works, including *The Satanic Verses*. Although I found *Grimus* almost unreadable, and have tackled nothing else by Rushdie, as a reader, writer and editor I strongly defend his right as a creative artist to shock and offend his readers without retribution.

The graphic collection *Outrageous Tales from the Old Testament* also fell foul of persecution. The writers and artists include many familiar names; amongst others, Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, Brian Bolland, Dave McKean, and Neil Gaiman, who wrote most of the book. Mary Whitehouse and others threatened court action; Gaiman's response was straightforward: every tale in the book, however horrific, however sexually perverse, however vicious, is simply a retelling of a Bible story. Ban *OT* from the *OT* and you need to ban the Old Testament itself.

Graphic collections and novels are taking on more significance within the SF world. The fortnightly *Crisis* contains hard political comment in its near-future stories. Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* and Brian Talbot's *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* both warn not just of the dangers of totalitarianism but of its closeness. They are disturbing, not because they are set in slightly different parallel presents or near-futures, but because their Britains are so frighteningly similar to our own, and could so easily happen.

I'm indebted to Tanith Lee for leading me to some words of Robespierre: "A writer is the most dangerous enemy his country can have." Enemy, that is, if the country is totalitarian (or getting that way), if individual thought and expression are curtailed by the state.

Lee's story "By Crystal Light Beneath One Star" in *Roz Kaveney's Tales from the Forbidden Planet*, is an intricate and clever tale of future State punishment of free-thinking individuals. After quoting Robespierre the narrator, a writer, continues: "I found fiction the sharpest weapon. It makes a thin cut they can't feel. And knowledge pours in like poison. By the time you know, it's too late. Awareness is in your veins. You're done for."

Art should be subversive — by which I don't mean, necessarily, undermining and overthrowing governments, or being polemical; art, including literature, including science fiction, including graphic SF, should get under our skin, should make us rethink our values and question our preconceptions, should be prepared to shock and shake people out of their cosy complacency. And anyone who gives any value to freedom of thought and expression must fight every inch of the way against creeping totalitarianism, wherever it comes from.



# LETTERS

## STATEMENT

I HAVE BEEN INSTRUCTED BY STEVE JONES TO MAKE KNOWN HIS displeasure at my V147 editorial about the World Fantasy Convention, and to make it clear that he did not say the things I quoted. His allegation that I made up the entire conversation was made in front of witnesses, and was technically slanderous. However, it was based on his belief that by my identifying the person I spoke to as "one of the organisers" I meant him; Jones tells me he was the sole male organiser of the con; if the conversation took place at all, says Jones, the person I spoke to was simply a minion.

I should like to make it clear that the conversation *did* take place, and that the person I spoke to was certainly organising both people and things; he was therefore an organiser at the con, if not of the con. However, I take this opportunity to make it clear that that person was not (and was not intended to be identified as) Steve Jones, and I apologise if this inference was made by any other reader.

While he was making his complaints (at a signing at the Fantasy Inn on February 10th, two full months after V147 was published) Jones publicly impugned my integrity both as a professional journalist and as editor of *Vector*; he was also quite insulting about the BSFA and fandom in general. He told me that I clearly had no understanding of what the World Fantasy Con was all about: it was a professional event (which of course was precisely the point I made in the turn-of-the-page paragraph); the opinions of fans, he told me, are irrelevant. Jones also claims — wrongly — that a publisher paid for me to attend the con, and cannot understand why a mere amateur should be so treated. A publisher *did* arrange for me to go, believing it was important for the BSFA — but I was represented at the World Fantasy Convention — but I paid for myself.)

Jones tells me that he found the editorial offensive and negative, and more likely to create rifts between the BSFA and the British Fantasy Society than to heal them; he also asserts that no such rifts or mutual ignorance have ever existed, and that he knows a great deal more than I do about the BSFA. (No comment necessary.)

My editorial was intended to draw people together, not drive them apart. Steve Jones' reaction would seem to indicate that rifts, misunderstandings and suspicion do still exist. I would like to re-extend my invitation to the leaders and members of the BFS to come to BSFA meetings in the hope that we can get to know each other better.

I suggested that Jones make known his views and his complaints against me and the editorial in a letter to *Vector*. He did not wish to do this, but insisted I set the record straight, which is why I have found it necessary, though distasteful, to make this statement.

- DVB

*"Having got that unpleasant business out of the way, let's move on to your letters, and an interesting bunch they are. Several discussing what SF is (or should be) all about; but first let's have a somewhat more pleasurable response to my V147 editorial:"*

MARTIN H BRICE  
11 Cherryway, Alton, Hants GU34 2AZ

YOUR EDITORIAL REFLECTING ON YOUR EXPERIENCES AT THE World Fantasy Convention prompts me — as a member of both the BSFA and the BFS — to consider what are the similarities and differences of the two organisations.... and the difference between Fantasy and science fiction.

For a start, there is a lot of overlap; such Fantasy is concerned with fantastical technologies and alien planets; such SF is concerned with alien technologies and

fantastical planets. Many SF characters undergo horrifying experiences. Nevertheless, actual physical horror and supernatural horror are more compatible with Fantasy writing. Not that the BFS should be retitled the British Horror Society. I admit that, at present, Horror is in vogue; but fashions change and within a few years swords and sorcery, little furies or technical science may be dominating the Fantasy shelves. The BFS can reflect and adapt to these trends, while the BSFA continues to concentrate on science fiction itself.

Science fiction places real human beings in future situations delineated by logical science. People may encounter weird aliens, but both must be subject to the laws of gravity, respiration (according to their atmosphere), food, and everything which science declares is immutable. If an SF character gets into an impossible situation, he has to die. If a Fantasy character gets into an impossible situation, he can be endowed with heroic or magical strength to overcome. This enables men and women, the elderly and the very young, the disabled and the dead, to have adventures which would otherwise be denied to them in science fiction. It is cheating to employ "with one mighty bound he was free" too obviously, but Fantasy fiction does not believe in letting some pedantic detail get in the way of a good story. Conversely, a true SF story is ruined if the gravity is 2% wrong for a planet of that mass, and rightly so.

Perhaps this accounts for the fact that of the professional or amateur authors I have met at both groups of meetings, the BSFA members seem more dedicated, the BFS members more relaxed, about their respective crafts and enthusiasms. For SF, it's got to be right; for Fantasy, it's got to be fun. There's no reason why both types of literature cannot be both right and fun, both entertaining and instructive; but that's my personal impression.

I find it more difficult to differentiate between both types of fiction on the one hand, and on the other, so-called "mainstream" literature. That in itself has two camps: those who believe that novels ought to reflect real life exactly; and those who get the story out of an impossible situation by permitting the heroine to win a fortune, or bringing along a flood to eliminate the villain. And it all demands a certain suspension of belief. I know someone who can't stand SF or Fantasy, whose favourite book is *Black Beauty*. And how does that begin? "The first place that I can well remember..." Being written in the first person singular suggests that either the horse sat down with a quill pen in its hoof, or it dictated its autobiography to a shorthand typist or into a tape-recorder...



JIM ENGLAND  
Roselea, The Coopa, Kinner, W Midlands D17 6HT

THE DEBATE AS TO HOW SF SHOULD BE DEFINED CONTINUES PERENNALLY because there is no definitive definition of "defining". Nor is there of "describing". Since there is never likely to be, the question arises: how important is this fact? Most people could easily get through life without defining anything.

Take a dairy farmer. He owns cows, knows a lot about cows, probably likes cows, makes a living from selling cows' milk and simultaneously performs a public service. He knows a cow when he sees one. But suppose you ask him to define a cow? He will probably have to refer to a dictionary, like the rest of us, to find that cows are

## L E T T E R S

"females of any bovine animal, esp. of the domestic species *Bos taurus*". This definition is of little use to him or to anyone (say, a Martian) who has never seen a cow and wants to know what one looks like. For this you need either a description, a picture or a photograph.

I think it was Mr Gradgrind in Dickens's *Hard Times* who wanted children to be taught the important (?) "fact" that a cow is a large, grainivorous quadruped. But suppose the cow has lost one or more legs; it is still a cow. Suppose it has lost everything except part of its brain, which is kept alive artificially. The point is that there must, in theory, be a point at which a cow losing parts of itself must cease to be a cow, yet the task of specifying exactly at what point it does is hopeless. And the same applies to nearly everything else.

I am not saying that all attempts to frame definitions are pointless academic exercises (or that all dictionaries should be thrown away) but a definition is a form of words in which the "precise nature of a thing or meaning of word" is stated, and a. the "precise nature of a thing" may be unknowable, whilst b. the "meaning of a word" changes from generation to generation, so the importance of definitions is always limited. They are of most importance in mathematics, science, the law and various other areas where pragmatism is necessary.

I suppose the choice of books to be considered for SF awards is such an area and would suggest that all should be considered which have either SF "ingredients" (knobs and dials) or an SF "flavour" (involve a rational/scientific way of thinking). If a book wins an award which many would not regard as SF, who cares? It is surely more important that it should be good than that it should be definitely SF according to a wide consensus.

Unfortunately, this still leaves us with a difficult question. SF "ingredients" are easy to spot, but how do we detect an SF "flavour"?

CECIL NURSE

49 Station Road, Haxby, York YO3 8LU

IN YOUR EDITORIAL IN V148 YOU COMPARE PUSHING BUTTONS AND reading dials and R/LP with sitting in a Lotus position and reciting a mantra and R/LP, and ask what the difference is. You suggest that the first, being set in a scientific framework, will be seen as SF, and the second, being set in an irrational framework, will be seen as Fantasy, despite the fundamental fictional "thing" that has been described being the same. I think you have posed a very good question, and one that needs to be clearly addressed as imaginative fiction moves into the 1990s.

The "thing": a corpse is seen walking in broad daylight. Where is it going? How does it come to be mobile and out of its grave? Who's responsible for this abomination? Is it a dead thing or an undead thing?

That's the idea, the imaginative scene which has grasped the writer and which he wishes to embed in a story. Certainly there's nothing new about it: there are zombies, ghosts, revenants, the Bible speaks of the dead rising, bodies were buried in the first place to prevent them doing this sort of thing. One could imagine magic or dark powers or demons, a golem, a vampire (perhaps not), or something more religious to do with souls and damnation and the Devil, or something inbetween from Lovecraft's universe. Alternatively, imagine a mad scientist experimenting with the Life Force, a virus that reanimates bodies, an experiment with psi powers that has gone very well or very wrong, possession by some form of alien, alien intervention using revivication technologies, an android. One can imagine tricks: the twin brother of the deceased has come to extract vengeance, there has been a time-slip or the individual has crossed from a parallel universe, the person's number two clone has been activated, some form of illusion, mass or otherwise.

The fundamental "thing" is something strange and uncanny walking in broad daylight, which could be an SF, Fantasy or Horror something. Do they represent fundamentally different ways of approaching this "thing"? I suspect

that there are differences, but that genre boundaries do not coincide with them.

It could be argued that I have started in the wrong place in the above argument. A traditional SF writer does not start with a corpse walking, but with some scientific fact or theory which he then chases up through several stages of development to see where it gets him, and if corpses start walking, well and good. I suspect, however, that only a small fraction of SF writers have ever done it this way. Rather, they start with some idea they have read in another writer's story — time travel, parallel universes, FTL and the million worlds you can thus get to, aliens, telepathy etc — and ring some changes on it. What they are doing is communally creating and developing a language of images. The same applies to Fantasy and the Pandora's box of images that Tolkien and D&D have rehabilitated for the modern psyche. The only difference between them is the language they use, their "tropes".

This suggests to me that SF should be seen not as a sub-species of literature (in both senses), but as an Artform in its own right, whose practitioners take symbols and techniques that earlier generations have "proved" and develop and expand on them. Aliens, time travel, alternate histories, galactic empires, post-holocaust worlds, are not content, they are *forms* being used by the writer to carry their meanings, and which the reader with previous experience of the genre will understand. Thus the general incomprehension of SF by a more general public is not because it is "unreal", but because it is esoteric, like Modernism in painting. It is condemned by the literary not because it is "bad", but because it has implicitly rejected the symbols and (formal) values of its predecessors, again, like Modernism. It requires a certain amount of "study" to understand what it is about, and only then can you distinguish what is good and innovative from what is poor

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# L E T T E R S

and derivative. A student of the Art reads a lot of SF and is called a fan. I sometimes wonder why people don't look at it this way.

I would like to make one more point: the term "traditional SF" seems to me to have two meanings which should be distinguished. One refers to the use of real science and logic as, if not the inspiration, at least the guiding angel. Thus nothing happens in it that has no rational explanation, one does not ignore the physical ramifications (like time dilation effects of friction heat) of any technology one invents, and one does not invent substances, physical properties, or processes without clearly signaling that these have been invented (usually by explaining them at length). The other refers to traditional SF motifs like spaceships, hostile aliens, intergalactic wars, and the like; basically anything that could have been written during the Golden Age and probably was. Eco-collapse is real science but not Golden Age; space opera is traditional but not scientific. Maybe if more people distinguished between the historical traditions of the genre and the traditional orthodoxy of science fiction, which is a continuing, respectable, but minority attitude, we would have less brandishing of battle-axes and a bit more gentlemanly fencing.



"Some excellent points here on what SF is; now, what is it for?"

BOB HOGAN

30A Grange Avenue, Street, Somerset BA16 9FF

WHEN I JOINED THE BSFA SOME FOUR YEARS AGO I FOUND THE style of Vector to be, if you will forgive me, too pretentious for my rather plebeian tastes. It reminded me of my long-ago days at college and the lecturers who tried to impress us rather than enlighten us, and the students who followed their lead. The change of style when it came was welcome, and the issues since have both stimulated and entertained me. There has, however, remained a slight uneasiness, a feeling that the books being discussed were not quite the same as the books that I had read. As if I inhabited a parallel universe only subtly different from the one many of you share.

One comment of yours in V148 supplied the clue I needed to finally identify this difference. You stated that the point of SF considering the future was to enable us to examine the present, and some backtracking through previous issues with that as my lead has at last resolved the problem for me. To me all fiction is concerned with the study of personality, not society. I am aware that some of your readers will contest that personality is purely a product of society, but I consider that to be a Thatcherite view of life and itself a product of this sad decade. We are deeply affected by our society, as my comments below reflect, but that is not the entire or the most interesting part of the picture. I read to help me understand the people around me, far more complex as they are than the society and culture they have spawned.

The difference may be due to a lack of sophistication on my part, but I suspect, with no hard evidence to back the supposition, that it may be a matter of age. As a child of the 50s and 60s I grew up in a culture that increasingly saw the individual as prime, but the fascist trends of the 70s and particularly the 80s have eroded the rôle of the person in favour of the group. We are being compartmentalised and forced into dangerously defensive postures on behalf of our various groupings. The profane feminism of the 60s is different in kind from the

anti-male version of the present time, and whichever route may be the best to follow for justice I would contend that the latter is an example of the negativities of a Britain ruled by the likes of Kenneth Baker and Norman Tebbit.

I would be interested in the views of other members on the issue. I would hope, though, that they would refrain from categorising me. Like you and them, I am unique. I am not even, believe it or believe it not, an aging hippy.

"Oh, but I am! I agree with much of what you say, Rob — and yes, haven't people's attitudes changed over the last few years. When I spoke of examining the present, I also meant understanding my place in the present; i.e. how I as an individual relate to and cope with the times I live in. And if SF can help me to do that, it's achieved something worthwhile."

KEW LAKE

115 Narthorse Avenue, London E17 8AY

MAY I WITH SOME DEFERENCE SUGGEST THAT LJ HURST MAY BE making an invalid assumption in proposing that his quote from 1984 has his similar one from *If Hitler Comes* as its source?

There was a well-known joke around in the 30s which contained the threat and plea:

"The whip"

"No, no, not the whip — anything but the whip!"

"Anything?"

"The whip! The whip!"

The point about "Stoke Poges" is that it was probably the most innocuous placename anyone could select, gaining its horror from its incongruity.

On the other hand, what the ordinary reader did not know is that "Room 101" was (and I leave someone else here to complete the details as my memory grows hazy) simply a room in Eric Blair (George Orwell's) civil service office building which was the dullest, most boring he ever experienced in his career.

Thus one quote uses common perception of a name to instil horror; the other is an in-joke with very explicit horror experiences appended. But both take their actual form from a common — and to anyone living at the time very obvious — folkish source.

As to the sheepish facial characteristics of Goldsmith and Goldstein — both, incidentally, recognisable as Jewish names — the coincidence is striking but again not conclusive. Trotsky was Jewish but by no means sheeplike of visage, but several Jewish government ministers of the 30s might be put forward as avatars of both characters. Did one have "Gold" as part of his name? — memory again defeats me.

Finally, the *pince-nez* and/or spectacles. Think of Heinrich Himmler and other well-known Nazis and you may find parallels; the wearing of glasses/etc has always been perceived as a mark of intellect or at least of pretensions to being an intellectual (not the same thing at all), especially in the 30s when designs were so unattractive and "Four-Eyes" was a far worse epithet than anyone today could imagine.

In no way do I suggest that Blair never read *If Hitler Comes* — I read it in the mid-40s and still have some vague recollections, not of the plot but of the effect it had on me, of righteous indignation both at the craven behaviour of the protagonists and at the unfair lampooning of British politicians by the authors. I merely suggest that he did not borrow from it, but merely made use of the same cultural matrix.

"That's it for now; more recollections from before my time next issue, which as Vector 150 we're hoping to make a special anniversary issue. Any "blinders" I've not contacted who might like to contribute, please drop me a line now... by the end of April to guarantee inclusion."

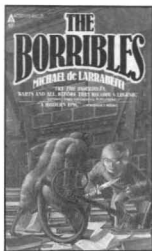
# THE BORRIBLES: Children's fantasy literature in today's Britain

## 'DON'T GET CAUGHT'

JOHN NEWSINGER



**M**ichael De Larrabetti's trilogy, *The Borribles*, *The Borribles Go For Broke*, and *Across The Dark Metropolis*, is the most important work of children's fiction to have appeared over the last fifteen years. The power and authority of his prose, the tough authenticity of his dialogue, the vividness of his imagination, the sharpness of his wit, the excitement of his narrative, are all crucial elements in the success of the three books. More important though is the nature of the myth that he elaborates, the way in which his grim metropolis, full of adventure and menace, beauty and ugliness, relates to the imagination of his readers. The Borribles trilogy creates an urban fantasy world, inhabited by monsters that have stepped straight from our own, but here they are not invincible and their triumph is not assured.



For those who don't yet know, the Borribles are anarchic tribes of inner city Peter Pans, pointed-ear children, boys and girls, black and white, who never grow up, live by petty theft, and squat in derelict buildings across London. They are continually on the run from authority in the form of the "woolies", the police, who seek to clip their ears so that they will grow up into decent, hardworking, conforming, submissive, nose-to-the-grindstone wage-earners like everyone else: "work, work, work: then die, die, die." Their only protection is provided by their wits, their speed and agility, their comradeship, and their catapults. They completely reject the work ethic and instead prize freedom and adventure above all else. Some of them are very old: Flinthead and Spiff, for example, became Borribles in the old Queen's reign, Victoria that is, and have more than the cunning and experience of grown-ups.

Borribles do not accumulate possessions which can come to take possession of those who think they own them:

instead they take only what they need to survive in a reasonable state of squalid comfort. In the words of the Borrible proverb: "Fruit of the barrow is enough for a Borrible." Much of their gear apparently falls off the back of lorries, something that seems to happen a lot in London on account of the bumpy roads! As for their names, Borribles remain nameless until they have earned one by some adventure. And the very worst thing that can happen to a Borrible is to get caught because that means growing up into adulthood with all its responsibilities and compromises, its strangled hopes and forgotten ideals.

The first volume of the trilogy appeared in 1976, and attempted to revolutionise children's literature by despatching an expedition of Borrible Adventurers on a raid across London to Rumbledom Common. They were charged by the Borrible tribes with the assassination of the leadership of the grasping, acquisitive rat-like Rumbles that lived there in well-defended underground bunkers. This gratuitous act of bloody vandalism against the thinly-disguised Woolies of Wimbledon gave rotice that the values and conventions of much of traditional children's literature were about to come under attack. In De Larrabetti's hands the harmless spiked sticks that the Woolies use to keep the Common litter-free become the fearsome Rumble sticks with their six inch spikes, the standard weapon of the Rumble warriors on which they like to impale their Borrible enemies. Of course, if the book had only performed at this level, while it might well have been an amusing conceit, it would never have achieved the resonance that was to give it a significance far greater than that of the literature it criticised.

### THE GREAT RUMBLE HUNT

"It is sad to pass through life without one good Adventure"  
Borrible proverb

The Great Rumble Hunt, as the first adventure becomes known, is cast in the form of a quest with the Adventurers undergoing a series of ordeals that put both them and their way of life to the test. However, instead of having to pass through some magical realm or enchanted forest, inhabited by dragons and goblins, the perilous landscape they must cross is that of contemporary London. De Larrabetti pays considerable attention to establishing a sense of place. The territory the Adventurers cross is mapped out for us, the places are named and familiar, and yet at the same time they are transformed into the terrain of high adventure where danger lurks in every shadow and around every corner and constant vigilance is the price of survival. The city itself becomes one of the trilogy's main protagonists. Just as the Adventurers seem to draw strength from the grim beauty of their urban wasteland, so do the books.

The Adventurers eventually number ten: Napoleon Root, Knockor, Torrey Canyon, Vulge, Stonks, Bingo, Oroccoco, two girls, Charlotte and Sydney, and a German Borrible, Adolf. After an early skirmish with the "woolies", they fall into the hands of a Borrible Snatcher, Dewdrop Bunyan and his idiot son, Erbie. They are held prisoner, half-starved and

regularly beaten, only taken out on house-breaking expeditions, hidden in Dewdrop's rag-and-bone cart. Eventually they murder their captors and escape, taking Dewdrop's horse, Sam, with them.

De Larrabeiti's recounting of the Adventurers' experiences in captivity and of their escape is harsh and brutal, with not an ounce of sentimentality. This, he tells us, is what the world is like for many people. There will be no kind old gentleman coming along to save these lost boys and girls. Instead they have to save themselves, drawing on their reserves of guile and courage to escape from Dewdrop's cruelty and exploitation.

At last they reach Rumbleton Common and launch a surprise attack on the Rumble High Command. The Rumble leaders are all killed, their Bunker is completely destroyed and the Adventurers escape with the Rumble Treasure. On the return journey, they seek safe passage through the territory of the warlike Wendies, the Borrible tribe that inhabits the sewers and underground waterways of Wandsworth. Here the ruthless, neo-fascist Wendie chieftain, Flinthead, rules by terror. He seizes the Treasure, but after an exciting flight through the sewers it is lost in the mud of the River Wandie. Four of the Adventurers hold the Wendies off while their friends escape to freedom.

#### GOING FOR BROKE

*"that smell is the smell of freedom"* — Ben the Tramp

The second book, *The Borribles Go For Broke*, is principally concerned with the fratricidal struggle between two rival Borrible leaders, Flinthead and his brother, Spiff, from Battersea. Spiff ruthlessly manipulates the survivors of the Great Rumble Hunt into helping him overthrow the Wendie chieftain and recover the Rumble Treasure. Only towards the end of the book do Chalotte, Stonks and the others discover that their lost comrades are still alive, slaves of the Wendies, something Spiff had known all along.



As well as this powerful story of treachery, betrayal and vengeance, De Larrabeiti also introduces his readers to the activities of an elite police unit, the Special Borrible Group (SBG) that has been established to suppress the Borrible menace and track down the murderers of Dewdrop Bunyan. At the outset of the story the Adventurers, now joined by Twilight, a Bangladeshi Borrible, are captured by the SBG and held for interrogation and ear-clipping at Fulham Road Police Station. They are only saved by the timely intervention of Ben the Tramp, a major comic creation, who is sleeping it off in another cell and sets them free. When he releases Chalotte from her handcuffs, she complains about his terrible smell. "Don't mock that smell," Ben tells her, "that smell is the smell of freedom."

De Larrabeiti's description of the old tramp is a masterpiece of children's grotesque:

Ben certainly smelt and it was a very special smell: a concoction brewed of body odours, decayed rubbish, dried pee, wood smoke and stagnant Thames water. Ben never

washed and the back of his neck was criss-crossed with deep crevices of dirt and pitted with the scars of ancient blackhead volcanoes... he did not wear clothes like other people wore clothes, he inhabited these, layers of them. When his garments became so old and stained that other tramps would have thrown them away, Ben just found another layer and climbed in, discarding nothing. He was like an archaeological dig...

The Borribles escape to Ben's shack in the rubbish dump on Feather's Wharf. Here the tramp has collected huge quantities of other people's rubbish, a cornucopia of junk, much of it perfectly serviceable but now unwanted. He wonders at the mystery of life that has so many people working to provide him with an excess of riches. Ben is the most unlikely embodiment of the Life Force, probably unique in children's literature.

His antithesis is the cold dead hand of authority that is soon to feel his collar, the hand of Inspector Sussworth of the SBG. He is out to sanitize society, to stamp out all dissent and to enforce a soulless authoritarian conformity; in the words of the SBG song:

To make a new society  
we must reform the human race;  
if all the world were just like me  
the world would be a better place.

The book reaches its climax when the two brothers, Spiff and Flinthead, finally confront each other at the bottom of the shaft that has been sunk into the bed of the River Wandie to recover the Treasure. They fight it out with shovels and Spiff strikes off his brother's head: "the chieftain's head exploded from his shoulders and stood surprised in the air... for one instant, the opaque eyes of the Wendie shone at last, incandescent with the fire of death, and a red glow illuminated the whole cavern."

The conflict between the two brothers, ending as it does in bloody murder, is a story of epic proportions. De Larrabeiti completely rejects the cosy and the conventional and instead writes of an almost elemental conflict that overwhelms the reader, a conflict that rises way above the conventions of bourgeois respectability and touches upon more fundamental feelings. The result is a quite shattering literary *tour de force* without precedent in recent children's fiction.

#### ACROSS THE DARK METROPOLIS

*"Borribles are the rubbish of our society and as such have got to be swept under the carpet of coercion and stamped upon"* — Inspector Sussworth

The last volume, *Across the Dark Metropolis*, sees the Adventurers, after having recovered from their ordeal in the underground realm of the Wendies, determined to take Sam the Horse across London to a place of safety in Neasden. They find that they are embarked on their most perilous adventure as the riot-clad forces of the Special Borrible Group close in on them.

Under the command of the obsessive Sussworth, the SBG have redoubled their efforts to hunt the adventurers down and intend to let nothing stand in their way. In this, the most controversial volume of the trilogy, the Metropolitan Police are cast quite explicitly in the rôle of villains. They are portrayed as an inhuman heartless force out to impose a dead authoritarian conformity upon society in the sacred name of law and order. Only the Borribles challenge this vision of a grey regimented policeman's utopia and they have got to be brought to heel. As Sussworth tells his appalling assistant, Sergeant Hanks, who gives a whole new dimension to the word "boglie", the Borribles

"have got to be made to behave like everyone else, earn money like everyone else and grow up like everyone else. Society is our responsibility... The Borribles are undermining the pillars of society and when that happens those pillars topple. Freedom leads to anarchy. They must conform to law and order."

Once again, the Adventurers are captured and held in a secret underground bunker complex that stretches beneath Clapham Common. Here, Sussworth tells his men, we have "all the things that our civilisation needs to preserve in the event of a thermo-nuclear holocaust: government offices, command posts, food, water, laboratories... and a jail, a very large one." Sussworth's is a mad apocalyptic vision: "whatever happens law and order will continue beyond the



day of doom. There is always a need for law and order." As for the Borribles: "You will be worked to death once we get their ears of yours clipped. You'll be nice normal wage-earners for the rest of your lives."

The Adventurers escape but now have to rescue Sam the Horse from Caden Town Slaughter House. After hiding out from the police in Brixton with a black Borribble tribe, the Adventurers plan an attack on the slaughter house together with a tribe of Borribble punk girls, the Conkers.



De Larrabetti describes the worsening of the SBG with positive relish. The cream of the Metropolitan Police, clad in their riot gear and beating their truncheons against their shields, are swept aside by a wild stampede of cows and horses, sheep and pigs, released by the Conkers. Inside the slaughter house itself a group of twenty SBG advance on the Adventurers, passing beneath a huge metal container. The Conkers empty it over them:

And what fell from above was a ton and a half of viscous offal: bright vermillion lungs and purple livers; gaudy tripe and dark blue intestines, all jumbled together with hearts and kidneys, tails and tongues, trotters and skin, stomachs and bowels, eyes, teeth, bone and brains, and all of it slippery with a fast thickening blood... A soft crimson explosion had engulfed the policemen and they were gone.

Even after this victory, the Adventurers are still not safe. They are trepped on the Underground, hiding out with Sam the Horse on a disused link line at Swiss Cottage. Here the final confrontation with Sussworth and the SBG takes place.

#### THE BORRIBLES AND CHILDREN'S FANTASY LITERATURE

Some critics reject children's fantasy literature as being escapist, as offering a make-believe sanctuary from the real world of poverty and racism, sexism and exploitation. Instead of helping children understand the world so that they can later help change it, fantasy offers an alternative, unreal, magical world that shuts out and hides away these problems. Moreover, the social model most often borrowed by fantasy literature seems to be some kind of benevolent feudalism. From this point of view children's fantasy literature can be seen as a kind of "opium of the children" and is consequently to be deplored.

This view is based on a serious misunderstanding. Fantasy literature is not necessarily any more escapist than any other kind of fiction. What it does is offer an understanding of the real world in the form of allegory and metaphor. It provides its readers with a symbolic map of reality, a map that identifies good and evil, advocates kinds of behaviour, warns against danger and teaches particular values and attitudes. What is to be objected to about such fantasy literature for both adults and children is not the form itself, not the actual producing of symbolic maps, but rather what the maps show, the values and attitudes, kinds of behaviour, notions of good and evil that they espouse. This is, of course, not a "literary"

criticism, but a political one. De Larrabetti's trilogy can, in this sense, be seen as a triumphant vindication of children's fantasy literature.

Inevitably any discussion of the trilogy has to consider De Larrabetti's portrayal of the police in the third volume. This was almost certainly the reason for the hardback publisher, Collins, pulling out, so that the book has only appeared in the Piccolo paperback edition. The police are without doubt the villains of the piece, mindless bullies out to impose drab conformity, a threat to all that is vital and alive. When the Borribles are captured at Buffon's circus, the police who arrest them are dressed as clowns with white painted faces, and with their mouths painted downwards in expressions of sadness and misery — a marvellous touch! While the Borribles are determined to escort Sam the Horse to safety, Sussworth and his men are equally determined to turn him into catmeat. The horse becomes the symbol over which the two rival philosophies of life clash.

Certainly the police are not shown in a way that is acceptable to those who control our society and one suspects that it is only a matter of time before the DES advises that the book should not be available in schools. Nevertheless it must be insisted that De Larrabetti's portrayal of the police accurately reflects a rôle that they have over the last decade come increasingly to play. The Special Borribble Group, for example, is obviously derived from the Metropolitan Police Special Patrol Group (SPG) that achieved notoriety in Southall on 23 April 1979, when in confrontation with demonstrators protesting against the National Front, London schoolteacher Blair Peach was killed. Since then, of course, the police have become more and more openly involved in suppressing social unrest and imposing Law and Order on people by force. That this experience of policing should be reflected in literature, including children's literature, is absolutely vital. Any attempt to suppress this viewpoint is something that must be vigorously fought against. Across the Dark Metropolis is a masterpiece of children's literature and its portrayal of the police is both powerful and compelling. This is Britain in the 1980s for a great many people and their voice has every right to be heard.

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# TWICE REMOVED FROM REALITY

ANDY SAWYER argues that  
Ransome's Rio and Eddison's  
Zimiamvia are on the same map

**E**RIC RUCKER EDISON (1882-1954) SPENT MUCH OF HIS life as a civil servant, but devoted himself to literature and finally retired to finish his "Zimiamvian Trilogy". He was a writer of rich and complex fantasies whose influences owe much to the philosophers and poets of the Renaissance, the Greek and Roman Classics, and the Norse sagas. His works are not set on Earth, but in a Mercury that never was and never will be (*The Worm Ouroboros*) and in a Platonic Valhalla he named Zimiamvia, and through them he tried to expound a philosophy entirely at odds with the mainstream of twentieth century thought.

Arthur Ransome (1884-1967) began his literary life in the "Bohemian" of pre-First World War London. After firsthand experience of the Russian Revolution as a journalist, he made a name as a writer on sailing matters until fusing that interest with his ambition to write a children's book in *Swallows and Amazons* (1930). The related books which followed shared the pattern of "everyday" children's adventures in a Lake District adapted into an appropriate setting by the children's imaginations. Others varied in geographical location; yet others put the same characters into settings and adventures which grew naturally out of their own fantasies.

In this article I want to explore some of the links between Edison and Ransome in order to suggest that the heroic decadence of Zimiamvia has roots unexplored by most commentators, and that Edison's inter-related cosmologies have analogues in an entirely different subgenre of fantasy. Perhaps through that, we can look at how this kind of fantasy actually operates.

ER Edison is a major fantasy writer and — in an article in which I want to discuss how fantasy can be manipulated on several levels — it makes sense to discuss his complex and subtly altering cosmology. But Arthur Ransome? A children's writer, save the mark! And one who, so far as I know, never wrote a word of SF in his life?

Talking about Ransome brings two things more clearly into focus, I'd argue. First, bringing his books into the arena of discussion shows the way two writers can operate in very similar ways using very different material; and second, this "operation" suggests some interesting questions about fantasy writing. Are there different levels upon which fantasy operates? Are we, perhaps, using a different kind of imagination when reading a fantasy than when reading a "realistic" novel? And what happens when a supposedly "realistic" novel turns out to be a fantasy, or built upon fantastic (or at least, "non-realistic") premises? Both Ransome and Edison manipulate the conventions of story-telling so that the boundaries between "real" and "imaginary" constantly shift. This is, I suggest, one of the marks of good fantasy — that feeling of estrangement when we're not wholly sure how seriously to take the author, which resolves itself when we realize that the author is writing on two (or more) levels at once.

The understanding of that resolution is one of the basic shifts from "children's" to "adult" reading, from naive to more sophisticated approaches to a story. Every experienced reader will have their own points where they

suddenly reached this illumination — with me it was the sudden realization at the age of seven or so that Edgar Rice Burroughs' protestations that "I had this story from one who had no business to tell it to me... the fact that... I have taken fictitious names for the principal characters quite sufficiently evidences the sincerity of my own belief that it may be true."<sup>1</sup> was not to be taken as evidence that Tarzan of the Apes had any basis of truth in it whatsoever. Asserting the truth of your fiction is of course the oldest trick in the book and goes back to Defoe and beyond: I don't intend to say any more about that here. There is also the question of moral truth — part of the root cause of censorship and literary intolerance is the simple inability of otherwise sophisticated people to grasp the fact that the grammatical meaning of a text is not the entire meaning. What I'm really talking about here are the different levels of imaginative truth: how parts of a story relate to the imaginative world set up by that story. Writers like Ransome — stimulating a child's imagination by juggling with experience, fantasy and literary borrowings and images appropriate to that child — prepare the way for writers like Eddison who carry out the same procedures in a more "adult", "literary" fashion. Despite the apparent differences between the two, Rio and Zimiamvia are essentially part of the same map.

Ransome, though not just a children's writer, is now best known for his children's books. Holidaymakers in Bowness — the town featured in his *Swallows and Amazons* books as Rio — will soon find evidence of the burgeoning "Ransome Industry" in conjunction with the outpouring of books — somewhere between academic study and fandom — about other Lakeland writers such as Wordsworth. The Abbot Hall museum in Kendal has devoted a special room to Ransome memorabilia, and his books are part of the canon of middle-class British children's literature — safe classics which can be read and enjoyed by adults and offer chunky, satisfying reads with lots of detail and enough viewpoint characters for every bookish child to have someone to identify with. Eddison, in contrast, is read by a small coterie of fantasy fans, and only on rare occasions by anyone else. He is one of those "writer's writers" he was, for example, highly praised by CS Lewis and Fritz Leiber cites two of his characters as originals for Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser<sup>2</sup> who remain — possibly for very good reasons — uncontaminated by mass publicity or critical acclaim, but who will remain read by a few for as long as there are books, even though that "few" may not be quite the audience to whom he addressed the books.

The choice of Ransome and Edison as exemplars is not as perverse as it may seem. They were, in fact, close boyhood friends and their friendship remained until Edison's death in 1945. Ransome owned several of Edison's books, and he recalls, in his autobiography, sharing some of the roots of Edison's *The Worm Ouroboros* in their shared games:

*The language, the place-names and the names of the heroes were for me an echo of those ancient days when Ric and I produced plays in a toy theatre with cardboard actors carrying just such names and eloquent with just such rhetoric. Corice, Lord Goldry Bluzock, Corinius, Brandoch Dahn seemed old friends when I met them nearly forty years later. Ric throughout his life had a foot in each of two worlds, and the staid official of the Board of Trade was for ever turning from his statistics to look out from the towers of Koshtre Belorn.<sup>3</sup>*

Ransome goes on to describe the torments he and "Ric" Edison inflicted upon various tutors. Those who suggest that the later writings of the two present a kind of "active — passive" polarity with Edison firmly on the escapist, compensatory wing might ponder the fact that the leader and prime mover in all these japes was, in fact, Edison.

Ransome's present status as a writer of a particular kind tends to obscure elements in his career which lean closer to the imaginative fantasies of Edison. He was always interested in the art of narrative, the ways of telling a story (one of his earliest books was the 1909 *A History of Storytelling*) and even more so in folk-tale. *Old Peter's Russian Tales* (1916) has recently been reprinted in paperback, and in *Bohemia in London* (1907) Ransome

describes hearing West Indian "Anansi" tales in Chelsea, told, as it were, straight in the oral tradition. In the same book he also evokes (in a whimsical way) the shades of the 17th century poets and playwrights whose work lies behind and to some extent forms Edisson's Zimlasavia.

Both also shared a passion for the Lake District's Viking roots, and its rugged scenery. As a young man, Ransome met and became friendly with WG Collingwood whose historical novel *Thorstein of the Mere* was one of his favourite childhood books. Edisson also wrote about Vikings (*Styrbyon the Strong*, 1926) and translated *Egil's Saga* (1930). Ransome's deep knowledge and love of the Lakes shines through his "Swallows and Amazons" books. Edisson spent several vacations in the lakes in his university days, and there are certainly elements of his imagined worlds which recall Lakeland. Not only is his house of Lessingham, the viewpoint character of *The Worm Ouroboros*, in the Lake District — "an old low house in Wastdale, set in a grey old garden where yew-trees flourished that had seen Vikings in Copeland in their seeding time" — but regions of Zimlasavia sound very like the English Lakes:

*A dazzling rain was falling when they came out of the forest and followed the left bank of Owiswater up to the bridge above the watersmeet at Storby, where Stordale opens a gateway into the hills to the north and the Stordale Beck tumbles into Owdale White over a staircase of waterfalls.*<sup>62</sup>

The two writers are totally different in prose styles — Edisson is convoluted and archaic, unashamedly and magnificently "literary". Ransome offers plain narrative. He is writing for children who have no truck with "fine writing" but want to get on with the story. Their subjects, too, are different. Edisson creates a cosmos, Ransome writes "realistic" tales of childhood life and imagination. Yet there is, in a way, a connection. Ransome's tales are, looking at it one way, as much total fantasy as Edisson's — homages to a life of complete childhood autonomy, with the opportunity to indulge your fantasies and the security of adults who are aware of this need and help to fulfill it. Fantasy is of the utmost importance in Ransome — his characters are acting out their "sources" in Romance (Defoe, Scott of the Antarctic, piracy and exploration) as much as Edisson's Zimlasavian characters are distilled from Jacobean drama or historical Renaissance men of action.



THERE ARE THREE LEVELS OF FANTASY IN RANSOME. HE IS AN excellent starting point for reading the genre because his books follow the multi-levelled logic of a child's mind in which the imagination is as concrete as the real. (This is not quite the same as confusing fantasy and reality!) The initial *Swallows and Amazons* is a story about children who use their imaginations to bring epic qualities to a holiday in the Lake District. From the viewpoint of the adult "outsiders" in the story — even, perhaps, from our own — they are "playing". But their "play" — their explorations and battles — is the important part of the experience. We see things through the children's eyes. Although Ransome's Lake District does not directly correspond to the "real" Lake District (the lake around which events are set being an amalgam of Coniston and Windermere), each place has its counterpart in actuality. But to the reader, it's the children's experience that counts. We may know that the "little town" by the lake is Bowness, "but the crew of the Swallow had long ago given it the name of Rio Grande" — and it is quite possible — and I would imagine the actual experience of most children: certainly it was my own — to read books without knowing anything about the true names and geography of the places described.

Ransome's technique is to present the actual and imaginative experiences of the Walker and Blackett children as equally "true" experiences; not drawing attention to the

"pretend" elements but presenting them as part of their entire experience, treating them absolutely seriously:

*Here and there, close to the shore, there were rowing boats with fishermen. But after all there was no need to notice any of these things if one did not want to, and the Swallow and her crew moved steadily southward over a distant ocean sailed for the first time by white seamen.*<sup>63</sup>



But because each child's personality is different, each brings a different imaginative filter to the raw material of the holiday experience. John and Susan Walker are practical, doers rather than thinkers, but whereas John is the "adventurer" and (as eldest) leader, Susan is the domestic organiser, the one who remembers about meals and bed-time and who occasionally almost "goes native". (It's because of this division of stereotypes that Ransome comes under fire from modern critics). Titty is the imaginative, sensitive one: she becomes Robinson Crusoe while guarding Wild Cat Island when the others are off warring against the Amazons and discovers an unnerving talent for dowsing.<sup>64</sup> Roger as the youngest is the nearest to conventional "pretend" games: he is first seen zig-zagging across a field like the Cutty Sark tacking against the wind.<sup>65</sup> Nancy and Peggy Blackett are the wildest and most unconventional — they are the "Amazon pirates" with Nancy the leader and Peggy the devoted follower. Dick and Dorothea Callum, later additions to the saga who also share the related "Coot Club" books set in Norfolk, offer their own slants to the "Swallows and Amazons" world. Both are observers, whose contributions to the stories are based upon analysis of the facts they see, but whereas Dick is a scientist, observing the natural world, Dorothea is an artist, who brings her reading (and writing) to bear on events. While the Walkers and Blacketts are rôle-playing, entering into a sub-creation, and her brother is studying the concrete reality of their world — birds, rocks, stars — Dorothea perceives the world as a book. Part of the joke, of course, is that Dorothea's books are stereotyped melodramas, but they act as commentaries on events in the same way as the direct shift from "real" to "imagined" world.

For instance, in *Winter Holiday* the Os, newly arrived at the lake, are watching the others, feeling left out and slightly miserable:

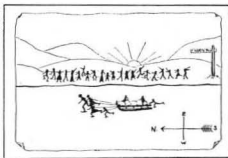
*What fun they were having, six of them, all together. A new story began to shape itself in her mind, one that nobody would be able to read without tears... The Outcasts by Dorothea Callum. Chapter 1. "The two children, brother and sister, shared their last few crumbs and looked this way and that along the deserted shore. Was this to be the end?"*<sup>66</sup>

There is, however, a third level, besides the children's imaginative re-creation of the world and Dorothea's

"literary" gloss upon it, upon which Ransome's fantasy operates. This is based upon the fact that certainly Peter Duck and *Missie Lee* and arguably *Great Northern*<sup>11</sup> — are fantasy in terms of Ransome's imagined world. They are, as Christina Hardyumont writes, "realistic fantasy rather than fantastical reality,"<sup>12</sup> what could have happened to the children if the logical premises of their holiday world were stretched just a little bit more. Peter Duck is an unshamed romance based upon *Treasure Island* — a desperate voyage to a hidden treasure in the Caribbean. Despite the colourful Mr Duck and the villainous Black Jake, the story is written in Ransome's usual detailed but realistic style. The only clue that it is not a straightforward adventure set in the "Swallows and Amazons" world lies in the reference in chapter 4 of the previous book, *Swallowdale*, that Peter Duck is an imaginary character:

He had been the most important character in the story they had made up during those winter evenings in the cabin of the wherry with Nancy and Peggy and Captain Flint.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in *Missie Lee*, the children and Captain Flint (in reality the Blackett's Uncle Jim) are shipwrecked off China and become involved with a Cambridge-educated pirate carrying on her family tradition. These stories work as realism because the personalities of the characters remain the same, but they are, nevertheless, fantasy even though it is quite possible to read the books and take them as extravagant adventure rather than tales made up by the characters themselves. This is quite a subtle and complex exercise of the imaginative art — not just "stories within stories" but whole separate books, self-contained creations, evolving out of the playful creativity of an imaginative sub-world. The pleasurable shock when the reader realises that Peter Duck or *Missie Lee* aren't "real" adventures of the Walkers and Blacketts but share the same relationship to them as they do to the author of the books is one which opens children up to a whole new way of using and experiencing fantasy.



WHEREAS RANSOME IS A "CHILDREN'S" WRITER, EDISON, FOR all the strollerisms I've pointed out, is an "adult" writer and although he engages the reader in similarly multi-levelled imaginative leaps they are both more subtle in themselves and part of altogether more sophisticated texts. To modern fantasy, Edison is somewhat like what Olaf Stapledon is to modern SF: a writer of long, erudite and philosophical fictions which owe little to conventional notions of literary excellence or taste or to the purely genre concerns of what crystallised afterwards. His reputation as a "writer's writer" and the sheer oddness of his books no doubt put people off. I want to argue that he is worth persevering with for the pleasure you can get from his writing even if — as I think is unnecessary — you have to reject a great deal of what lies behind it.

Edison's fantasy is scarcely unreadable. Difficult, yes: elitist, very probably and in fundamental values certainly reactionary. It is cloaked in philosophy and frequently reaches stages where the philosophy becomes too obscure or the influence of Renaissance or Classic styles becomes too overt. You run into problems as soon as you tackle Edison. The beginning of *The Worm Ouroboros* is clumsy, the trilogy remained incomplete, and a close scrutiny of Edison's fantasy raises disturbing questions about how far racism, hero-worship of aristocracy and wilful ignorance (at best) of any attempt at working-class emancipation are acceptable when encased in a far-away

setting in a fantasy story. And yet Edison is also capable of writing wonderfully manipulative prose and some of his people — Corund and Gro from *The Worm Ouroboros*, Horius Parry and the weasily Gabriel Florus from *Mistress of Mistresses* — are unforgettable: full-blooded characters in magnificent nastiness.

*The Worm* — first published 1922 — is a flawed masterpiece. Echoing the conventional openings of the Norse Sagas it begins "There was a man named Lessingham..." Lessingham, however, is little more than a gloss through which the action of the story is observed. Sleeping in the uncanny "Lotus Room" of his country house, he is awakened by a heraldic ariel and driven to Mercury in a chariot drawn by a hippogriff! Invisible to Mercury's native Demons and Witches — so much so that he is not mentioned after page 26 — Lessingham is introduced to the titanic conflict between these two races.

It's hard to blame anyone who puts the novel down at this point, particularly as by then Edison has also betrayed a fondness for ornately descriptive set pieces. But once he reaches the story proper he reveals a superbly heroic plot which turns upon the ambitions of Gorice of Witthland to claim sovereignty over the Demons, ruled by Juss. It involves necromancy, a quest, and base treachery all wrapped up in High Renaissance decoration: a baroque delight in cadences and vocabulary which balances characters and themes straight out of Jacobean tragedy. Edison pays homage to his sources by including in his text poems — translations from the Greek, verses from Donne, Herrick or Shakespeare — which are incongruous in a fictional Mercury but do arise naturally from the world he actually describes; a world of barbaric sophistication where chivalrous Honour wars with crafty Policy and the greatest tragedy for a noble victor is victory itself, which removes further opportunity for glory.

Perhaps because his ending left no opening for a direct sequel, Edison set his next Fantasy books in Zislaavia, the Valhalls of the Ouroboros-world, glimpsed briefly by Lord Juss from a mountain-top. The Zislaavian trilogy is more complex, partly because only a third of the final volume was actually written by the time of Edison's death (the rest survives in summary form), partly because the scope of the work is considerably wider.

The first volume, *Mistress of Mistresses* (1935) takes us initially to the deathbed of Lessingham, seen by a grieving friend as some tragic superman, both adventurer and scholar, who has outlived his time. The introductory elegy is, however, merely an overture to the "Zislaavian" story. Lessingham is cousin to Horius Parry, who is about to pounce upon the throne of Stylis, heir to the late King Mezentius of the Three Kingdoms of Fingswold, Rerek, and Mezria. To summarise the plot is hard: *The Worm* is crude by comparison. In *Mistress of Mistresses* we have another scenario of political conflict between "Honour" (the King's rightful descendants) and "policy" (the scheming Parry) which also involves Duke Barganax, the bastard son of Mezentius, and Lessingham who is (this time) intimately involved. Honourable and chivalric, he is nevertheless on the wrong side, supporting Parry (although he detests his motives) because he is his cousin. This is not all. There are echoes of Lessingham's "earthly" life and strange correspondences between him and Barganax (and particularly between the "earthly" Lessingham's wife Mary and Barganax's mistress Florinda who seems to possess an uncanny power of occult-erotic transmutation which can cross worlds).

The succeeding volumes, *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941) and *Mezentian Gate* (published posthumously in 1958) show us the "earthly" life of the Lessinghams, the history of Zislaavia leading up to the death of Mezentius, and the connections between the two. They make somewhat clearer Edison's philosophy of a Male/Female creative dualism whose "love" infuses the universe. This is expressed in various ways through the relationships of Mezentius and the Duchess of Memison, the Lessinghams, and Barganax and Florinda, and commented on at various points through the trilogy by the wandering philosopher Doctor Vanderast. Our own world occupies a somewhat surprising niche in this scheme.

More supple and varied in prose-styles than *The Worm*, the Zislaavian trilogy continues its use of High Literature — Sappho, Homer, Shakespeare and Webster, for example, as touchstones. The prose itself ranges from straightforward descriptive narrative to mysteriously languorous prose-poems. Built upon a foundation of echoes,

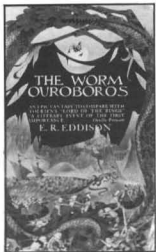
correspondences, half-remembered dreams and snatches of poetry, the trilogy becomes in the end an ambitious attempt at capturing a philosophy of heroism and love.

As I've said, there's such that is unpalatable about it. The 20th century episodes show that Lessingham, with all his attractive heroism and culture, is a particularly unpleasant member of the British ruling class and his transfiguration into a Zimian hero is perhaps only a fictional way of suggesting that the world was built for Old Etonians to play in. But in the better parts of the trilogy there is an authenticity about it which makes the action and plot, by fantasy novel terms, very good action and plot indeed. And the theme behind, of transmutation of identity and dark erotic symbolism, is fascinating and strong. The chapter "Wailar in Starlight" from *Mistress of Mistresses* fuses and confuses the Zimian and Earthly characters (and behind them, the Gods) in a skilful, poetic and alarming manner:

*The awe of that sight darkened his voice as he spoke: "Who are you?"  
Antiope trembled. "Sometimes, in such places as this," she said, "I scarcely know."<sup>112</sup>*

In terms of putting across an imaginative creation, what is Edisson doing? The inter-related structures of his novels could best be described by a three- (or even four-) dimensional model. Unfortunately, I'm confined to two dimensions, so perhaps it's best to eschew diagrams and merely describe.

The Worm, as I've said, is simpler than the Zimian books, more akin in structure to the simple wish-fulfillment scientific romances such as Edgar Rice Burroughs' "John Carter" books, which also feature mysterious crossings of interplanetary distances. (Although there are intriguing parallels between the writings of ERB and ERE, I have no evidence that Edisson ever read Burroughs!) Perhaps another example would be David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*: in all three examples we have a hero magically (albeit in Lindsay with a scientific gloss) transported from our world to another. Is this just escapism from the mundane, whatever the intellectual trappings with which the two British writers invest their stories? Perhaps; but Edisson's Lessingham is an exotic, heroic, romantic character in his own right. Lessingham's world is never that of the everyday reader, so in entering into the world of the "old low house in Wastdale" we are already at one imaginative remove from our own realism. (The parallel with Ransome here is perhaps in the fact that the reality of *Swallows and Amazons* — messing about in boats in the Lake District — is itself divorced from the reality of most of his readers.)



Soon, Lessingham is in Mercury: a shorthand for a heroic world which transforms his experiences, to which he is as we are to him. And soon afterwards, Lessingham disappears from the text, fading from becoming a character in his own right to becoming 100% observer. After the

necessary background information is given to him the story carries on apparently without his presence. Presumably, he sees all that the reader — in imagination — sees. So what, then, is the difference between you, the reader, and Lessingham, the ex-character in the book? Is this really just clumsy construction or is it an attempt at an unusual and significant narrative viewpoint?

But Lessingham does appear again after Edisson has constructed another imaginative leap. The "overture" to *Mistress of Mistresses* refers back to *The Worm* directly — Lessingham is overheard as he stares at Arctic shores and mutters "The sea-board of Demoland"<sup>113</sup> — and indirectly: the action in *The Worm* begins with Lessingham sleeping; in *Mistress of Mistresses* the change of consciousness is more final. The chapter ends with a poem apparently written by Lessingham. The poem is entitled "A Vision of Zimianvia".

So what is Zimianvia? It exists on three levels. In terms of the fiction we're reading, Zimianvia is a physical Valhalla on the Mercury of *The Worm*:

*no mortal foot may tread it, but the blessed souls do inhabit it of the dead that be departed, even they that were great upon earth and did great deeds when they were living, that scorned not earth and the delights and glories thereof, and yet did justly and were not dastards nor yet oppressors."<sup>114</sup>*

The earthly Lessingham is one whose description this might be, a man who can trace his ancestry back to Viking kings, author of a History of Frederick II which "is, of course, today the standard authority of that period, and ranks, as literature, far and away above any other history book since Gibbon"<sup>115</sup>, who conquered Paraguay and held his own personal fiefdom in the Arctic, who is rock-climber, poet and printer. He is also a man out of place in the 20th century. At the time of his death the new Norwegian government is about to reclaim, by force of arms, Lessingham's "estate" in Lofoten. Lessingham dies in time to escape ignominious defeat.

But Lessingham can meet his destiny in Zimianvia. After the words "I have promised and I will perform" are spoken over his bier by a woman who may be Lessingham's mistress and may be — indeed is — someone definitely more elevated, the action shifts to that "blessed realm", where a heroic figure named Lessingham is being told that he ought not ally himself with his cousin Horius Parry against the new King Styllis. Agreeing with the argument if not its conclusion ("I must have danger"), Lessingham explains his initial distraction:

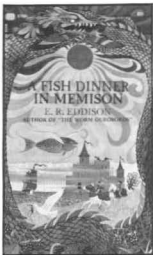
*For I thought there was a voice spoke in my ear at that moment and I thought it said, I have promised and I will perform."<sup>116</sup>*

We may conclude that Zimianvia is a creation by the "Senorita" whom we later identify with the lady Florida, mistress of Duke Barganax, for her heroes; a playground in which they may indulge their chivalric instincts and make love, war and art to their highest and most aristocratic levels.

Zimianvia is also an artistic creation made out of other artistic creations. Fully examining the raw material of which Zimianvia is fashioned is beyond my scope here. But Edisson's sub-creation, more than that of any other fantasy writer including Tolkien, involves direct borrowings from literature. Most fantasy writers borrow, even if from each other, but the best of course borrow from outside the genre, taking ideas which possess a romantic/fantastic tinge but which are not — at least at time of borrowing — clichés.

Edisson belonged to that generation which reclaimed the Elizabethan/Jacobean poets and tragedians. In his memoir of his friend Philip Sidney Nairn (who may have been a "source" for Lessingham; and note the Christian names!) Edisson recalls their love for the Elizabethans, especially Webster. "Many of these we discovered jointly, and read aloud together."<sup>117</sup> The plays and poems of Webster and his contemporaries are extensively used throughout the Zimian works, as characters quote aphorisms and love-poems to each other. The Red Foliot's funeral dirge for Gorice XI, in *The Worm*, is the fifteenth century Scots poet William Dunbar's lament "Timor Mortis conturbat me". The love scenes, particularly, are marked

by the passionate lines of the Greek poet Sappho. There are, if you care to look for them, a considerable number of indirect allusions as well as the direct quotations and, as Edisson himself writes in the note to *Mistress of Mistresses*, "In Vandermaast's aphorisms students of Spinoza will recognise that master's words..."<sup>(20)</sup>



The "base" for the creation of the Edissonian cosmos is art rather than life. We're not dealing with anything so crude as a "parallel universe" in which the characters share our cultural heritage, but something much more sophisticated: an imaginative creation built out of other imaginative creations but remaining vital. These initial creations, remember — the plays of Shakespeare, Webster and Marlowe with their Italianate backgrounds and Machiavellian hero-villains — were in many ways as "exotic" to their original audiences as they are to us. Their meanings and to some extent their characters were realistic but, as Marlowe, Kydd, Jonson and Dekker in their different ways experienced, too close a fictional representation of actual moral and personal reality could lead to trouble if people in High Places were offended. Hence the convention that certain sorts of plays were set in Italy, because everybody knew that Italians were treacherous villains who'd poison a dagger as soon as look at it and generally get up to all sorts of nastiness, and everybody knew as well that the playwright was in truth getting at someone or something such closer to home. Edisson employs a similar kind of double vision by creating what is in effect a composite Renaissance, a distillation of Renaissance values as we see them or understand Renaissance figures themselves to have seen them, which enables him to praise aristocratic and heroic virtues without examining their darker sides too closely. Created out of passions made already superhuman by their transformation into Art, Zimisavia is a world of perfection, in which the Renaissance should have been, where everybody plays their appointed rôles in the drama:

*Zimisavia is, in this, like the Saga time; there is no malaise of the soul. In that world, well fitted to all their faculties and dispositions, men and women of all estates enjoy beatitude in the Aristotelian sense of... (activity according to their highest virtue). Gabriel Flores, for instance, has no ambition to be Vicar of Rerek: it suffices his lust for power that he serves a master who commands his dog-like devotion.*

This says Edisson in the "Letter of Introduction" to *The Mezentian Gate*.<sup>(21)</sup>

Those who share Edisson's love for Webster's plays may remember that one of the powerful motive forces of these dramas is precisely that figures such as Gabriel Flores do not love and accept gratefully positions as grovelling underdogs. Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* or Gabriel's near-namesake De Flores in *Middleton's The Changeling* attempt, even if they fall in the end, to play the Machiavellian game themselves. Discontent is not a

feature of Zimisavia and when the further connections between Zimisavia and our world are made clear in *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, this raises a few questions about the underlying morality of the scheme.

For Zimisavia is a world at the third "remove" from ours. *The Worm* makes it a Valhalla in an imaginary world. *Mistress of Mistresses* allows Lessingham to live and die after his earthly death, in an heroic romance. Both the dresslike parallels of identity, and the commentary upon events given by Doctor Vandermaast and his shapeshifting companions suggest that Zimisavia is Aphrodite's domain. The book ends with a suggestion of Eternity, after the Goddess has fulfilled her promise:

*"For now Night," she said, scarce to be heard,  
"rises on Zimisavia. And after that, To-morrow,  
and To-morrow, and To-morrow, of Zimisavia.  
And all of Me. What you will. For ever..."<sup>(22)</sup>*

*A Fish Dinner in Memison* turns this scheme on its head, and gives us the third level of Zimisavia. Set before (if such an expression has meaning) the events of *Mistress of Mistresses*, it shows us much more of the lives of the "earthly" Lessinghams, but also carries on the motif of the identity as a "dress" of ultimate Divinity, exploring the links between Lessingham, Barganax and King Mezentius, and the Duchess of Memison, Fiorinda, and Lady Mary Lessingham, whom Lessingham courts, wins, and tragically loses. There is little "action" in the novel — apart from an abortive plot by the villainous Farry — because most of it is concerned with the philosophical implications of that important scene near the end of the book where in an almost casual aside to illustrate a dinner-table question what worlds they would chose, were they gods, Mezentius creates for his guests a cosmos. It is this cosmos, bound by "clockwork" laws of cause and effect, created on a whim of Fiorinda, which is our universe. The couples around that dinner-table enter into the created cosmos to experience it.

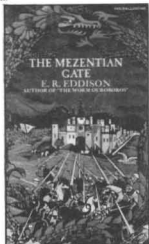
The book, then, seems to suggest that the earthly Lessingham is not, actually, the "real" Lessingham, but that he is a "dress" of Mezentius in a world "such like this real world, but created."<sup>(23)</sup> This may lead to conceptual problems, especially in *The Mezentian Gate* when Lessingham would be shown being born and brought up in Zimisavia, which seems to contradict the impression which was initially given of the history of Zimisavia (or at least of Lessingham's part in it) actually beginning with "I have promised and I will perform". These are probably more apparent than real. God's personality splits among his "dresses" and He is quite capable of being in two places at the same time. Mezentius himself is only a partial realisation of the Divine. What the scheme does do is add a four-dimensional complexity to the relationship between our world and Zimisavia. Zimisavia is both a heightened aspect of our world (*Mistress of Mistresses*) and a pre-existent superior model in which Gods and Goddesses amuse themselves. Our universe expires at the point of a hairpin.

Only Mezentius and Fiorinda, the "highest" and most self-aware aspects of Divinity, actually remember what happened around that dinner-table, we are told in *The Mezentian Gate*, although the Duchess and Barganax half-recall events mistily, as in a dream. Only a third of *The Mezentian Gate* exists in anything other than summary, but it is clear that the entire work illuminates the relationships between the characters, starting with the evening before Lessingham's death on Earth, where he hopes for "a world that is wholly of itself a dress of yours"<sup>(24)</sup> and covering Zimisavian history twenty years before the birth of Mezentius and ending with his death, shortly before the commencement of *Mistress of Mistresses*. The "Fish Dinner" is returned to, obliquely, and seen as an episode in a deeper and somewhat darker sequence. There is, as always, a "political plot", but there is also a sharper delineation of the debate between Action/Intellectualism (Mezentius) and Contemplation/Emotion (Fiorinda) — the two poles of Divinity? — whetted by Mezentius's self-awareness and difficulty in keeping his omnipotence/omniscience balanced as one of his own creation. This is counterpointed by the existence of Lessingham and Barganax as Men of Action and Artists: Barganax's decision at the end not to know his Divine Aspect, just to experience — "Even when we were Gods, best not to know. Well: Thank God, I know not."<sup>(25)</sup>

can, tentatively, be contrasted with Mezentius' knowledge and Lessingham's desire for knowledge.

And here we come to Edisson's own statement that Zimslavia is "a special world, devised for Her lover by Aphrodite, for whom... all worlds are made."<sup>22</sup> Our world, then, is a nothing, most of us probably not even real in any significant sense, and only a few supermen like Lessingham are worth bothering with. And in suggesting this, it's difficult to escape from the fact that most of Edisson's earthly characters really are horrible. Where, as in the "earthly" episodes of *A Fish Dinner*... modern life is discussed, the unpleasant aspects of Edisson's attitude come through as a seemingly deliberate avoidance of perceiving society as anything other than an elite "aware" few served by the great mass of extras. In Zimslavia, your place is fore-ordained. Because there is a religious decree hanging over the whole thing, any thought of social dynamics, of the Zimslavian masses arising and taking control of their own destiny, even of some individual spear-carrier realising that dying simply so that Lessingham can have a glorious time isn't that wonderful a fate, is a non-starter. You come out of Zimslavia still in love with the characters (as clearly, was Edisson) but suspecting that Webster and Middleton probably had a clearer idea of how these sort of people do behave.

Fortunately, we are not necessarily asked to judge Zimslavia as political philosophy. I'm not arguing "art for art's sake" — it is impossible to ignore the creepy feeling which comes over you at the thought of a world run by Lessingham. But there are worse things for demigods to be than hedonists, and the Zimslavian universe or complex of universes remains one of the great fictional creations. Like Ransome's world, it is built upon several levels of the imaginative art which expand outwards from the initial "let's pretend" which is our experience of any kind of fiction.



Ransome's "given" state, underlying any journey to imaginative reflections of it, is an idealised version of the real; the Lake District in which a group of children are on holiday, free from the mundane, everyday round of school and home routines. What is important and basic to Edisson is Zimslavia, whose roots are literary and philosophical, an "ideal" rather than "actual" state (and, of course, "state of mind" rather than "political state"). But in both cases these basic situations serve as springboards to more convoluted relationships. In many ways they are two sides of the same coin, and although you can classify Ransome's initial world as "possible" and Edisson's as "impossible" in relation to our reality, each writer allows the reader to find ways into the territory of the other, shifting into different imaginative gears as the overall story progresses, and eventually seeing a multi-volume series as a creation which works by exploiting and inter-relating several imaginative levels. This may not be the sole reward of reading them — few of Ransome's readers, for instance, will self-consciously examine their responses to this extent — but it is there for the taking.

Certainly in Edisson the metaphysical journeying between different interpretations of Lessingham's exist-

ence is fundamental to the book. Is he a real character or just a reader-substitute? (No!) Or a hero from this world reincarnated in another? (*Mistress of Mistresses*) Or is his existence in what we fondly imagine as a "real" world merely a shadow of a far greater reality, a far fuller identity? Partly because of the unfinished nature of the trilogy, we are left with no answer, but the point anyway must surely be that all conclusions are relative. The argument may be that a Platonic ideal underlies all; what the books give the reader is a sense of flux, of imaginative possibilities, of greater and more self-referential statements of "let's pretend". I'm certainly happier with this than with any possibility of certainty: whether my preference for the "open" imaginative system rather than a "closed" philosophical/religious one has anything to do with my dislike of Edisson's fundamentally conservative stance, I'll leave you to decide. But when reading a book we don't have to actually agree with it to experience the rapture of identification with another person's creation. This is the final level of imagination at which the Edisson trilogy works — that of empathy between writer and reader. It's the fundamental level for any writing — especially fantasy. And by whatever Powers lurk behind the jigsaw of Edisson's cosmology, it's a powerful one indeed.

#### References

- (1) Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan of the Apes*, NEL, 1975, p.7.
- (2) Fritz Leiber, author's note to *The Swords of Lamkhar*, Mayflower, 1970.
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- (4) ER Edisson, *The Worm Ouroboros*, Pan/Ballantine, 1972, pl. 901.
- (5) ER Edisson, *Mistress of Mistresses*, Ballantine, 1968, p.143 (MM).
- (6) Arthur Ransome, *Swallows and Amazons*, Cape, 1967, p.38 (SA).
- (7) SA p.39.
- (8) SA, ch. 18; *Pigeon Post*, (Puffin, 1984) ch. 13.
- (9) SA p.13.
- (10) Arthur Ransome, *Winter Holiday* (Puffin, 1983) p.20.
- (11) So argue Hugh Brogan, whose *Life of Arthur Ransome* (Hamilton, 1985) and Christina Hardymount, whose *Arthur Ransome and Captain Flint's Treasure* (Cape, 1984) are essential reading for anyone interested in Ransome.
- (12) Hardymount, p.26.
- (13) Arthur Ransome, *Swallows*, 1946, p.64. An unfinished MS known as "Their Own Story" gives more details of these winter evenings: Hardymount, pp. 148-161.
- (14) MM p.330.
- (15) MM p.5.
- (16) WO pp. 219-220.
- (17) MM p.14.
- (18) MM p.31.
- (19) ER Edisson, *Poems, Letters and Memories of Philip Sidney Nairn* (privately printed, 1916), p.17. Nairn, who died of a burst blood vessel in Malaya in 1914 appears from this collection (apparently assembled at the request of Henry Nairn, his father) as travelled, cultivated, a bit of a ladies' man (one female acquaintance dubbed him "The Viking", which Edisson suggests gives "the essential elements of his character") and came from a family which boasted lineage back to the 14th century. Nairn was "a big man and a strong", over six feet high and well-proportioned, possessing strong natural gifts of leadership. Edisson's enthusiasm for Nairn's poetry does not however, find much justification in the pedestrian verse printed there.
- (20) MM p.395.
- (21) ER Edisson, *The Mezentian Gate* (Del Rey, 1978) p. xii (MG).
- (22) MM p.391.
- (23) ER Edisson, *A Fish Dinner in Meislon*, Pan/Ballantine, 1972, p.309.
- (24) MO p. xxvi.
- (25) MO p.269.
- (26) MO p.xi.

# BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by Paul Kincaid



**MEMORIES OF THE SPACE AGE** - J.G. Ballard  
[Arkham House, 1988, 216pp, \$16.95]  
**RUNNING WILD** - J.G. Ballard  
[Hutchinson, 1988, 72pp, £5.95]  
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

*EMPIRE OF THE SUN* (1984) WAS SUCH A success for J.G. Ballard not because it represented any great advance in his artistry, it did not, nor was its subject any more readily accessible, but it provided a context for, and exploration of, his familiar iconography. Ballard has always been out of step with science fiction, where its forms were traditional he was experimental, where it pretended to look forward he blatantly looked back. Again and again the same images of loss and decay littered his stories, the fruits of modern technology could only be embraced when past their sell-by date, when gleaming carapaces are patinated with rust, and the external landscape echoed the ruin of Shanghai.

If his fiction finds understanding of the past through symbols of the future, it was inevitable that the most potent image of tomorrow our age has produced should haunt his work. Repeatedly he has returned to Cape Canaveral, and eight such stories, arranged chronologically from "The Cage of Sand" (1962) to "The Man Who Walked on the Moon" (1985), have been gathered together for this excellent new collection. Though one might have hoped that the title alone would have encouraged the publishers not to make misdirected claims about Ballard being a "visionary prophet."

Some of the most archetypal Ballardian images are here. Dead astronaut's circle endlessly overhead in abandoned capsules forming new constellations of loss. Martian sand swamps the resort areas around the space centre. Gentries rust and tumble across deserted launch pads. And isolated figures gravitate towards the Cape in a perpetual quest for a past that cannot be reclaimed. To Ballard, as one character puts it, "The entire space programme was a symptom of some inner unconscious malaise afflicting mankind." The decay reflects an inner state, though this is not necessarily a hopelessness. By "My Dream of Flying to Wake Island" (1974), for instance, a typical icon - a World War

II bomber buried in sand - has become a symbol of beginnings, not endings. Though it is still a mental landscape forested with memories and foggy with delusion. We can never escape entropy.

It's a attitude that finds perfect expression in these grim fables where mental and physical decay illuminate each other, and even the fraudulence of "The Man Who Walked on the Moon" embodies "the absolute loneliness of the human being in space and time." But where there is no technology to reflect upon, Ballard's eloquence begins to slip. In the novella *Running Wild* he has only the sterility of his enclave of the contemporary rich, Pangborne Village, which does not acquire a vivid enough life of its own to illustrate the psychosis he has taken as his subject. When all the adults in the village are savagely murdered one morning, and the children disappear, it is clear from the start who are the culprits. The only mystery is in why, and he cannot get as close to this derangement as he can to the man who imagines he was an astronaut, or those who follow the corpses in perpetual orbit. There is no crumbling icon that adequately contains the nullity that is today's horror.

*(This review first appeared in the Times Literary Supplement, January 13-19, 1989)*

**THE MAN WHO FULLED DOWN THE SKY** - John Barnes  
[MEL, 1986, 256pp, £2.99]  
Reviewed by Cecil Nurse

ISAAC ASIMOV RECOMMENDS THIS BOOK. AT least, the cover says he does. Or the merchandisers of the Asimov name have decided to put it on this book, in the interests of promoting new writers with "radically novel styles and fashions". This isn't one, but the American market is tough and anything that works must be repeated. Asimov knows.

This is a reversion to those American nightmares: totalitarianism, violence, and Vietnam. After a stodgy start in which the collectivist society and economic problems of the trans-Martian "Brenkovays" are sketched in, it settles down to the hero's aiding and abetting of (often uncontrolled) violent rebellion on a pastoral Earth controlled by two or three major corporations and pacified by enclaves of "cosmorines" in the name of property rights and freedom. The Earth residents are "dirtsiders", and the highly industrial Orbital Republics are the enemy. The parallels to Vietnam are inescapable, though Asimov, perversely, I think, compares it to America's dom-

ination of Britain (sic). The hero's side is not immaculate in motive or deed, and after several battles with more than a hint of tragedy, the book ends on an ambiguous but hopeful note. Barnes has made an effort to avoid the extremes of both militarism and pacifism, indeed has attempted a dialectic, but this is more hard work and thought than the deeply standard plot and format deserves or can bear. Perhaps this young writer will focus more closely on his major concerns in later works, but this his first has come out on the fence.

**THE FLINT KNIFE** - E.F. Benson  
[Equation, 1986, 184pp, £3.50]  
**WARNING WHISPERS** - A.M. Burrage  
[Equation, 1988, 190pp, £3.50]  
**IN THE DARK** - E. Nesbit  
[Equation, 1986, 176pp, £3.50]  
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

THESE EQUATION "CHILLERS" OFFER CAREFULLY chosen examples of work by neglected authors, with comprehensive and interesting introductions (though Jack Adrian oddly chooses to illustrate the characteristics of E.F. Benson's "spook stories" by referring to tales not actually reprinted in his selection).

Benson and Burrage flourished between the wars; Nesbit's weird fiction was published in the 1890s. All three are interesting as individuals. Nesbit is still celebrated for her children's books, but through her association with the early Fabian Society also has a place in the development of British Socialism. The oft-anthologised "Man-size in Marble" (included here) remains her finest supernatural tale, but it is run a close second by "The Violet Car". There's a Gothic flavour to her fiction - Hugh Lamb suggests a measure of personal exorcism in tales of catalogue and amorphous shadows - and there is fascinating proto-SF in "The Three Drugs" and "The Five Senses".

Benson stands out as a complex member of a strange clan. The stories here don't quite (apart from a certain brutality) reflect the strand of mental and sexual instability in the Benson family, although one of the best stories here ("Dumsey on a Dahabab") features what appears to be a homosexual couple in the cast. Despite Benson's increasing popularity, these stories aren't quite up to the mark, often of that potentially tedious kind of ghost story in which the spook reveals a shocking crime. Good moments rather than extended exorcism.

Like Benson, Burrage belonged to a family of writers. His father and



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uncle were prolific scribes of pulp fiction. The stories in *Warning Whispers* (also chosen by Jack Adrian) are the productions of a working hack. They are absolute gems, living examples of how work of high quality can remain neglected between the covers of obscure magazines. Burrage offers a more varied approach to supernatural fiction than Nesbit or Benson: a lighter touch, such subtle humour and a wider, almost Wellesian, social range (music hall, provincial journalism). From the pessimistic "Father of the Men" to the nightmarish "The Acquittal" or "The Attic" to simple *Joux d'esprit* such as "The Imperturbable Tuck-er", all are thoroughly entertaining.

Each of these volumes is a valuable resurrection of stories which should be better known, but no-one with even the slightest interest in ghost stories should pass up the chance of buying *Warning Whispers*.

**THE DIGGING LEVIATHAN** - James P. Blaylock  
[Morrigan, 1988, 275pp, £11.95]  
**HOMUNCULUS** - James P. Blaylock  
[Morrigan, 1988, 244pp, £11.95]  
**LAND OF DREAMS** - James P. Blaylock  
[Grafton, 1988, 234pp, £11.95]  
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

LOVE HIM OR HATE HIM, THERE SEEMS NO escape from James P. Blaylock at present. 1988 saw three hardback and seemingly endless paperback editions of his novels in Britain. So, who is he? I think he's currently one of the most talented writers around. On the other hand, the critical woodwork is bristling with people who will explain why he is the most godawful writer. Many don't get past their first Blaylock novel, and those who finish the first rarely read a second. I suppose that makes me an addict; I finished all three in a comparatively short space of time, and an eager for more.

Let me tell you why I think this man is so good, and why others think he is at best pretty average. His style is idiosyncratic to say the least, bordering on the downright eccentric. On an uncharitable day, I might say his concept of plotting is virtually non-existent, and you can't say a lot for his characterisation either. But that's only part of it. He has a highly individual vision of the world, and it is such fun. Not comic, nor exactly humorous, but joyous and uninhibited. Take *Homunculus*: set in a highly-coloured Victorian England, the plot is full of tortuous twists as the members of the Trisagionist Club solve the mystery of Dr Narbondo and Sebastian Oulesby's method of raising the dead, inbetween sustained chases round London after one or another of William Keeble's strange boxes. As to where the resurrection of Joanna Southcote fits in, it's probably better not to ask. *The Digging Leviathan* is set in the 1960s, though names from

the previous novel resonate. It illustrates more clearly Blaylock's delight in offbeat science. No one could fail to be entertained by William Hastings and Giles Peach who are prepared to take on the scientific establishment, approaching technological problems through literature, or a simple refusal to believe in things being impossible. The scientific world is turned upside down. Most of the rest of the world too, as Blaylock probes the possibility of travelling along tunnels through the world, and explores an impossible realm in the sewers of LA.

Through both novels runs the theme of the search for the Elixir of Life, however indirectly - always be suspicious when carp are mentioned in Blaylock's fiction - and oblique references to his friends. Tim Powers appears as a tobaccoist and a book-seller, and Dean Koontz's name pops up unexpectedly. As for Ashless, who first appeared in Powers' *The Anubis Gates* (clearly a companion work to *Homunculus*, which reads like *The Anubis Gates* on speed), he appears in several guises. And watch out for a monograph which should have been written by Delany. This is just a small sample of the in-joking and cross-referencing which Blaylock delights in, and which I find so entertaining.

*Land of Dreams* at first seems to have little relation to the other two, reminding me more of a cross between Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, parts of Crowley's *Little, Big*, and Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*. Blaylock's obsession with marine animals reaches its apotheosis in *Dr Jensen*, who discovers improbably huge items of clothing on the shoreline, while Skeerix, Jack and Helen try to solve the mysteries of the mouse-sized man and the bottle of green liquid, (similar to readers of the other books. The quality of the novel is almost elegiac, a hymn to the wonders of childhood, and the child's ability to accept the impossible without question. There's an elusive magic in the work of Blaylock which almost defies explanation, but which lifts his fiction way above the ordinary, faults notwithstanding.



**ADULTHOOD RITES** - Octavia Butler  
[Gollancz, 1988, 277pp, £11.95]  
Reviewed by Edward James

XENOGENESIS LOOKS AS IF IT IS GOING to be that rarest of commodities: a trilogy planned as a trilogy, whose

full importance will only emerge with the publication of the third volume. Dawn told us how Lilith was revived and re-educated by the alien Oankali, who have rescued an unspecified number of humans after a nuclear holocaust. Her friendship with the Oankali was viewed by other humans as treacherous (indeed, obscene) collaboration.

*Adulthood Rites* sees her re-established on Earth, along with other humans, by the seemingly all-powerful Oankali. The novel is, however, about her son Akin - human mother, and Oankali "father" - from the moment of birth (literally, he experiences and remembers it), through to young adulthood, when he becomes a vital link between human and Oankali. The Oankali are master genetic engineers, capable of making themselves in any form; and with Akin and others they manipulate human genetic material to produce a hybrid species, endowed with new sensations and awesome potential. To ordinary humans, who remember the pre-nuclear past, they are, of course, monsters. The novel ends with the reaching of another crucial stage in the evolution of Oankali-man.

The novel is very different in feel from its predecessor: somehow less predictable, but more familiar. It has many of the hallmarks - notably the moral dilemmas and practical problems - of a standard post-holocaust novel. Yet there are two elements which are very different, and make it a novel well worth finding and reading - preferably with, but if necessary without, Dawn. The first is the Oankali themselves, such more complex and interesting than most aliens, both in their biology and their motives, which are morally ambiguous: what they offer certainly benefits humanity, but is a response to a deep need of their own as well. And the second is the gradual growth of the superhuman (or post-human) Akin, as we and he together gradually discover the powers that he has. Butler has produced a number of SF books which are not only morally and scientifically sophisticated, but also have suspense and action; they deserve to be much better known on this side of the Atlantic than they are. If you want to find out what you have missed, try this one.

**KINDRED** - Octavia E. Butler  
[Women's Press, 1988, 264pp, £4.95]  
**CARMEN DOG** - Carol Emshwiller  
[Women's Press, 1988, 148pp, £4.95]  
Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

IN *CARMEN DOG* THE WORLD HAS GONE FAR beyond earlier fantasies: females everywhere are metamorphosing; human women are degenerating into giraffes, bison, snapping turtles, while animals are moving upwards. Pooch the heroine begins sleeping on the doormat of her master but ends as a grande dame on the stage of the New York Metropolitan Opera. In between she escapes from

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mad doctors, government prisons, and sex maniacs but comes out unharmed. Men cannot understand what is happening, they don't trust the new women who were formerly domestic pets and they reject their former wives. They turn to bizarre experiments to try to reproduce but women eventually free themselves and come to terms with the new world.

If *Carmen Dog* is a distant relative of David Garnett's *Lady Into Fox* then Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is an even more remote descendant of Jane Eyre. From the first short section I expected a didactic novel but found that, set mostly in the antebellum South, it belongs to the line of Jane's descendants known as bodice rippers.

Dana, 25, black and living in LA trying to write but getting by on unskilled jobs from an agency known as the slave market, suddenly finds herself back in 1819 saving a (white) boy from drowning. She returns to the present when she feels fear, increasingly damaged each time. Throughout the boy's life (and years of his life are only minutes of her's) Dana goes back involuntarily when he is in physical trouble. And those troubles, in shades of *Roots*, revolve around abusing Dana's ancestors. She is finally freed from the problem by a denouement familiar to anyone who has read Charles Porteous's *True Grit*.

This book looked as if it would extend Yoko Ono's famous line - "Woman is the nigger of the world" - but did not. It is much more an entertainment than it would care to admit. And its melodramatic structure of only pulling Dana back at times of physical trouble helps to avoid any psychological depth in dealing with day to day pressures in the slave world.

This lightness is also a criticism of Carol Emshwiller. Both played with their material instead of examining the subordination of women in a world of domination (Orwell, after all, found animals a good enough vehicle for his Marxist examination of power). I have emphasized the literary references because they indicate the failure of these books beside comparable ones. The only domination they have shown us is how such power an author has over a fictional world.

**STROKES** - John Clute  
(Serconia Press, 1988, 178pp, \$16.95)  
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS COLLECTION OF "Essays and Reviews 1966-1986", is that it gives us, in permanent form, the work of one of the finest critics that science fiction has yet produced.

The measure of Clute's impact lies not just in the breadth of his reading outside the genre, though he can handy names like Faulkner, Nabokov and Genet with utter assurance, and in so doing provide a literary context for science

fiction; it is rather the depth of his reading in science fiction, a thorough knowledge of all that has gone to make the genre, and the sort of card-index mind that can produce hidden connections and flourish as a result an often astounding appreciation of just what science fiction is. The literature, frequently dismissed or over-inflated by other critics depending on their whim, is as a result clarified and vivified. He has the patience and the obsession to burrow deep into a book and tease out, by means that appear obvious when he describes them, such snippets of vital information as the identity of Severian's mother in Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, and by so doing he enriches our appreciation and enjoyment of the books under his spotlight.

Yet it seems increasingly unfair to assess Clute merely (as if "merely" were at all an appropriate word in the circumstances) as a critic. He is a creative writer of great power and subtlety, though the fruit of his creativity tends to take the form of book reviews. The language he deploys has a rhythm and clarity that casts the mind back to some impressive literary forebears, though he can say of himself:

As a reviewer of sf... I've been accused of pedantry, bias, logorrhea, bile, sophomoric obscurity, and some other things. These accusations are accurate. They have the ring of truth. They can be sustained by chapter and verse.

Which also illustrates something of the quality of the writing.

Among other things it displays the humour in his work. Clute has a reputation as a difficult writer. It is not unearned. He writes with a density it is often hard to unravel. He writes with a familiarity with his texts that often demands the same familiarity from his readers in order to pry all the juices from his commentary. He writes with a vocabulary that only a minute acquaintance with the complete Oxford English Dictionary could hope to translate (and he is not helped in this by some atrocious proof reading on the part of Serconia). All of these faults - and they are faults for they have the effect of distancing his readers from what he is saying - are



on display right through this very welcome collection, but that should not disguise one considerable virtue which is often overlooked. He can be extraordinarily funny. His demolition of a novel by Poul Anderson and Gordon Eklund, for instance, was cruel, accurate, backed by chapter and verse, and had me laughing helplessly out loud. How many critics can do that?

**THE THORN KEY** - Louise Cooper  
(Orchard, 1988, 163pp, £7.95)  
**TRANSFORMATIONS** - Ann Halam  
(Orchard, 1988, 223pp, £7.95)  
**THE HIDDEN ONES** - Gwyneth Jones  
(Women's Press, 1988, 181pp, £3.50)  
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

IT IS ALL TOO EASY FOR THE IGNORANT to dismiss fiction for teenagers as "kids stuff", and admittedly, there is some appalling writing being fobbed off on a theoretically undiscerning audience. Yet there is also some fine work being done for a younger audience, which an adult reader should find equally absorbing.

Orchard Books unwittingly provides an opportunity to appreciate the best and the worst of the field. Louise Cooper is well known to many as a writer of highly successful fantasy trilogies, and not surprisingly, in *The Thorn Key*, she has chosen a fantastic theme, inevitably drawing on Celtic mythology. The basic concept - a person snatched away by a supernatural force - is reasonably interesting, but the execution is poor. The writing is flaccid, the words convey nothing of the drama and danger of the situation, and the plot quickly descends into sticky sentimentality, not helped by all the horse-and-stable sequences which seem aimed at a tangential market. Helen's rescue from the King of the Dead is miserably perfunctory, and the "happy" ending is positively twee.

It is a relief to turn from this black and white view of good and evil to more uncertain ground. I was not entirely overwhelmed by *The Daymakers*, but Gwyneth Jones, writing as Ann Halam, is right back on form with its sequel, *Transformations*. Zanne is once more travelling in search of relics of the technological past, and this time encounters a puritan community, with a secret to hide. One is confronted with fascinating debates on the nature of belief, and its interpretation and effect, not to mention a frightening warning about the dangers of pollution, which is nowhere near as moralistic as I might have made it sound. The ultimate confrontation between Zanne and the community is complex, and far removed from the naive denouement of *The Thorn Key*. Even as the book closes, another challenge is being thrown down, and I await further developments with interest.

This gritty, uncompromising style is carried through to *The Hidden Ones*, written under Jones' own name, and set

in our own time and place. Although possible elements of the supernatural pervade the entire novel, one is never entirely certain whether Adela, the central character, has truly awoken a mysterious power or whether she is the wildest drop-out that others believe her to be. In many ways this story is the total antithesis of *The Thorn Key*: The main character is thoroughly dislikeable, and the entire story is hedged with ambiguities and uncertainty, but it works all the better for the action being hinted at, sketched in rather than being firmly and unequivocally spelt out. I know which I prefer - mental roughage is always preferable to lightweight pap.

**DEMON LORD OF KARANDA** - David Eddings  
(Bantam, 1988, 378pp, £11.95)  
**LAST SWORD OF POWER** - David Gemzell  
(Legend, 1988, 275pp, £11.95 hardback,  
£6.95 paperback)  
Reviewed by Sus Thomason

TWO FANTASIES, TWO CERTAIN SELLERS both sited at a reading public that knows what it likes and wants more of the same. *Demon Lord of Karanda* is the third in the 5-book *McIlveran* series, itself a sequel to the 5-book *Reiger* (ad We Join (and leave) the Good Guys in mid-stage); the major Plot Token, a prophecy about the confrontation of the Child of Light and the Child of Dark, is obviously due to be cashed in about five pages before the end of the final book. Meanwhile, the alarms and excursions are competently written (though incomprehensible to someone who hasn't read at least some of the previous books). *Demon Lord* is recommended as a pleasant and harmless read for anyone who can relate to a bunch of down-home, ordinary, 7,000-year-old magic-wielders whose blue-eyed boy hero says things like "I can relate to that".



*Last Sword of Power* is not as good. It's an Arthur-mythos fantasy which suffers from a bad outbreak of mixed mythologies which were presumably introduced to invoke a universal significance but which only succeed in muddying the mythic certainties. Celtic gods and heroes, their identities blurring into each other, are revealed as superbeings from Atlantis. Most of the "Arthur myths" happen in more or less recognisable form to King Other

Pendragon. The younger Ursus (also called Galead) is descended from Merovee, the Sacred King of France (remember *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*). Gulein lach Feragh (ie. Cuchulainn?) is also Lancelot, and an Atlantean magician. Post-Roman Britain (whose fauns include rabbits and peckrats) is under attack by a horde of Goths led by Kotan, "an undead god from the vaults of pre-history", aka another Atlantean. Gemzell wreaks a creaky but workable plot from this, but loses any real feeling for the numinous, powerful archetypes that lie behind the well-known tales.

The moral is obvious: to write a decent fantasy, work within the constraints of an existing mythology - reinterpret, yes, but don't do a major rewrite of existing patterns and structures - or invent your own.

**ROOFWORLD** - Christopher Fowler  
(Legend, 1988, 344pp, £11.95 hardback,  
£5.95 paperback)  
Reviewed by Paul Brazier

I'VE NEVER READ A HORRIBLE BOOK, BUT the impression I have received - an anarchic society living beneath London and fighting another group which is both organised and evil - is very reminiscent of this book. The only difference is that the setting is on top of London, not underneath it.

Now this setting is excellent. The rooftops of London are strange and romantic. I looked forward to this story with bated breath; after all, Keith Roberts' *Kiteworld* is a wonderful book, and it has a daft name too. However, the plot has all the originality one would expect from the following list of stock characters: clever police detective; his consort, nearly as clever female police sergeant; weak good leader; powerful evil leader; mindless followers, evil; intelligent followers, good, but with social problems; hapless and incompetent hero; dashing clever heroine; incompetent uniformed policeman. In fact the powerful evil leader is such a frankensteinian monster I was able to identify some of the bits he had been cobbled together from.

There is some good writing here; but when I am left wondering what a book is for, I am sure of this: it hasn't succeeded. The lack of a definite plot direction is the chief failing. This is undoubtedly a supernatural story, but in large chunks of the book the writer gets so interested in the mechanics of zipping from roof to roof, or graphic violence, that the sense of the supernatural disappears.

Happily, towards the end, the violence is abandoned for comic narrative. The two incompetent policemen engage in a routine which would have done Laurel and Hardy credit.

But, finally, the book falls simply because this good stuff is thrown in willy-nilly with a lot of dross. There

is probably the potential for one good book and several pot boilers, should the author concentrate on any one style. For my money, he should give up novels and write comedy for TV.

**THE FINAL PLANET** - Andrew M. Greeley  
(Legend, 1988, 302pp, £11.95)  
Reviewed by David V. Sarrett

THIS BOOK WAS A GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT to me. I enjoy Fr Greeley's many novels about Chicago Catholic priests and their crises of conscience when they fall in love with their childhood sweethearts; his retelling of the Irish version of the Arthur myth, *The Magic Cup* was beautifully touching; and his previous SF work, *God Game*, while riddled with Greeleyisms, was great fun.

But *The Final Planet* is sheer, unadulterated bludge, hack SF of the worst sort - and I actually paid good money for the US p/b before the UK review copy arrived.

In a sentence (as much as it's worth) Sesam O'Neill, a second-rate bard looking for true love, is sent down to the planet Zylong from his interstellar pilgrim ship *Iona*, travelling home of the Holy Order of St Brigit and St Brendan, to smoothtalk the Zylongi into inviting *Iona* to land; he gets highly involved in local politics, is nearly killed several times, falls head over heels with every female Zylongi he meets, thinks interminably about undressing beautiful women, blarneys in cod Irish, and ...

Does he survive? Does he find true love? Does *Iona* land? Do the aliens become Chicago Irish Catholics? Who cares?

Gods, it's too bad even to be a decent spoof. And the greatest shame is, Greeley is a damn good writer at his best (probably *Virgin and Martyr*), and he's going to be judged by SF readers on the basis of this drivel.

**RETURN TO EDEN** - Harry Harrison  
(Grafton, 1988, 400pp, £12.95)  
Reviewed by Neale Vickery

THIS IS THE THIRD VOLUME OF HARRISON'S *West of Eden* trilogy, and takes the series to an apparently final conclusion. If you have read the two previous volumes you may find this book intelligible, even enjoyable. If you have read neither, it is rather hard going.

Harrison has created an alternative Earth built upon two basic ideas: dinosaurs did not die out and their saurian descendants, the Yilané, have evolved to inherit the Earth; and the Yilané developed a technology based on biology rather than mechanics. Around these propositions Harrison has constructed his imaginary world with the familiar paraphernalia of invented languages, alternative biology and original philosophy. The book comes complete with glossary, dictionary and

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excerpts from a Yilané encyclopedia britannica. But to create a world, however imaginative, is a sterile exercise unless you do something positive with it. Unfortunately, Harrison doesn't even tell a particularly good story.

He is at his best dealing with the Yilané characters, particularly Ambalasi and the Daughters of Life, a kind of saurian pacifist movement. He manages to inject a real sense of peculiar reptilian vitality into the Yilané and a feeling that their behaviour and actions spring inevitably from their physiological peculiarities.

His suppressed humans, the Tenu, are mere stereotypes by comparison. The characters are cardboard cut-outs and sexual stereotypes of the worst kind, the men all macho hunters; the women fiercely protective homemakers who defer to their hunter husbands. It is lazy writing.

As you would expect from such an experienced storyteller, Harrison contrives a grand finale, drawing the disparate strands of the story into one final dramatic scene. But the plot seems forced, the devices employed just too artificial, and there is one glaring error in the plotting which leaves the Yilané city of Alpeasak preparing an attack on the Tenu which unexplainedly never materialises.

Thankfully, *return to Eden* seems to leave limited opportunity for a further volume, but then again Harrison has an eye for the commercially lucrative series. What price *The Stainless Steel Rat in Eden?*



THE ASCENSION FACTOR - Frank Herbert & Bill Ransoa  
Gollancz, 1988, 381pp, £12.95  
Reviewed by Keith Freeman

THIS IS THE LAST VOLUME OF A TRILOGY. If you have read *The Jesus Incident* and/or *The Lazarus Effect* you will not need this review, but the authors are

to be congratulated that the reader doesn't need to.

The story is set on Pandorra, a water world with two moons (hence tides, weather and volcanic disturbances are all exaggerated), some relatively newly exposed land and a sentient 'kelp'. A dictator, Flatery, one of the few survivors of a "void ship" from Earth, is ensconced on the largest land mass, starving refugees from the floating islands (previously roaming the oceans), keeping his population subservient with "security forces" and building, in low orbit, a replacement void ship to escape Pandorra's catastrophic end. The humans who originally settled Pandorra have evolved with many mutations appearing in the population, and the main plot revolves around Crista Gall, found after living in symbiosis with the kelp for 22 years. Her humanness is questioned and the opposition "Shadow" who rescue her from the dictator's prison must beware her poisonous secretions - a very unusual heroine.

The action unfolds as seen by many characters, each chapter being a change of viewpoint - a very unsatisfactory method. In some long chapters (others are very short) one gets involved with the characters and the building climax then, suddenly, one is thrust into another portion of the story. Most of these segments advance the basic storyline, though others are there only to set the scene and thus slow the action.

When the strands of plot reach a congruence the "kelp" almost take over and what should be the culmination of the book seems rather a let down with the human (Pandoran) actions being almost inconsequential. I would not recommend this book except to those who've read the previous volumes.

KAIROS - Gwyneth Jones  
(Unwin, 1988, 260pp, £12.95)  
Reviewed by K.V. Bailey & David V. Barrett

IN HER FOLLYOON GOH SPEECH GWYNETH Jones offered an exasperated counter to the mainstream inquisitor's "Why Science Fiction?" gambit - "You see, I'm into sub-atomic bondage." In a *Foundation* review she has recently written of the "vogue for 'borrowing' today's urban tribes to populate the twenty first century". This she herself does effectively in *Kairos* for, in various guises, currently familiar protest factions, pseudo-religious/scientific groupings, and crypto-fascist formations loom monstrously over the progressively deteriorating landscapes of London, Birmingham and Brighton. Then, as reality blurs critically, that "sub-atomic bondage" riposte assumes special significance, given the kind of subtly witty punning at which she is adept. Just as energy is released in the chemical breaking of atomic bonding, so when the drug *Kairos* dismantles the mind, infects it at the inter-

face between the brain's electronics and individual awareness "down where everything turns into everything else" (as one of the drug's "angelic" acolytes puts it), then "consciousness expands over whoever is around you".

Although the narrative allows a scientist's sceptical dismissal of "a load of old psycho-physics" (thus encapsulating a pervasive auctorial ambivalence), *Kairos*, real or not, semantic metaphor or world-disrupter, is central to the action. This involves a young boy's journey through the barren lands to rescue his kidnapped and vivisection-threatened terrier bitch from the *Kairos* militia. They are holding her hostage to regain a black tube, the minuscule massive supply of this drug which the boy has in his possession. His name is Candide (!) and he appears to be at once too knowing and too innocent to be much affected by *Kairos*'s osmotic diffusion. Not so his companion and surrogate mother, the delicately pretty dropped-out girl Sandy; nor his actual mother, her discarded lover, the tough activist Otto; nor, indeed, any of that company of old campus chums, black, gay, left, right or fascist. They are all victim-actors in the post-catastrophe situation - the catastrophe being the expansion of this eponymous neuro-bomb, everywhere annihilating "the difference" (*différence/différance*) between Logos, the creatively determined word, and the Heraclitean flux, manifest in the cellular flux and ultimately in the indeterminate play of kaons and quarks.

Whether Ms Jones is pursuing these themes through a misty subjective drizzle of hallucinatory and surrealist images - libidinal, scatological, masochistic, orgasmic, ecstatic - or whether she uses such images to hallmark an objectively envisaged socio-political future, she continually excites with her interlinking and allusive motifs and her descriptive flair. ("Two red spires lifted out of a helix of flyovers" is 21st century Coventry.) The recurrent symbolism of Hopkins's "Windhover", the naming and depicting of Underhill, that elusive "desired Eden"; the subliminally sustained sepulchral/eschatological implications of the Melbourne Tomb in St Paul's (first introduced on the dust jacket); the constant reverberation of Carrollian, Joycean, Dantean, echoes; certain slyly or shyly emergent ghosts from *The Jungle Book* and *The Wind in the Willows*; all of these both adorn and shape a sophisticated fantasia concerned in essence with the strange and estranging experience of being human - and that particularly in "interesting times". (KVB)

THOUGH I'M AWARE THAT OPINIONS DIFFER on her first two novels, there is no doubt that *Kairos* is Gwyneth Jones's most readable adult novel. Having said that, it's still badly flawed.

Rules of writing can be broken if done effectively. One of the basic

rules is not to change viewpoint during a scene: this happens over and again, to no great effect except confusion and loss of character identification and belief - which is exactly why we are told not to do it.

GWYNETH JONES



KAIROS

The book is emotionally cold; we are told that the protagonists have emotions, but we never feel them. This is a particular loss in a book which deals so much with relationships - between the lesbian main characters Otto and Sandy, between Otto and her son Candide, Otto and the gay black James, Sandy and Candide, and several other permutations.

They also have an unpleasant preoccupation with bodily functions, with the less-than-glorious aspects of being human:

"I've always hated being a woman," said Sandy, "menstruation babies weak body inferior mind, ... But I wouldn't like to be a man either. Shaving every day and walking around with that horrible jelly pouch wobbling between your legs all the time, and the shit-sears on their underpants - yes, including yours, Cand. Girls never do that."

Don't they? I don't particularly want to know anyway. There's no beauty or love or trust in these relationships; only a cold bitterness, awkwardness and dissatisfaction.

Right: we've got lesbians, gay men, a black, a lesbian with a child ... what else? There's the sexual politics of all this, and the racial politics; there's the national and international politics of the turn of the century; there's a dangerous right wing pseudo-religion; there's the effects of a reality-changing drug ...

Jones is trying to cover far too much ground in this novel. She's fighting on too many ideologically sound fronts at the same time.

She's also borrowed too much from other authors, without any attribution. The Kairos drug could easily be called Can-D or Chew-Z; there are situations taken directly from C.S. Lewis's *Narnia*; and there are not just attributes of characters, but a scene paraphrased from David Benedictus's *This Animal is*

*Mischievous*. There are other examples which seem very familiar, but which I can't pin down. For an author to include literary references in a novel is fine; but this is maybe overstepping the mark.

And all this is a shame, because whatever its faults, *Kairos* is an interesting novel which asks a lot of questions about interpersonal relationships, personal responsibility, the nature of reality, and both an individual's and society's perception of it. (DVB)

**ABANDONATI** - Garry Kilworth  
(Unwin, 1988, 162pp, £12.95)  
Reviewed by Barbara Davies & Jim England

**ABANDONATI: "THE UNWANTED, USELESS ones, cast away and forgotten"**

The time is unspecified, the near future perhaps; the place, a broken city of "crumbling buildings, stagnant canals and pitted roads". There is no electricity, gas or piped water; no wealthy people, only scavengers making their way the best they can. One such is our anti-hero, Guppy, an alcoholic who has visions of the way things were or might be.

One day, Guppy wakes from his hangover and decides that there must be more to life. He walks out of the city to discover where the wealthy have gone:

all the rich people must have left ... taking their possessions with them ... not a thought for those that remain behind.

On the way he teams up with the gentle black giant, Trader, with his cache of tinned food, and the skinny electronics genius, Rupert. Narrow escapes from cannibals and other dangers face this ill-assorted trio as they travel to the airport so Rupert can attempt to build a space ship to reach the planet of the wealthy.

In fact, there seem to be several choices of destination for the rich: a multicoloured planet, a bunker 300 ft underground. Kilworth never spells out the actual answer, merely giving a tantalising glimpse of each, but are they merely Guppy's imagination? Either way, the escapees show absolute concern about those left behind. The story does not suffer from this lack of clarity as the city is complete in itself; perhaps it has always existed in its own limbo.

*Abandonati* is primarily an exercise in dilapidation and decay; it shows us graphically what the hungry and homeless suffer, disease and discomfort in abundance. The three main protagonists are detailed though slightly caricatured, but they work within the plot's limitations. The style is clear and concise though the altered (cannibalised?) nursery rhymes become rather repetitive.

The blurb says that *Abandonati* is "a funny and moving fable ... a haunting reminder of a need for social

responsibility and humanity in a world that is swiftly losing both." Well, I don't think that it is quite that portentous, just an interesting and rather depressing book. (BD)

IT IS AN INTERESTING QUESTION WHETHER a novel written largely from the viewpoint of a stupid character can be good. I think it can; Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* comes to mind. The important word is "largely", because obviously the viewpoint of the author will be a vital, added ingredient. In all such novels there will be two opposing tendencies: (a) for the author to adopt in his narrative the character's apparent mental habits, (b) for the author to appear to look down on the character from a great height. Both can be seen at work in *Abandonati*.

Guppy, a homeless alcoholic, apparently suffering from loss of memory, decides one morning to find out where all the rich people have gone from the nameless city in which he lives. He embarks on an epic journey to the outskirts, in the course of which he meets Trader ("A large black man", whose character is never really developed), Rupert (of whom it is said humorously "There was nothing of his worth mentioning to anyone interested in physical fitness") and a small number of minor characters who share Guppy's ignorance to the end.

The people of the city, it seems, dine primarily on rats, cats and dogs which (it must be assumed) dine primarily upon human beings and each other. (There are also some human cannibals.) But we are not to see this as a grim scenario of the future. It is, according to the blurb, "a funny and moving fable". Art is imitating art (rather than real life). Horror is not stressed. Each chapter is prefaced by a little rhyme, for example:

Woe Willie Winkle  
Crawls through the town  
Drinking scummy water  
To wash the 'roaches down



The tendency to patronise is shown in such sentences as "Guppy was desperately impressed" and by Rupert being frequently referred to as "the little man". (Of course, he is little: a memorable character obsessed with showing his "manhood", brilliantly caricatured.) The characters are portrayed blandly as speaking a kind of transatlantic English abounding in double

## BOOKS

negatives. Guppy has banal introspections. The prose is flat. A street cleaning robot is an implausible concession to science fictionality.

It is an easy read. The ending - in which Guppy heads off to resume life as an alcoholic - is good, if unlightening. It is one that only Garry Kilworth could have written. He is a writer good at endings.

**AN ALIEN LIGHT** - Nancy Kress  
(Legend, 1988, 370pp, £12.95 hardback, £6.95 paperback)  
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

THE GED ARE A THREE-EYED HOMINID RACE of methane breathers who have evolved very, very slowly by means of co-operation (?). They are appalled and endangered by the spread through the universe of intensely competitive humankind (did someone say "wolfing"?). By happy happenstance the Ged stumble across two isolated communities of humans, marooned by the destruction of their generation ship elsewhere on the planet. For some unrevealed reason these communities have an uncanny resemblance to Athens and Sparta and the Ged decide to conduct an experiment with them to resolve the Central Paradox - how come such a mutually inimical species as humankind has got so far when it takes even more pleasure in warring within itself than with the Ged?

Stripped to its constituents, an *Alien Light* leaves a lot to be desired. We are never told why the two communities establish themselves as they do - apart from plot convenience. Ms Kress's female warriors (of course, these days) are just as brutal, brutish and macho as any SAS thug, but we might wonder why armies of such limited human resources use execution as a means of routine discipline. Mind you, if the humans are woodpeckers, the Ged are exceptionally stupid for star trekkers - why should they ever assume this is a typical human arrangement? The plot is very pat and just so - nothing came as a surprise to me and I doubt it would surprise any regular SF reader.

HOWEVER - and it is a capital letter however - the whole is a good deal more than the sum of the parts. This reader at least was drawn into a suspension of stern disbelief as the story swept along - it is easier to read than many "better" stories. Then there are some quite delightful touches - for instance, under Ged tutelage the humans learn to make acid cells (among other things) and there is a tangible thrill of discovery in the writing. The characters may be clichés but Ms Kress obviously feels for them and this comes over very strongly in the writing.

In many ways this is an unoriginal piece, well within the mainstream of the school of "American female fantasy" which I find depressing because

of its lack of intellectual rigour. On the other hand I just had to read it through to the end. You pays your money and you takes your choice.



**EMPRISE** - Michael P. Kube-McDowell  
(Legend, 1988, 304pp, £3.50)  
**ENIGMA** - Michael P. Kube-McDowell  
(Legend, 1988, 355pp, £2.99)  
**EMERY** - Michael P. Kube-McDowell  
(Legend, 1988, 325pp, £3.50)  
Reviewed by John Fairry

THE BOOKS THAT COMPRISE THIS TRILOGY are Kube-McDowell's first novels. Though each volume concludes with a loose end that begs for resolution, it was obviously not planned as a trilogy, a positive strength as each book stands on its own, and in particular the middle volume is not just padding to turn two volumes into three.

They cover a period from the first development of interstellar travel, through the second contact with aliens, to the resolution of the first contact with aliens. The first novel deals with the formation of a supranational organization which combines features of a private company and a political empire, hence *Emprise*. The second, set a number of years later, involves the search for an answer to the question of why various planets already have human colonies when they are discovered. On the way we get: a new star drive, first contact with colonies, implications of time-dilation, "second" contact with aliens, obsession, rites of passage, etc - all in all a full novel. The final book resolves the questions raised and developed in the first two, while at the same time introducing enough new elements to maintain interest in the story for its own sake.

Considered as a whole, the trilogy shows the progression of man into space and the impact of various discoveries on society. The key word is "progression", with each stage following naturally from the previous one, and resulting in radical modification of mankind's world view.

Kube-McDowell successfully blends sociological trends, political manoeuvring and individual adventure to provide entertaining and believable books. Much of the pleasure they give stems from the juxtaposition of individual motivation with the needs of society, the whole placed in the context of an enjoyable story. The main characters are well rounded, in a literary as opposed to psychological sense, but

then "normal" people do not usually make for interesting reading. The problems they face have both personal and societal implications. The former develop the characters and the latter the plot. The integration of the two is complete and unforced throughout.

Though reminiscent of Heinlein and Haldeman, among others, Kube-McDowell is not derivative. There is a vitality to his work that doesn't depend on slick images and plot devices, but convincing characters behaving in a consistent way under extraordinary circumstances. He has heroes, but made of flesh and blood, with motivations we can all understand.

This trilogy is not classic fiction but it is a pleasure to find an author who can entertain with a consistent and absorbing story, the occasional innovative idea and strong characters.

**THE WHITE RAVEN** - Diana L. Paxson  
(NEL, 1988, 414pp, £12.95)  
Reviewed by Jessica Yates

IN THE TRADITION OF ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF, Mary Stewart and many others who have retold Celtic legends as historical novels, combining current knowledge of the period with speculative details of the Old Religion, here is another "White Goddess" epic. With relief I discovered that it's not another Arthurian saga, but deals with the Tristan legend which, apart from Sutcliffe's children's book, *Tristan and Isolt*, has not recently been novelised.

Diana Paxson tells the tale from the viewpoint of Branwen, the "White Raven", Esselitte's companion in legend and Wagner's opera. This makes sense: once we are asked to see Branwen and Esselitte as real people not legendary lovers, their obsession would become tiresome and the author (and reader) would grow weary recounting every sexual bout and trying to differentiate them. If Drustan or Esselitte had been the narrator or central figure.

Ms Paxson has done good research, on the historical facts of 6th century Ireland, Cornwall and Brittany, and on the dragon-power and ley lines of the Old Religion, working in reconstructions of Samhain, Beltane, Harvest and other festivals at appropriate points. The plot is basically that of the medieval legend, significantly altered so that Drustan is Marc'h's unacknowledged son passing as the son of Marc'h's brother in law. The love-potion is not a magical draught but an aphrodisiac.

To conceal Esselitte's lost virginity, Branwen agrees to substitute on the wedding night. However, Marc'h insists they spend it within a stone circle, and after a glorious sexual initiation (Ms Paxson rises to the occasion!) Branwen must hide her love for Marc'h, and the knowledge that she is the true queen of the land, having undergone the sacred marriage of the Old Religion.

The only flaws in this satisfying

Celtic fantasy are Ms Paxson's occasional stylistic lapses: Americanisms like "ended up", "traded blows", "trade sour glances", and wooden latinized phrasing:

Even King Diarmait's stern features were marked by the aftermath of action, and I realised that perhaps his justice was not as effortless as it appeared.

No-one has beaten Mary Renault as far as style goes in this genre.

#### STARFIRE - Paul Preuss

(Simon & Schuster, 1988, 310pp, £11.95)  
Reviewed by Michael Fearn

THE AUTHOR IS HONEST ENOUGH TO ADMIT in his afterword that this book was originally conceived as the scenario for a film. This probably accounts for a slow start and very lumbering exposition in terms of character development. It is regrettable, because it detracts from what is otherwise a highly readable and enjoyable book. Too many people can say, with some justification, that many characters in SF are not developed so fully as those in mainstream literature.

It has everything, I am assured by someone who actually *understands* nuclear fusion (that the science is correct (engineering drawings are supplied) and is either possible now, or shortly will be. There is credible hardware, human interest (albeit handled in a slightly clumsy way) and incidents of derring-do which even Dan would not dare.



Travis Hill is a former NASA astronaut who returned to Earth from a mission in which a docking manoeuvre went awry. Hailed as a hero but rusticated by the agency as a liability, he becomes head of a small research unit specialising in the geology of asteroids. When an unknown asteroid enters the solar system, the lure for Travis is irresistible. With the help of his uncle the senator, he manages to persuade NASA to investigate it by changing their plans for the first mission of the revolutionary fusion-powered *Starfire*. The crises which ensue, as the mission encounters problems, are resolved in a way which is both scientifically adventurous and feasible.

One highly welcome feature is that the two female characters in the crew play pivotal, scientific roles: the female commander is a more rounded creation than the main character.

The book has very much the "corporate" feel of those written in the days when space exploration was still a new, literary theme and certainly recalls Clarke, although without the same quality of execution. It has been

a long time since I really enjoyed a fairly hard science novel: I am delighted to see that new work in this area can still be written which ought to titillate the most jaded palate.

#### THE PENGUIN BOOK OF VAMPIRE STORIES -

Alan Ryan (Ed)  
(Penguin, 1988, 621pp, £4.95)  
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

I'VE NEVER CONSIDERED VAMPIRES TO BE sympathetic creatures. Of the entire pantheon of mythical creatures, I dislike them most, and in the normal run of things, would probably never have considered reading this collection. But a reviewer's obligation, plus a burgeoning interest in Gothic fiction prompted me to finally bite the (silver) bullet, and much to my surprise, I found this book to be compulsive reading - mind you, one of the notable features of vampires appears to be their hypnotic effect on victims.

Alan Ryan has attempted, in this collection, to provide an historical survey of the vampire in fiction, with stories spanning two centuries. He begins with Byron's fragment of story, written at the same time as Mary Shelley was writing *Frankenstein*, and complemented by the story which Dr John Polidori, Byron's physician, based on that fragment, all some fifty years before Bram Stoker arrived on the scene. The 19th century is skilfully represented by Rymer's "Varney the Vampire", LeFanu's excellent "Carrille", plus the obligatory episode from Bram Stoker, but once into the 20th century, the famous names come thick and fast, and the quality of writing is consistently high. Robert Ackman, E.F. Benson, F. Marion Crawford, Derleth, Clark Ashton Smith, M.E. James, - they're all here and more.

Perhaps the most interesting thing to me, as a previously prejudiced reader, is the discovery that vampire fiction does not necessarily require lavish descriptions of blood and gore, although they do occasionally appear. Conversely, many modern authors are extraordinarily sympathetic towards the plight of the vampire, a feeling best expressed in Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's "Cabin 33", and it is also recognised that vampirism comes in many forms, not necessarily sucking blood, as illustrated in Algernon Blackwood's "The Transfer", and Fritz Leiber's "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes". And vampires can be comical, too. R. Chetwynd-Hayes' wonderful North Country vampires in "The Werewolf and the Vampire" were splendid.

In addition, Ryan has provided brief introductory notes to each story and also a list of contemporary vampire novels and relevant film. I would have liked to see a list of useful reference works for further reading on the phenomenon, but this is a minor quibble. On the whole, I found this collection to be extremely satisfying,

and declare myself converted to the idea of vampire fiction, even if I still have no intention of sitting up for the late film.

#### THE JAGUAR HUNTER - Lucius Shepard

(Kerosina, 1988, 429pp, £13.95, Collector's edition £40)  
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

THIS BOOK HAS ALREADY COLLECTED WELL deserved awards and is one you may already have read, or intended but not yet got around to reading. Do get round to it, even if short story collections are not your favourite format - this one is worth breaking your own rules for. The stories range from the almost factual to pure fantasy, with sometimes an understated, hackle-raising horror which leaves a chill after the book has been put down.

Some stories form natural groups. "The Jaguar Hunter" and "Solitario's Eyes" take place among the South American Patuca tribe where magic exists and can play significant and cataclysmic parts in the lives of individuals. "Black Coral" and "A Traveler's Tale" are located on the Caribbean island of Guanajo Menor, where life is not as passive and uneventful as it first appears. "Salvador", "Mengele" and "Delta Sly Honey" bring the nightmare effects of war on people into close and painful focus.

It is impossible to describe or attempt to evaluate these stories in a short review, and to hint at the plots would spoil their impact. What they have in common is instant depth. In the first few lines of each story you are *in* the place, with the characters, with no effort of imagination, so that the gigantic Dragon Grailua becomes believable, in fact you wish him to be more real than the terrifying protagonist of "Salvador" whose insanity is a product of our insanity.

Michael Bishop, in the introduction, cites "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Grailua" as his favourite story. I have difficulty being so decisive but I am most intrigued by "The Spanish Lesson". How much (if any) of it is true, how much (if any) has that Lucius to do with the author, how much (if any) of the moral at the end is heartfelt? Whether the world is as close to ruin as suggested in "Mengele", whether America is as degenerate as in "The End of Life as we Know it" are just some of the questions posed in this uncomfortable, perceptive, quite beautifully written book.

THE EMPIRE OF FEAR - Brian Stableford  
(Simon & Schuster, 1988, 390pp, £11.95)  
Reviewed by Tom A. Jones

I THINK ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES ARE THE epitome of the "what if" story. This novel takes the premise that vampires exist and rule most of Europe and

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Asia. These vampires are not supernatural (although many ordinary people obviously think they are), but they are long lived, immune to pain and have amazing recuperative powers (it's very difficult to kill a vampire), and they have to drink the blood of ordinary people (although this doesn't harm them).

It is easy to see why vampires could become the aristocrats; and they can turn ordinary mortals into vampires, a gift which inspires loyalty of a kind. The process of making a vampire is kept secret but many rumours abound, mainly linking it to some form of sexually orientated rite.

The story starts in 17th century London. Richard the Lionheart rules. The court mechanician, Edmund Cordery, is a member of the Invisible College, a secret society dedicated to overthrowing the vampires' rule. He has built a microscope in his attempts to discover the difference between vampire and ordinary man, and also devises a way to kill vampires. Interwoven with this is the story of Edmund and the vampire Lady Carrilla; they were lovers when Edmund was young and perhaps some vestige of that love remains.

The sexual overtones of vampirism are well recognised. In this society they are explicit: many vampire Ladies take young mortals as lovers. Edmund finds a way to kill vampires but is the ultimate loser.

In the second part, Edmund's son, Noell, flees from the Benedictine monastery at Cardigan, where he has been hiding from the vampires, with his good friend the priest Quintus, and the pirate Langloisse. They end up in Africa, where they journey to Adamavara, reputed to be the birthplace of vampirism. Here Noell learns the secret and returns to Europe to use his discovery. The vampire aristocracy cannot allow this and a vast armada is sent against his base in Malta, jointly

commanded by Richard the Lionheart and Vlad the Impaler.

Innaturally allows characters from many historical ages to be on stage at the same time. A less experienced writer than Stableford could have overplayed this hand and detracted from the true thrust of the story. While such in this history is different, the general trends are the same and many events parallel ours, for example the armada against Malta parallels the Spanish Armada. This imposes a discipline on the story, without it we could have been reading a fantasy rather than an alternative history.

The plot is well controlled and moves along at a reasonable pace. The main characters are well rounded and differentiated and they change - Noell the old man is clearly not the same person as Noell the teenager, but we can see that one has grown from the other. Stableford uses the story to explore many facets of vampirism (apparently endlessly fascinating for us mortals) and man's view of himself. Many of the worst excesses of medieval mankind are in this history instigated by vampires and in this way it is easy to recognise them as monsters.

I liked this novel. It is one of the best new books I've read in 1988. Whether or not it is a great book only the test of time will tell.

THE HEAVENLY HORSE FROM THE OUTERMOST WEST - Mary Stanton (NEL, 1986, 352pp, £6.95)

Reviewed by Valerie Housden.

NOT ONLY DOES THIS BOOK COME WITH THE obligatory endorsement by Orson Scott Card, but the accompanying press release includes fulsome praise from Stephen Donaldson. Oh dear! Is there any hope for this horsey fantasy?

Duchess has obviously been mistreated, when she is brought to join

the herd at Bishop's Farm. However El Arat, the Dreamspeaker, recognises that she is an Appaloosa, who will breed true if mated with an Appaloosa stallion.

The god Dancer, the Rainbow Horse, second only to Equus in the Army of One Hundred and Five, in a last ditch attempt to save his breed, comes down to Earth to mate with Duchess, but in a fit of pride he escapes from the farm with her and another horse, Susie, thus upsetting the Balance and letting loose Anor the Executioner and his Harrier Hounds from Hell. En route to the mountains, the herd gains another mare, Pony, and as winter advances, it becomes clear that all three are in foal. Will they survive winter? Can the Balance be restored without Dancer sacrificing himself? Who sired Pony's foal - Dancer or Anor?

This story of divine redemption, which includes the usual background myths, is told from the point of view of the animals who, at times, seemed like humans with hoofs. While the characters are initially well delineated, their development is not always convincing, particularly that of El Arat from seer to traitor. There is little in this reworking of an old theme that is new and exciting, and I find stories in which characters frequently consult the gods to advance the plot, pretty implausible, even if such consultations appeal to the outsider as: "a black horse standing belly-deep in a duck pond, singing to an indifferent moon."

To her credit Ms Stanton tells the tale well, and the task of reading a novel with which I was so out of sympathy was not a chore. It is sad that, so often, authors with stimulating ideas are so bad at writing whereas those who are good at the craft merely regurgitate the same old worn themes. This book will make a suitable present for a horsey friend.

## THE ARTHUR C CLARKE AWARD

RACHEL POLLACK'S *UNQUENCHABLE FIRE* HAS WON this year's Arthur C Clarke Award for the best SF novel of 1988 - £1000 and an engraved book-shaped trophy. A complex and moving tale of story-telling and myth-creation set in an alternate present-day America where miracles really happen, *Unquenchable Fire* beat Brian Stableford's *The Empire of Fear* into second place; *Rumours of Spring* by Richard Grant came third.

The announcement was made at the Groucho Club in Soho on March 15th. Maxim Jakubowski, chairman of the Judges (who represent the BSFA, the Science Fiction Foundation and the International Science Fiction Foundation), got as far as "The winner is *Wach*" before cheers and applause from the audience of authors, publishers and critics drowned him out.

As we said in V148, 1988 was an extremely good year for SF. Seven books were shortlisted for the award; a further nine were highly commended. In any other year, any of these could have won. The competition was intense, making *Unquenchable Fire* a worthy as well as popular winner.

March was a good month for Pollack, an American living in Amsterdam, who is best known for her books on Tarot; her latest, the beautifully illustrated *The New Tarot: modern variations of ancient images*, came out just two weeks after the Clarke presentation.

Previous Clarke Award winners were: 1988: George Turner *The Sea and Summer*; 1987: Margaret Atwood *The Handmaid's Tale*. • *Unquenchable Fire* will be published by Legend (p/b) on April 20th at £3.99.

