

A bimonthly review of British paperback SF, published by Philip Stephenson-Payne

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As all the books reviewed in PF have been published within the preceding two or three months, it seems ridiculous to continue stating year of publication at the head of each review. From this issue on, therefore, I have replaced it with the date of first publication (as far as I can tell). Comments on the idea are, naturally, welcome. Thanks, as always, go to my co-reviewers, Robin Marcus (RM) and Philippa Grove-Stephenson (Pa), and to Keith Freeman, who does the production.

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THORNS by ROBERT SILVERBERG: NEL: 158pp: 65p: 1967

'Thorns' is a novel about three people. Lona - 17 year old mother of a hundred babies; Minner - altered by alien surgeons into something not quite human; and Chalk - manipulating and torturing them to satisfy his own cravings. It is a novel about humanity and love, about despair and consolation, about the heights and depths of the human soul. It is a story guaranteed to reach you, move you, and leave you a little different, a little humbler, perhaps a little 'better'. It is possibly the best novel Silverberg has ever written. We may not see its like again.

BROTHERS OF EARTH by C.J. CHERRYH: ORBIT: 254pp: 80p: 1977

'Brothers of Earth' is a serious novel which describes an alien but humanoid society in some depth, from the point of view of a human being slowly learning to understand and fit into one of its family groupings. Just as 'Dune' draws on but transcends desert Semitic culture, so this book draws on a Far Eastern tradition for its inspiration, but then delicately alters and extends it to produce a coherent and intriguing world full of mysterious charm. This, the main fabric of the work, is very fine indeed, but the tense drama which Ms Cherryh then weaves through it is scarcely less good - for the advent of the Earthmen catalyses a strained politico-religious situation into a turmoil which ultimately threatens the very existence of a culture all the main characters wish desperately to preserve. Their emotional response - to each other and to the political situation - is described with deft sympathy and great appeal. The timing is meticulous; as the characters' understanding of one another deepens, so the plot quickens and the range of emotions grows. The language has vitality, but is carefully restrained, in keeping with the natural dignity of the society it treats. This is altogether a singularly impressive book. (RM)

TWO-EYES by STUART GORDON: PANTHER: 256pp: 75p: 1974

'One-Eye' climaxed with the meeting of the infant god and the mumen - his ordained followers. 'Two-Eyes' is about the ripples which spread from that meeting. As the second part of a trilogy, 'Two-Eyes' does not stand on its own, but explains and contrasts with the earlier, and presumably the later, books. In this one the society presented is one whose decadence is bright, brittle and over-sophisticated (in contrast to bleak Phaadraig). Restless within an existence she finds pointless Tsecha welcomes, whilst fearing, the change she feels coming. It arrives in her life, in the shape of Liam the songmaker. How their lives are changed, destroyed and ultimately transfigured forms the plot-line. The core of the book is "a war to do with whether or not the Zuni Bird should fly through Miir", and the throbbing rhythms of the Delta where the Zuni Bird and its song, the salvation of Miir, are to be found, pervade the book. 'Two-Eyes' is somewhat deficient in plot; too vaguely tied to its predecessor and rather poor in style. Nevertheless, the book gathers emotional momentum to reach a powerful and compelling climax. Stuart Gordon has conveyed, at least in part, an impressive vision. (Pa)

THE THIRICE-BORN by ANDREW LESTER: NEL: 158pp: 75p: 1976

Hermaphroditic aliens and a xenophilic Terran fight against the narrow-mindedness of humanity. The book has no saving graces.

AGAIN, DANGEROUS VISIONS Vol I ed HARLAN ELLISON: PAN: 450pp: 80p: 1972

AGAIN, DANGEROUS VISIONS Vol II ed HARLAN ELLISON: PAN: 448pp: 80p: 1972

It is five years since these stories first appeared, and several more since some of them were written and sold. In that time the genre has grown and matured, so that now there seems very little 'danger' in most of the stories. Yet, despite the interval, some of them still rank as outstanding. Particularly one is struck by Ursula LeGuin's 'The Word for World is Forest' (Vol I, 96pp), a tender yet intense story of a very alien ecology, and Dick Lupoff's 'With the Bentfin Boomer Boys on Little Old New Alabama' (Vol II, 107pp), a chaotic saga of voodoo and war; each deserves its own review. Shorter, yet just as worthy, are Piers Anthony's sick 'In the Barn' (Vol I), Joanna Russ's superb 'When it Changed' (Vol I) or James Tiptree's tragic 'Milk of Paradise' (Vol II). Each is introduced with Ellison's stylish, moving and revealing introductions, and followed by the authors' afterwords. The only drawback is that, unsurprisingly, the 898pp also contain a large amount of rubbish. Had the volumes been cut to half the size (at the same price) they would have been brilliant - as it is, they are still worth buying, if you can ignore the poor stories.

HIGH-RISE by J.G.BALLARD: PANTHER: 173pp: 60p: 1975

Relentlessly Ballard creeps back to the future with each new novel, while retaining a firm grip on the present. Like 'Lord of the Flies', 'High-Rise' moves inexorably from the commonplace to the horribly fantastic, but here there is no final reprieve. The book has no heroes - just one villain, a 40 story block of flats. Here humanity is encapsulated - its strifes, hates, loves and spites all redrawn in miniature as the rival floors vie for supremacy, and the people revert to savagery. The book is drab yet intense; bleak yet vivid; despairing yet dynamic. After 10 years of searching Ballard has again got into his stride and produced one of his best ever novels.

THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF J.G.BALLARD: ORBIT: 411pp: £1-25: 1957-67

Ballard published his first science fiction story in 1956. Ten years later he had written the first of the pieces, later collected in 'The Atrocity Exhibition', that marked his partial retirement from traditional SF. He had, he felt, exhausted its possibilities. The 17 stories collected here trace part of his remarkable development as a writer during those years. There are many old favourites included, like 'Chronopolis', 'The Garden of Time' and 'The Terminal Beach', as well as several lesser-known pieces such as 'The Waiting Grounds' or 'The Insane Ones'. Sadly lacking, however, are all the 'Vermillion Sands' stories - possibly Ballard's most consistently polished collection - and the post-67 classics like 'The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy ...'. Ballard has contributed a brief foreword, and introductions to all the stories, which make this a worthy book for anyone who does not have the stories already.

SURVIVAL by MARTIN SHERWOOD: NEL: 128pp: 60p: 1975

'Survival' is a first novel, and suffers from most of the standard faults. Clearly Martin Sherwood is trying to convey a strong conviction about life and its meaning, but, through inexperience, his effects are diluted. The characterisation is unconvincing, the plot and setting too nebulous to make a satisfying book. However, it has been thoughtfully planned and carefully executed. Hopefully Martin Sherwood will soon learn to flesh out his writing. (Pa)

THE STRANGE INVADERS by ALUN LLEWELLYN: NEL: 208pp: 80p: 1934

In his introduction, Brian Aldiss recounts his encounter with this book nearly 40 years ago, and admits that 'first impressions count for much'. In this case they have coloured his judgement badly. 'The Strange Invaders' has an imagination and sense of vivid description that must have been rare in SF in the '30s. On the other hand, the plot is almost non-existent, the characters very stereotyped and the writing, in places, turgid. It would have been better left in oblivion.

PERRY RHODAN 22: THE FLEET OF THE SPRINGERS by KURT MAHR: ORBIT: 125pp: 55p: 1973

A very brief continuation, but not conclusion, of the episode begun in No. 21. The quality remains the same.

THE HISTORY OF THE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE: PART 1 1926-1935 by MICHAEL ASHLEY:

NEL: 239pp: £1-50: 1974 (1926-35)

For someone who has only been a fan for 14 years, Mike Ashley certainly knows a lot about his subject. In this first part of his five-volume labour of love, he contributes a meticulously researched and carefully composed 50-page article on the SF mag up to 1935 (the end of the Gernsback era). This is followed by ten stories (one from each year from 1926 to 1935) all nearly forgotten, as are some of the authors, yet still retaining a little of the sparkling innovation of their time. The book is rounded off with a few pages of illustrations and some useful appendices on magazine editors, author checklists and so on. One could quibble at the high price (for a paperback), or the admittedly low standard of the stories, but this is the series on SF magazines for anyone interested in the field.

THE DISPOSSESSED by URSULA LE GUIN: PANTHER: 319pp: 75p: 1974

Arguably this is the finest novel that science fiction has produced. The story is neatly divided between two contrasting worlds; between the years Shevek spends growing up, an undifferentiated unit, on Anarres, and the months he passes on Urras as the greatest physicist alive. Shevek is a passionate observer of the two contrasting societies; too intelligent not to see the flaws in any social system, too caring and articulate not to voice his doubts, he is an outcast in both. Le Guin points the contrasts, and the similarities, by interleaving the 'Anarres' and the 'Urras' parts of Shevek's story, while retaining the tension of both parts and enhancing the unity of the whole. Her style is always careful; her characters and background are all treated with the same meticulous concern. Above all, however, compassion and honesty are the keynotes at this undogmatic look at the ways in which men treat themselves and each other. 'The Dispossessed' is a great novel, whose stature will grow with the years.

THE BEST OF C.M.KORNBLUTH ed FREDERIK POHL:BALLANTINE:338pp:85p:1941-58

Many people are aware of Kornbluth's outstanding collaborations with Fred Pohl (e.g. 'The Space Merchants'), but fewer know how brilliant a short story writer he was on his own. At last, many years overdue, there is a good collection of his stories available in paperback, to remind us of his skill. The book contains many of the classics - the macabre 'Little Black Bag', the depressing 'Marching Morons' and the bleak 'Shark Ship' - as well as several shorter, lighter pieces - 'Gomez', 'The Silly Season' etc. The collection is not perfect - one could have wished for one or two of his 'Cecil Corwin' stories - but it is the best volume of Kornbluth stories yet available.

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD BEGINS by J.T.McINTOSH: CORGI: 205pp: 70p: 1974

A curiously enjoyable book. Ram Burrell and Roberta Murdock take the Starways tourist trip to Earth. Rather than follow the standard tour, though, they both escape from the party to see what Earth is really like. Hidden in Edinburgh, they slowly come to love this old and noble planet, and decide to fight for it against the imminent takeover by Starways. The bulk of the book deals with their fight. Although the plot is rather unoriginal and somewhat patchy in places, the whole emerges as a pleasantly amusing tale. The political manoeuvrings between Burrell and Starways are immensely engaging, and both Ram and Roberta are well drawn characters. This is by no means a great novel, but it is an enjoyable read.

CHARISMA by MICHAEL CONEY: PAN: 220pp: 60p: 1975

After some exceptional writing, one has come to expect a lot from Michael Coney, and by these standards 'Charisma' is a disappointment. John Maine becomes involved with parallel world travel at a research station in Cornwall, when he falls in love with a girl from one of the other worlds. One of the select few who can travel to several parallel worlds (because 'he' is dead in most of them), Maine relives the same few days of his life with slight variations while searching for the girl he loves. Although attempting to dismiss them, Coney falls foul of the paradoxes of such travel, and his attempts to circumvent them are disappointingly unbelievable. The ease with which Maine travels in the other worlds rings false, as does his encounter with a copy of himself. An enjoyable book taken to a neat, if unsatisfying, conclusion - but one could have hoped for more from Mr. Coney.

FADE-OUT by PATRICK TILLEY: SPHERE: 416pp: 95p: 1975

Initially 'Fade-Out' appears to be a careful, gripping novel. First the Earth's magnetic field is distorted by the arrival of an alien spaceship; then the ship lands in Eastern Montana and burrows into the ground, apparently harmlessly. When the 'Fade-Out' starts again and then spreads, the authorities, worried before, become desperate. Tilley has written a novel whose appeal is well-balanced between the SF and the general reader. Both the spaceship and the political scenario (very reminiscent of Allen Drury) are convincingly presented, and a degree of suspense is maintained throughout. Unfortunately both themes have been better handled elsewhere, and the combination produces an over-long novel, whose characterisation is dull and whose pace is just slow enough to be irritating after a while. All the same, it seems horribly plausible. (Pa)

FOURTH MANSIONS by R.A.LAFFERTY: STAR: 252pp: 75p: 1969

Lafferty is unique. His mastery of the bizarre, zany and unexpected make his imitators pale by comparison. As far as it has a theme, this novel has the one that Lafferty has made his own (though many have copied it) of an inhuman society which secretly rules the Earth. His characters are as bizarre as always - Carmody Overlark, who must periodically immerse his head in a bucket of salt water; the two Letitia Bauers, one dead and one alive; or Bagley, the patrick with a plappergeist servant. Lafferty is very much an acquired taste, and the best introduction to his style is really his short stories, but, until they are available in this country, this is as good a place as any to start. Don't forget your oxygen mask.

GATE OF IVREL by C.J.CHERRYH: ORBIT: 191pp: 70p: 1977

This work is a romantic fantasy in the Andre Norton manner, well written and providing a carefully worked out picture of a strange world and its institutions, the whole brooding in the uneasy aftermath of some nasty space-time tampering. The characters are well described and most should engage the reader's sympathy. The work is plainly derivative, but it is an intelligent plundering by a writer fast learning her craft. The result is satisfying and highly readable. (RM)

MERLIN'S GODSON by H.WARNER MUNN: BALLANTINE: 311pp: 80p: 1939/67

A prequel to 'Merlin's Ring', this volume consists of two earlier Munn novels, 'The King of World's Edge' and 'The Ship from Atlantis'. In the first book Ventidius Varro, a Roman centurion in Britain, flees with Myrddin and a band of soldiers, from the marauding Saxons. They cross the Atlantic and join forces with Hayonwatha, several Indian tribes and the Azteca against the Mian Mound-Builders. In the second book Gwalchmai, Ventidius' son, sets out to return to Europe and meets some of the strange remnants of Atlantis. The book is a fairly competent piece of fantasy, but shows its age in places, and will probably only suit real lovers of the subgenre.

THE CROSS OF FRANKENSTEIN by ROBERT J MYERS: SPHERE: 156pp: 65p: 1975

Victor Frankenstein, son of the infamous doctor, is kidnapped and taken to America where his father's monster lurks in the mountains at the head of a religious cult. There he learns of the creature's evil plans for mankind, etc., etc. Despite a pompous foreword, the book is no more faithful to the original than most pastiches have been, and the writing is poorer than many. Sadly there will be sequels, hopefully not many.

THE COMETEERS by JACK WILLIAMSON: SPHERE: 186pp: 65p: 1936

Part 2 of a trilogy that makes Doc Smith look like a literary giant. The characters are hackneyed, the plot stereotyped and the style atrocious. Ignore it and perhaps it'll go away.

SPACE 1999: THE PSYCHOMORPH by MICHAEL BUTTERWORTH: STAR: 156pp: 70p: 1977

Koenig battles the 'Jelly Agents of the Space Field', without a single smile or other human gesture. This 'Stunning New Series' of Space 1999 novels is as bad as the original one - and as worthy of oblivion.

A MIRROR FOR OBSERVERS by EDGAR PANGBORN: STAR: 222pp: 75p: 1954

23 years have passed since this novel won the International Fantasy Award, but age has not dulled it in the slightest. It tells the story of Elmis, one of the Martians living, in seclusion, on Earth, who is an official Observer. He is given the job of watching over a 12-year old prodigy - Angelo Pontevecchio - and of protecting him from the Abdicator Namir, who has resigned as Observer and wishes to destroy the human race. Almost against his will, Elmis finds himself loving Angelo and his ten-year-old girlfriend Sharon, who typify for him all that is good in humanity. Even so he is unable to save them from Namir, through whose agency Angelo flees from home, leaving Elmis with a nine-year search to find him and try to repair the harm. At its barest the plot sounds trite, which is unsurprising as Pangborn's real talent is in drawing his characters and portraying their lives. This is not a book about aliens on Earth, or a quest for a lost boy - it is a study of three kind, loving people supporting each other against the bleak oppression of evil. At one point Elmis remarks - defending the human race to Namir - that if you look for the good in Man, you will find it. It is this element that pervades Pangborn's work - enabling him to see the best in everybody, even Namir, without denying their faults - and which makes 'A Mirror for Observers' possibly his greatest book.

BIG PLANET by JACK VANCE: CORONET: 158pp: 65p: 1952

SHOWBOAT WORLD by JACK VANCE: CORONET: 171pp: 65p: 1975

Big Planet is an enormous world, almost free of metals but otherwise supporting Terran life, to which practically all Earth's eccentrics and misfits have, at some time, emigrated. This ingenious concept should provide an ideal setting for Vance's peculiarly sardonic wit and his flair for the socially bizarre. Sadly 'Big Planet' and 'Showboat World', both set in this gargantuan madhouse, are well below Vance's best, with only occasional passages of mordant farce and hilarious horror hinting at what could be. (RM)

THE MASKS OF TIME by ROBERT SILVERBERG: TANDEM: 252pp: 80p: 1968

It is the turn of the millenium, and mankind is ready for anything - except, possibly, Vornan-19. Making a sudden appearance on the streets of Rome on Christmas Day 1998, he soon captivates the world with his enigmatic presence. Is he really from far in the future, as he claims, or just a clever fraud? Like most intelligent time travellers, Vornan-19 will offer no proof either way. For the book, the truth is irrelevant - it is the effect Vornan-19 creates that is important. Nonchalantly iconoclastic and totally amoral, he acts as foil to the insanity of the world, creature a measure of order and sanity. A free-thinking Messiah, he manages with a few deft words to expose the stupidities of Western Society and morality. The book is pyrotechnic and immensely refreshing, with all the keen-edged satire of Silverberg at his best.

THE QUEEN OF AIR AND DARKNESS AND OTHER STORIES by POUL ANDERSON: NEL: 144pp: 60p: 1961-71

Six of Anderson's fairly recent pieces. The title story, which won both the Hugo and the Nebula, is a mythic tale of the clash between reality and illusion as the colonists on Roland are forced into conflict with the mysterious 'Outlings'. Anderson skillfully captures the fantastic element of the creatures with rhymes and vivid images. The other stories are far less successful, each merely a brief padding around a single 'point'. 'Home' inveighs against civilised man's treatment of natives; 'In the Shadow' plays with an odd scientific theory; and so on. All have been done better elsewhere, some by Anderson himself.

TIME AND AGAIN by CLIFFORD D SIMAK: MAGNUM: 255pp: 75p: 1956

Simak rarely fails to tell a good story, but in this book he rushes heedless through the time paradoxes to make his point. Which seems to be that all things, human, android and alien, are brothers. Asher Sutton declares this philosophy, against opposition, to the Universe, and is rejected by Humanity because of it. His personality comes through the confusion, but his story is not told with the skill we have come to expect of Simak. (Pa)

THE MAN IN THE MAZE by ROBERT SILVERBERG: TANDEM: 192pp: 70p: 1969

On the abandoned planet of Lemnos stands a maze; a maze filled with deadly traps, unknown animals, and one man - Richard Muller. Humanity's first envoy to an alien race, Muller has been altered so that he broadcasts his emotions telepathically. Anathema to the rest of his race, he has fled from human contact and now broods alone on Lemnos, filled with disgust for Man and all his works. But Muller is needed, his unique 'talent' required in Earth's service, and it is up to his old friend Charles Boardman and the innocent, Ned Rawlings, to tempt him from his seclusion. First they must breach his internal and external walls. This book, from Silverberg's best period, is certainly one of his most accomplished, and most bitter, novels. The discussions between Rawlings and Muller lay bare the glory, despair and disgust of being human as Muller, against his will, proves adequately Donne's maxim that 'No Man is an Island'. A bleak, uncompromising book, but one of great power.

THE KING OF ELFLAND'S DAUGHTER by LORD DUNSANY: BALLANTINE: 242pp:90p: 1924

This minor classic is a mood piece where plot and character are wholly subordinate to style and atmosphere. Dunsany deftly, and almost unerringly, treads a path on the very edge of whimsy as he describes, in the images of Faery, the wonder of the world as perceived by the child, the artist, the lover. But their other great aptitude - for totally amoral brutality - is not forgotten. Dunsany describes both the angelic and demonic aspects in similar glittering prose and the result is a pervasive and at times uneasy irony plus a curious sense of remoteness. There is humour too, wry and roisterous by turns, to round off this subtle and delicious fantasy. (RM)

SOUL OF A ROBOT by BARRINGTON J BAYLEY: ORBIT: 206pp: 70p: 1974

Jasperodus is created by a childless couple who want to care for him in place of a son. He, however, walks out minutes after 'birth' and wanders the world in search of adventure and his 'soul'. This latter point, in particular, comes to obsess him, especially as all the authorities seem to be convinced he cannot have one. Without a soul, Jasperodus feels, he has no right to existence and certainly none to the power he wields. Although a little rough in places, the book is surprisingly enjoyable, especially some of the metaphysical interludes. Its sequels will probably become tedious, but this one has made a good start.

SF CHOICE 77 ed MIKE ASHLEY: ORBIT: 137pp: 65p: 1975

This is Mike Ashley's selection of the nine stories published in 1975 that he found 'most entertaining'. In many ways an apt description, for it is an 'entertaining' book. All the stories come from the American SF magazines, mainly 'F&SF' and 'Analog', and present a fairly good portrayal of the better side of magazine fiction. It would be hard to pick the best from the nine, but most memorable are Brian Stableford's 'The Engineer and the Executioner', P.J. Plauger's 'Child of All Ages' and Stephen Robinett's 'The Tax Man'. The volume ends with a brief discussion of SF in 1975 and a list of further recommendations. It is regrettable that the publishers restricted Mike Ashley to such a slim volume, thus forcing out his favourite for the year - the superb 'Storms of Windhaven' by George R R Martin and Lisa Tuttle. Nevertheless the collection is still most enjoyable, particularly if you have not read the stories when they appeared in the magazines.

A PLAGUE OF DEMONS by KEITH LAUMER: CORONET: 159pp: 60p: 1964

A very odd book. Earth has been invaded by alien beings looking, to the few who can see them, like ferocious dogs. They have transformed some human beings into superbeing allies and are kidnapping others for unspecified purposes. Another set of aliens turn John Bravais into a superbeing, and he attempts to defeat the dog-beings singlehanded, only to die in the attempt. Which is where it all really begins. The story edges are rough, and the implausibilities of the plot more than outweigh the slight interest of novelty the book attains by the end.

THE BIRTHGRAVE by TANITH LEE: ORBIT: 408pp: £1-25: 1975

It is particularly difficult to write good large-scale heroic fantasy with the main protagonist a woman; if she is not a near-sexless amazon then the plot tends to be fragmented as a welter of subheroes come and go. Either 'human interest' is lacking, or it takes over to the detriment of momentum. In 'The Birthgrave' Tanith Lee shows that by facing the problems squarely and planning accordingly, they can be overcome. Her solution is to take a dominating plotline (an obsessive quest) and tell it in the first person. This subjective approach allows personal relations to fall naturally into a subordinate episodic pattern so that they point rather than clog the plot. It also allows Miss Lee to present the feminine point of view more in the heroine's thoughts than her actions. All this sets her free to produce a taut, eventful story in the best tradition of the genre. The writing is forceful yet nicely detailed, rising to one or two superb set-piece scenes. There are a few flaws, most notably in the final resolution of the plot, but despite the somewhat disappointing endsection, this is a splendid book. (RM)

DAY OF THE MINOTAUR by THOMAS BURNETT SWANN: MAYFLOWER: 142pp: 50p: 1966

There are many tales of the ancient enemies of mankind - the Centaurs, the Dryads, the Minotaurs etc. - but none before have taken the enemies' point of view. Now Thomas Burnett Swann presents the chronicle, translated from an old scroll found in Knossos, of Eunos the Minotaur, and of 'The Passing of the Beasts'. The story tells of Thea and Icarus, half Minoan and half Beast, who fall foul of the Achaeans. They are thrown into the Cave of the Minotaur, where they find a far more civilised and amusing creature than they had expected. With him they witness the final war between the Beasts and mankind, and its touchingly tragic end. Mr. Swann has again conjured up a marvellous fantasy in his own inimitable style.

MARCHERS OF VALHALLA by ROBERT E HOWARD: SPHERE: 156pp: 65p: 1928-72

Another eight rare Robert E Howard stories, six of which have never appeared in a Howard collection before. The stories range from heroic fantasy to straight horror, and are far from Howard's best fiction. Even so, some of them show imagination and verve far beyond many of his imitators. A book for the collector, certainly, but one he will welcome.

SAVAGE HEROES ed ERIC PENDRAGON: STAR: 190pp: 60p: 1935-75

An undistinguished collection of nine pieces of 'magical fantasy'. There are no stories from the famous heroes of fantasy, like Conan, the Grey Mouser, or even Dray Prescott. Instead we have Jirel, Elak and Rald, as undistinguished as their names. Jim Pitts supplies some good textual illustrations, sadly wasted.

STAR MAIDENS by IAN EVANS: CORGI: 175pp: 60p: 1977

After Space 1999 this novelisation of a TV serial is a relief. The plot is implausible, but not completely ridiculous, the attempt at characterisation is at least partially successful, and the conclusion surprisingly undogmatic. Unfortunately, it is still a bad novel. (Pa)

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES by RAY BRADBURY: PANTHER: 220pp: 75p: 1963

The story of how Will Holloway and Jim Nightshade, one fair one dark, encounter the evils and horrors of a mysterious carnival is in many ways typical of Bradbury. The settings are fantastic and vivid; the sense of the struggle between good and evil is finely tuned; the suspense constant. Here the colours and shades are exciting and exotic, capturing the glories of boyhood in bold exaggerated lines. If the constant breathlessness of Bradbury's style does not annoy you, this novel will entertain as much, if not more than, his short stories. A vigorous novel. (Pa)

REVELATIONS IN BLACK by CARL JACOBI: PANTHER: 141pp: 60p: 1931-44

Ten stories, mainly from Weird Tales. One or two are interesting, but most show their age badly and spend a dozen pages leading to a climax visible long before. For the collector or avid horror fan only.

IMPERIAL EARTH by ARTHUR C CLARKE: PAN: 287pp: 75p: 1975

Clarke has called this his 'best book'. The big problem with it, is its lack of plot. Duncan Makenzie, part of the ruling elite on Titan, decides to travel to Earth to join in the Quincentennial Celebrations in the U.S. and to obtain a cloned son for himself. This he does. On the way we are treated to explanations of the economic basis of the Titan colony, the development of Terran culture to decadent Imperialism, the joys of skindiving and many other similar excursions. Hope of action is vaguely kindled at the mysterious appearance of a mad scientist - an old friend of Duncan - but no sooner does he appear than he dies accidentally and the mystery is proved innocuous. The background and characters are drawn in loving detail, but it is rather like looking at a very opulent stage, expecting a play that never happens.

THE JONAH KIT by IAN WATSON: PANTHER: 192pp: 60p: 1975

Again Ian Watson has chosen a pair of divergent circumstances for the basis of his novel. The main theme deals with Russian experiments to imprint a human mind on a whale, and the Americans' attempts to discover what they are doing. Subsidiary to this is Paul Hammond, a famous astronomer, who comes up with a new theory of matter which proves the existence, but absence, of God. The two find an uneasy synthesis in the Thought Star, a form of 'biological computer' formed by and of the whales, and which is fed the 'Hammond Theorem' with alarming results. As before, Ian Watson has spoilt the book by attempting too much. Hammond's Theorem, the Thought Star, the mind imprinting are all handled competently but skimpily. Ian Watson certainly has great talent, but he has yet to come to terms with it.

VAMPIRELLA 3: DEADWALK by RON GOULART: SPHERE: 144pp: 65p: 1969-76

Another amusing episode of the sexy vampire from Outer Space, the lovable alcoholic magician Pendragon, and the cleancut all-American Adam Van Helsing. This time they get involved with voodoo, human sacrifice and a home-made android. Goulart's tongue stays firmly in cheek as the story bubbles lightly & trivially along.

DAN DARE: PILOT OF THE FUTURE by ANGUS P ALLAN: NEL: 128pp: 60p: 1977

How Dan and Digby become the first men on Venus, and how they first meet the dreaded Mekon. The plot and characters are as hackneyed as ever, but at least there's a sense of humour, as well as several of Frank Hampson's marvellous illustrations. For nostalgic children of all ages.

SPACE 1999: THE SPACE-JACKERS by MICHAEL BUTTERWORTH: STAR: 158pp: 60p: 1977

Shoddily written hackwork. (RM)

LETTERS TO STAR TREK ed SUSAN SACKETT: BALLANTINE: 216pp: 80p: 1977

This is a collection of a great many letters from people of all ages and most levels of literacy. There is much repetition of material and the compilers have treated the whole as an exercise in narcissism. Nevertheless, poor though the production is, the letters are of some interest. Not only are there occasional genuinely touching stories, but also these "contributors" document a typically American phenomenon, including college courses on 'Star Trek', miracle cures and complete addiction. Rather sad in a way. (Pa)

TOWARDS TOMORROW by ISAAC ASIMOV: CORONET: 70p: 173pp: 1967-72

More fact articles from the Good Doctor on 'Space, Earth and Science Fiction'. The pieces come from sources as far apart as 'Science Journal' and 'Penthouse', and form one of his better collections. For anyone whose reading strays beyond fiction.

BOOKS NOT RECEIVED FOR REVIEW

SPACE 1999: MIND-BREAKS OF SPACE by MICHAEL BUTTERWORTH: STAR

PERRY RHODAN 23 by KURT MAHR: ORBIT

QUEST OF THE DARK LADY by QUINN READE: PARAMOUNT

ILLUMINATUS 3: LEVIATHAN by R. SHEA & R.A. WILSON: SPHERE

THE GREAT STONE OF SARDIS by FRANK R STOCKTON: PARAMOUNT

TECHNOS by E.C. TUBB: ARROW

VERUCHIA by E.C. TUBB: ARROW

LEGION OF SPACE by JACK WILLIAMSON: SPHERE