

SF COMMENTARY

No. 67

January 1989



TWENTIETH
ANNIVERSARY
ISSUE

Elaine Cochrane
Thomas M. Disch
Diane Fox
Bruce Gillespie
Michael Tolley

I MUST BE
TALKING TO
MY FRIENDS

Why not say that overwhelming public pressure has forced the revival of SF Commentary?

Because it isn't true. Readers seem to be getting used to the idea of The Metaphysical Review. Truckloads of letters of comment arrive every day. The next issue is approaching the thousand-page mark. (Not really, but it seems that way.) TMR still gives me a freedom of subject matter that SFC did not allow me. And the massed Ditmar voters of Australia liked The Metaphysical Review, which I did not expect.

But... there is some unfinished business here. Five or six years of it. Lots of loose ends sniggering and sneaking out of dusty envelopes on the shelf. Brilliant articles still unpublished, because they were outdated by the time TMR began. Material that didn't quite fit the format I wanted for TMR. Letters that I wanted to publish, although they arrived seven years ago.

Some of the Best of the Last of SF Commentary appeared in Van Ikin's Science Fiction. Van threw open his magazine to my untender ministrations, and I filled it with such pieces as George Turner's 'What Australian SF Critics Should Be Talking About', Joe Sanders' brilliant article on Robert Silverberg, and Yvonne Rousseau's review of Murnane's The Plains. And there were letters from Ursula Le Guin, Thomas Disch, Andrew Weiner, and James Campbell.

That issue was Vol. 5, No. 3, whole number 15, September 1983, and no doubt Van still can sell you copies if you send him \$20 for a subscription (Dr V. Ikin, Department of English, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, WA 6009). That issue was also numbered SF Commentary 67.

Why didn't I take up Van's offer to make every second issue of Science Fiction into an issue of SF Commentary?:

- (a) Because I thought Van was being over-generous, and in danger of locking himself into a format that would inconvenience him more than it would me.
- (b) Because Norstrilia Press sold its IBM electronic composer, on which I typeset several issues of Science Fiction, including the non-SFC 67. Suddenly I had no machine I could use for Van's format.
- (c) As soon as I was offered the chance to earn some real money (in mid-1984), I went back to fanzine publishing. There are some bad habits than can never be cured.

And lo! The Metaphysical Review was born, and rose in the air, and began to flap its wings, but the funny old SF Commentary bird was still lurking away in an nest somewhere.

Here then is the Twentieth Anniversary edition of SF Commentary, and the first of the new series. As the Page 3 says, you can only get future issues by subscribing, contributing, sending review copies, or by trading for SFC instead of TMR.

I don't expect this issue to satisfy admirers of the old SFC. It is short, because I have only a limited amount of American quarto paper in stock. It features too much Gillespie for some tastes; crowd me out if you like. But this issue is more a harbinger of SFC future than the ghost of SFC past. To the duplicator!

SF COMMENTARY

No. 67 :: January 1989

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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Edited, printed, and published by Bruce Gillespie, GPO Box 5195AA, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia (phone: (03) 419 4797). Elaine Cochrane of the same address will probably proofread this issue. Cover printed by Copy Placo, Melbourne.

HOW TO MAKE SURE YOU RECEIVE FUTURE ISSUES,
OR, THE BORING BUT NECESSARY POLICY STATEMENT

The issue of SF Commentary you are holding is a sample copy. I've revived the magazine to provide a succinct and (I hope) cheap way of discussing some of the mountain of sf and fantasy books awaiting review. Such reviews are often squeezed out of The Metaphysical Review. I've been reviewing sf non-fiction for Van Ikin's Science Fiction. That column, 'Terminus Est', will continue.

To keep SF Commentary within my non-existent budget, I'm limiting circulation in future to the following people:

- * Subscribers.
- * Publishers who send books, magazines, CDs, etc., for review.
- * Contributors (three free issues for each article, review, or publishable letter of comment).
- * Fanzine traders who wish to receive SF Commentary instead of The Metaphysical Review.

I need reviewers -- people who will actually write the reviews they promise when they receive the books. I'd prefer short reviews (3-4 well-chosen paragraphs) to theses. Long articles on sf will usually appear in TMR (but I've already broken this rule for Michael Tolley's article).

SFC will appear when I can afford it. This will be quarterly rather than 'irregular' if either (a) lots of people subscribe or (b) nobody shows interest, enabling me to cut the print run to 10 copies. Average 40-50 pages per issue.

DON'T FILL IN THE BOXES
IF YOU WANT TO PRESERVE YOUR COPY...

...but do take the trouble to send me the following information:

Yes, I wish to subscribe (Australia: \$A25 for 6 issues. USA: subject to currency fluctuations, but today it's US\$30 for 5 airmail. Britain: £15 for 5 airmail. Send your subscription in US or GB bank notes or by cheque addressed to 'Bruce Gillespie', already converted to Australian dollars.

Yes, I currently trade my fanzine for The Metaphysical Review, but would prefer to receive SF Commentary instead.

MICHAEL TOLLEY, who teaches English at the University of Adelaide, is a Blake scholar who gets more encouragement these days from grant-issuing bodies to prepare a descriptive bibliography of Australasian crime fiction. He has been an active reviewer of sf in recent years in various journals and fanzines.

BEAR WITH ME:
A Survey of Some Recent Books by Greg Bear
by MICHAEL TOLLEY

Editions consulted:

BLOOD MUSIC

by Greg Bear

(Gollancz 575-03777-6;
1986, first publication 1985;
263 pp.; £9.95)

EON

by Greg Bear

(Gollancz 575-03861-6;
1986, first publication 1985;
504 pp.; £10.95)

THE FORGE OF GOD

by Greg Bear

(Gollancz 575-04101-3;
1987; 474 pp.; £11.95)

HEGIRA

by Greg Bear

(Gollancz 575-04008-4;
1987, first publication 1979;
222 pp.; £2.95)

STRENGTH OF STONES

by Greg Bear

(Gollancz 575-04090-4;
1988, first publication 1981;
221 pp.; £2.95)

The life bearers

Among the numerous things that I would like to compel the Australian Federal Minister for Education to do (if I were that sort of person, which of course I am not, or I might be in politics) are (1) make him watch Babette's Feast for, say, five nights in a row, so that he might understand the value of art and the tragedy of denying its cultivation; (2) make him read Blood Music at least once, so that he might gain a healthy fear of biochemists and other high-profile scientists in the business of manufacturing money-spinners and, as a consequence, fund a Mary Shelley chair in science fiction at one of our major universities.

There is not a lot of point in reviewing Blood Music at this juncture, as the book should be well enough known to readers, or at least the award-winning short story from which it was developed. Bearing in mind Bruce Gillespie's professed interest in 'metaphysics', I shall instead indulge myself with some speculations derived from my reading of the book and trace similar ideas through the later ones.

Somewhat surprisingly, Blood Music, which begins as a darksome novel in the Frankenstein tradition (as Bear well knows: he even refers at one point in Chapter 41 to the scientist and his monster as sharing the same body), it ends up as the rankest piece of Mills and Boon wish-fulfilment. It is a disturbing ending, because one of the strongest statements in the book has been Bernard's affirmation that he is 'not interested in dreams' (Chapter 39). By the time he has surrendered completely to the minute 'neocytes' in his body, which represent the new direction for the human race at 'childhood's end', Bernard no longer cares to distinguish between reality and fantasy: there is more than one way of thinking small, we find.

One hypothesis that comes to be affirmed in the book is that everything really is just information (Chapter 45: 'What is matter, after all, but a standing-wave of information in the vacuum?'). In the book, a significant consequence of this

pseudo-insight is that all you need to do to change matter is to change the information about it: thus a sufficiently powerful belief can indeed change the laws of the universe (as the North American noocytes prevent Russian nuclear missiles from exploding on their territory). In the new NA, mountains are literally moved. Ultimately the Earth as we know it cannot stand the strain of being subjected to the Organic Intelligence that has wiped out the dream of an Artificial Intelligence. In Thought Universe, we are no longer bound by the distinction between valid information and fantasy: all memories are equal, whether of truth or dream.

In real life, one of the markers of our sanity is that we can distinguish one kind of memory from another. The memory of a real event is different from that of a dream, or of a daydream, or of a book, a work of somebody else's imagination. It is hard to believe that any Artificial Intelligence could make these fine discriminations. When we affirm that we do not wish to dream, we do not mean that literally, because dreaming can be not only pleasurable but also instructive; we mean that we shall not be satisfied with any experience that has not been felt as real. What we have experienced with full mental and bodily consciousness belongs to the first order of satisfactions (and dissatisfactions); we acknowledge the satisfactions of 'real dreams' and so on, only on the condition that we have known them to be dreams or vicarious living experiences. Dreams enrich our life but they do not belong to the first order of life experiences. Those who do not acknowledge this valuation have had a significantly different education from the rest of us. The inference from this is that matter-generated information is different in our experience from mind-generated information. Matter is not itself information, although we can receive information about it; furthermore, our information is never complete: it is always, to a degree, misinformation. It is for this reason that we are not, in fact, capable of complete satisfaction in this life (this is one of the more persuasive traditional arguments for immortality in some life to come). For all the force of the misinformation effect, however, we will continue to rate the substance higher than the shadow.

Blood Music raises the hope that we might find satisfaction in a new bodily mode within this life, this noosphere, inside some 'thought universe' accessible to us without a lapse into actual death (to rephrase Paul, 'we shall all be changed', but by deliquescence not by resurrection). Thus the book is, in a sense, eutopian in tendency: NA becomes the 'great good place'. It is correspondingly unfortunate that it should appear, during Bernard's Dantean or Thel-like journey into his own underworld, somewhat Orwellian in both its easy censorship of information and the double-speak in Chapter 39 that 'Information is always lost. That is the struggle.' yet 'No cluster's total structure is ever lost. There are always duplications.' The noocyte structure appears both anarchic and rigidly hierarchical. Bernard asks the question of what happened in North America to all the bad people (Chapter 41) but never answers it. Cancers, one assumes, will both continuously exist and be continuously edited out among the noocytes. They will not matter, because fear and pain can no longer exist without 'hormonal response of macro-scale BERNARD' (Chapter 39). Alas, one fears that joy will by the same token prove equally elusive to a micro-scale Bernard, despite the last chapter's assurances. As Bernard concedes, before he finally succumbs to the noocyte blandishments, he can never know whether the noocytes are not lying to him. The reader, on the other hand, is entitled to counter-affirm that what is presented as illusion must be untruth.

Mr Potato-Head

In Greg Bear's Eon (1985) a means of fulfilling a wish is found by a roundabout route, this time the high or macrocosmic rather than the low or microcosmic road. Along both roads, you begin by destroying life on earth. For the heroine, Patricia Luisa Vasquez, a speculative mathematician, knowledge that her fiancé has been killed in a nuclear war means that all she has to do is to find him again

in another 'standing-wave of information', although in Eon the waves are those of closely matched universes. Fortunately for her, technology from the future will enable her to enter a universe of her recent past sufficiently close to the one in which she begins her story for her to recover her lost dream: Paul (or a reasonable facsimile of him) will exist in this world but there will be no big war. All the story does, in effect, is to show Patricia the way to go home, by the most indirect route conceivable.

A magic vehicle is provided for Patricia in the form of a new large chunk of rock in space, which is identical to a known asteroid, on first sighting, except for obviously external markings. It is called the Stone by the Americans, the Potato by the Russians; they come to blows over it, because the Americans are the first ones to explore its interior and the Russians, despite a token presence, feel excluded. Information is slow to come out of the Stone, because the library inside one of its seven chambers includes information about the future and forecasts an imminent world war: Patricia, as the only world expert on the physics of alternative universes (an unlikely premise but certainly a possibility that would receive no near-future support from the funding bodies in Australia), is called to the Stone as a principal trouble-shooter. Events overtake her but she has a way out, or rather, a way in. Earth-visitors enter the Stone at one end of the cylinder, but the door at the other end opens into infinity along a corridor down which, in fact, the previous (sorry, earlier future) occupants have retreated, leaving the mind-bending signs of their occupation behind them -- and a few spies. In other words, the Stone is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside, and is thus like that familiar fantasy object, the Tardis. It is even more like the human brain pan, which Blake metaphorized as a Stone nearly 200 years ago.

Bear's Stone is obviously a wonderful concept for a science fantasy, offering a gateway to future and alien worlds while solving the boring problem of travelling through normal space. The trouble is that such a concept absolutely must be used wonderfully. Bear has provided his characters with a physical means of entering the imagination; unfortunately for his reputation, he goes along the corridor with them and all he can provide us with are the same tired clichés we all know so well: human neomorphs and reactionary 'Naderites', engaged in the same old internal political squabbling that the intrusive humans have left behind them, and on a similar occasion, in this case, a threat of annihilation from hell-bent aliens located further down the corridor, who plan to open a gateway from the corridor into the heart of a sun. There are also benevolent aliens, the Frants, and it is possible to obtain a tourist visa to their planet: tourism is all it is. Much could have been done with this premise, if Bear had the wit to exploit the satirical implications inherent in the idea that the more things change the more they are the same. Bear does not distance himself sufficiently from the characters (who include other leading individuals besides Patricia with their own wishes to have satisfied by the story's end) to provide more than a straight adventure story which grows more boring as it recedes from familiarity. What he does provide is a sufficiency of mathematical jargon to give limited credence to the book's gimmickry (and, perhaps yet more importantly, to fudge it) but it remains unbelievable as soon as one stops to think about it. Potato pie in the sky that you can have without dying is all the Stone can ever be; but perhaps the manufacturers from the future have the right idea when they call the Stone 'Thistledown'.

There is something a little alarming about a fiction writer who has an idea that begs to be treated as a metaphysical phenomenon but who insists on treating it as exclusively a problem in physics. Such a writer will suggest that the only possible changes we may have in our future are superficial or external; what effectively happens in Eon is that a metaphysical idea is turned inside out. We have no insight into the creatures of imagination; to get a knowledge of them requires that we get inside their infinity. When Bear attempts this, occasionally and briefly, in Eon, he tells us something of what the future humans have lost, such as the capacity to shed tears, but is not capable of suggesting what they have gained.

Great Gaia's gonads!

One of the awkward philosophical difficulties set up in increasingly obvious forms by Greg Bear's books is the query whether our predicament requires theodical discussion and resolution or merely biological and material presentation. Has the human race sinned against a divine edict, thus requiring punishment or redemption; or are the faults in the stars (and not even in our stars at that, altogether)? Are we to be considered as an order of beings halfway up an evolutionary hill; or are we already a secondary, inferior, and rejected order, a superseded model? Identification with members of a second-order race becomes more and more the open premise of the books. The Forge of God (1987) again presents us with a scenario that includes the end of the world, a first encounter with aliens, and the redemption of a few humans, but this time the action remains, except in the last pages, fixed on the Earth and through the bodily sensations we know. Aliens come not from inside the body; are not encountered outside our known universe; but invade Earth directly, bent classically on destruction. The twist is that there is another group of aliens, in the wake of the destroyers, whose work is one of redemption. Humans can do little to influence the course of events; they are used or discarded. Meanwhile, they try to cope with the scientific and political consequences in fairly predictable ways. Once again the book is far too long, and Bear almost succeeds in making the end of the world uninteresting; we have to wait so long for it to come that when it happens our feeling must be one of relief. Fortunately, he manages to rise to the occasion, with the instinct of a Hollywood movie director, letting one of his principal characters take a grandstand seat at Yosemite to witness the event. This character, geologist Edward Shaw, one of the discoverers of the alien ship, heavily disguised as a rock, that settles in Death Valley, decides that 'God is what you love' and that he 'loves the Earth'. It follows that God is the Earth and, alas, Bear's story endorses the idea, invoking the Gaia myth, according to which, in this case, human beings are Gaia's gonads, carefully developed by the planet for the purpose of sharing its biological information with similar beings in space. Gaia, however, is a foolish virgin chicken who has prematurely advertised her existence to the universe, and her elaborate plans are cut short when a hawk appears, prompting the aphorism: 'Planetisms that don't know enough to keep quiet, get eaten.' It is just as well that a medical team arrives (was that their ship which arrived in Australia, heavily disguised as a clone of Ayers Rock?) to collect Gaia's 'information', put it into test tubes, and place it in another biosphere (Mars, which has been thoughtfully provided with water from an ice asteroid).

The Gaia hypothesis is first enunciated by Harry Feinman, who is about to die from leukemia. Harry is part of a team of advisers to the American President, who has his own view about the aliens. He divides them into angelic punitive agents of a God who, 'a superior intelligence, having sculpted us all, finds us wanting, and sends our material back into the forge to be reshaped', or else, as with the aliens who land in Australia and speak words of comfort, they are creatures of the Adversary, 'Something opposed to the Creator. A force that hopes we will be allowed to continue our transgressions, to put all creation out of balance.' In the book, there is a sense in which both views are half right; Bear has it both ways by presenting a God who dies and is resurrected, along with humans who are destroyed, all but a faithful remnant who are saved (the President himself, however, is not numbered among them). Once again we have a metaphysical subject that is treated on a highly superficial level. What matters is not, it seems, so much why the end of the world happens; why there is evil in the universe; as that we should have witnesses to that ending and that evil; such is the principal hero, another presidential adviser, Arthur Gordon. One reason why he and his family are saved to be 'born again' on Mars is that his son can join the forces of justice that will bring retaliation upon the destroyers' home planet. None of this gives us much insight into the ways of God.

The Second-Born

Another novel, Hegira, has quite a different 'feel' to it, being superficially nothing more than a story of the exploration of an unknown, wondrous world, through the medium of a quest. It is reminiscent of Jack Vance in tone, and belongs in the same class of works as Aldiss's Helliconia trilogy or Gene Wolfe's New Sun books, but most of all, perhaps, of Le Guin's Earthsea trilogy and one or two of her adult books. Among such company, Hegira is not particularly distinguished, and is indeed rather pedestrian for much of its length, though it has some good ideas, particularly the notion of huge monoliths, a thousand kilometres high, which are covered with information about the first-order race that formed and colonized Hegira and similar worlds around singularities. Unfortunately, the Second-Born cannot get high enough up the monoliths to find out sufficient information to take them out of the early industrial age; especially as their gigantic planet lacks fossil fuels. Nevertheless the planet is, it turns out, alive, though in her death throes (yes, this is another end-of-the-world novel), and has a way of using one of her people to warn the others of the coming end (which is to be a dissolution into a new beginning). This prophetic function will justify the quest of Kiril the Kristian, which is crudely expressed in fairy-tale terms: he must travel to the Land where Night Is a River in order to rescue his bride from a living death; the more prosaic quest of a more conventionally heroic figure, Bar-Wotan, who wants to find out why there is all the suffering he has experienced in his life, will end by his remaining a pilgrim; he is comparable to the Russian, Pavel Mirsky, in Eon, who desires continuous adventure among the stars.

'What is mine end, that I should be patient?'

Most recently to hand is a fix-up, Strengths of Stones (1988), comprising three novella-length stories about cities that can move around the landscape at will. The attractive idea of nomadic cities on a desert planet tearing themselves down and transporting the parts to be reconstructed in more suitable locations makes some sort of sense and prompts some powerful images. Greg Bear adds to this the notion (a variation on the idea of Blood Music of our own inventions judging us as inadequate to their moral demands) that the cities are in decay following their expulsion of all human citizens on the grounds that they were not good enough to remain inside. Thus the problem of sin recurs: since the planet concerned was colonized by Christians, Jews, and Moslems, no one was found unsinful in the paradisaical cities. (Loss of contact with off-planet humans, who have lost interest in the planet oddly called God-Does-Battle, in itself reduces the inhabitants to second-order status, a reduction only augmented by the action of the cities.) In 3451 AD, the time of the first story, the city called 'Mandala' is sending out scouts to hunt for people suitable for readmission; meanwhile, it will give temporary sanctuary only to the sick or wounded. 'Mandala' first appeared in Silverberg's New Dimensions 8 (1978) 'in substantially different form'. The story concerns a giant called Jeshua who is impotent (his stones are not strong) and so self-outcast from his own tribe; his health problem is solved by Mandala, but that is only the good news. In 'Mandala', it may be noted in passing, Bear experiments with a style of future degraded demotic English dialogue with fair success.

The second section, 'Resurrection', moves the narrative along a few years to a time when Reah, a woman outcast from one of the fixed desert towns (an outcast from those outcast -- and from a town that itself will shortly be destroyed), finds shelter, after being raped, in a mobile city, Resurrection, and takes charge of it, directing it to heal and educate sick and wounded children, but delivering her own unwanted child over to the city's exclusive care. (This child, Matthew, will spearhead the rebellion by those former citizens who consider that the 'god-cities' are the ones who have sinned by failing to fulfil their design.) Meanwhile marauders have been using the pretence of sickness as a means of gaining

entry to the cities in order to destroy them, appropriating their parts to other uses. This section was first published in Rigel (1981) under the title 'Strength of Stones, Flesh of Brass', a text derived from Job 6.

The new third section, 'Revenant', brings the city architect, Kahn, to the planet in the temporary form of a simulacrum, supposedly in order to make a routine inspection and provide ongoing advice to the cities. He has arrived too late to save the cities from their mistakes, but finds himself locked in combat with Reah's now aged son Matthew, who has been bent on destroying the cities, and in alliance with the ghostly form of Reah, who was killed during one of the battles of Resurrection with its human assailants, but is partially preserved in its memory so that she is capable of a kind of half-life in the form of a hologrammatical projection. Kahn goes on a quest to an Antarctic city, where strange things have occurred, to investigate the 'Bifrosts'. It is in the Bifrosts that we renew our acquaintance with Bear's interest in saving a remnant of the people from the inevitable ending of their world. Kahn finds that there has been -- in his own future, but in his simulacrum's past -- the formation of a 'Golden Sphere', designed to be 'that state desired by mystics and saints, artists and laborers, scientists and philosophers: the state of Freedom'. What is interesting is that the Golden Sphere has apparently gone from its place of construction and we are left uncertain as to whether the grand plan for it has worked, whether his former self caught up with it (and his wife Danice) in time. Bear has achieved a genuinely open ending in Strength of Stones. Perhaps because Kahn is only a simulacrum Bear has not needed to force a euphoric conclusion upon the story. Formally, if not morally, it is notable that in Strength of Stones various kinds of 'second-order' humans proliferate. The basic model seems to be that of a computer memory bank. We can be redeemed because we can be saved, i.e., put into storage and then retrieved at command, which may be sometimes self-willed, sometimes pre-programmed. The cities can make their own 'city-parts' in 'immortal' android form. Perhaps we have some kind of inverted resolution to the problem of sin here, in that the stories tell us that only the sinful, i.e., the sick, can be saved. Ironically, after attempts to prove oneself righteous have failed (a problem raised also by those who wonder why they have been chosen or rejected by the aliens in The Forge of God and which appears in a different form in Hegira), attempts to prove oneself sick (perhaps invoking obliquely the Gospel idea that Jesus came to heal only the sick and redeem only the sinners) are made: however, at least as long as Reah is in control, the cities are not deceived.

At the end of reading these books we remain in flight (hegira?) from the unknown to the unknown. Greg Bear might be blamed for giving us a little less of the joy of flying than of the fear of falling; nevertheless, he often succeeds at least in suggesting what an exciting sensation free flying might be.

- Michael J. Tolley,
5 January 1989

CRITICANTO has been the regular column of shorter reviews of sf and fantasy books since SF Commentary began in January 1969. Sometimes, as you will see below, the reviews are on the long side of short. Preference is given to books sent as review copies. Volunteer reviewers are welcome.

CRITICANTO

Thomas M. Disch :: Elaine Cochrane :: Diane Fox

THEROUX'S RAGBAG OF CONTRADICTIONS

Thomas M. Disch reviews:

O-Zone
by Paul Theroux
(Putnam; 1986;
527 pp.; US\$19.95)

Not to pussyfoot around it, O-Zone is a dismal novel: dull, ill-written, misconceived, nakedly exploitative — and a botch even at that unworthy task. Yet it does possess a kind of baleful interest, for Paul Theroux is a writer of no small literary reputation and accomplishment, and in proportion as

this, his longest and, so to speak, most ambitious novel is ghodawful, one has to marvel at the monstrous birth. How did it come to be written? What prompted the powers that be to plunk down a million dollars for it? Supposing the book can be hyped onto the bestseller lists, are there, in fact, readers who will enjoy what they've spent their twenty dollars on?

Before offering my own speculations on these questions, let me describe what a wary emperor may cavil at. O-Zone does not refer, in Theroux's novel, to the triatomic form of oxygen that has been making headlines lately for its alarming disappearance from the stratosphere, but rather to an area of Missouri that has been evacuated, at some unspecified point in the near future, because of the leakage of atomic wastes. It has become a no-man's-land, walled off from the rest of the country by a supposedly impregnable electronic barrier. At the New Year, a group of eight wealthy New Yorkers flies to O-Zone in their private jet-powered helicopters for a party, and discovering that their Eden has an indigenous population, three of the men mount a hunting party and zap two of the indigenes with a raygun. In Theroux's future America, the wealthy are called Owners and are licensed to kill the rest of the population, who are spoken of, indiscriminately, as 'aliens'.

The secret purpose of this expedition was to survey O-Zone preparatory to covering it with asphalt, ostensibly to create a 'thermal mountain' that will benefit the drought-stricken Midwest, but in actuality as a means for the evil Oil Industry to upload its surpluses. However, Hooper, the richest Owner in the party, has spied a fifteen-year-old girl among the indigenes and becomes so smitten with her videotaped image that he determines to return to O-Zone and abduct her. He does this with the help of his teenage nephew Fisher, an electronics genius who has till now lived immured in his Manhattan bedroom devoting all his time and attention to a computer called Pap. Hooper abducts his beloved effortlessly, but the indigenes, just as effortlessly, capture Fisher. This brings us to page 249. In the remainder of the novel, Fisher achieves manhood by discovering that his captors are human beings just like himself (he even assumes leadership over them by virtue of his high-tech knowhow), while the abducted girl becomes Hooper's compliant mistress after weaning him, effortlessly, from a predilection for voyeurism. (In a third, time-marking subplot, Fisher's mother seeks out and is reunited with his long-lost father, who has become a

biker in California.) The moral of the three tales is that the rich can only find their authentic identities and/or sexual fulfilment through exogamy with the sturdier, more authentic poor.

I do not take exception to the moral. It has served innumerable storytellers in good stead. It is the effortlessness of everything that happens, of every paragraph Theroux writes, that makes the book such a cheat. When, after an interminable build up, Fisher is snatched from inside a helicopter by the O-Zonians, it happens in this wise:

Two men who in the darkness were no more than hard hands and grunts smelling of glue had plucked Fisher out of the rotor and swung him to the ground in a net. The boy screamed once sharply and punched and pulled at the ropes...

And when, on page 387, Hooper, the lifelong voyeur, who has not till now laid a hand on his captive nymphet, explains to her shyly that he would like to set up some cameras, his cure is effected in just two lines of dialogue:

'Is that all you want?' she asked in a wondering way. 'To look at me like that?'

As soon as she said it in that certain way his desire for it died. He had never wanted her to know that she was being watched. The pleasure lay in the secrecy. But her permission took all the blame away, and all the eroticism of watching her, and in that moment he wanted more.

Later, after their meal, when they lay on the cushions by the window...

Those are only the two grossest instances of Theroux's not bothering to fill in the blanks of a novel that ends up, for all its great bulk, consisting of little else. Only a few characters are presented in any detail, and these details are endlessly reiterated. Only Owners are shown to have inner lives or even memories. No one ever thinks to ask the most obvious questions about the world they inhabit or the people they encounter. The plot requires its cast of billionaire, rotor-riding Owners to be not only nitwits but utterly incurious nitwits, and this for the compelling reason that Theroux's dystopian future America is a sociological farrago, a ragbag of contradictions so flimsily conceived that it could not bear any closer examination than it is given.

So, to return to my original questions: How did a self-respecting writer come to write it, and a reputable publisher to publish it, and could someone actually turn all 527 pages with vicarious pleasure? Surely, Theroux and his publisher must have calculated that the answer to the last question is 'Yes, people are really that dumb', and they acted accordingly. There has been a lot of sf on the bestseller lists in the last few years, and most of it has been pretty dumb. The difference, I think, is that those books were at least sincere. To suppose the same of O-Zone would be an insult to Paul Theroux.

-- Thomas M. Disch, December 1986

JOANNA, JANET, JEANNINE, OR JAEL?

Elaine Cochrane reviews:

The Female Sex
by Joanna Russ
(most recent edition:
Women's Press 7043-3949-8;
1986; £1.95/\$5.95;
original publication 1975)

On a series of probable Earths, one constant is found in society: where both sexes exist, women are forced into the role of inferiors, pressures to conform being applied by other women as well as by men. Joanna's world is our world; Jeannine's is a little different, a little poorer, a little more extreme

in its oppression. In Jael's world, the battle between the sexes has become a shooting war, and in Janet's, men have been wiped out so long ago that they are only a textbook memory.

Janet's world, Whileaway, develops a means of making contact with these other worlds, and she, as an emissary chosen for expendability, appears abruptly in contemporary America. At first in innocence, later in revulsion at what she finds, she proceeds to shock alarmingly the male establishment. In a delightful scene Janet is interviewed live on TV. She is asked what impact she expects the reappearance of men to have on Whileaway. 'What men?'

She finds Jeannine's poverty-stricken world even worse. Jeannine is a part-time library assistant, still single at twenty-nine. She has an eligible young man just waiting for her to say yes, but even with all the social pressure on her to marry, leave the workforce, have children, and surrender herself body and soul to a man, she cannot bring herself to give in. Nor can she bring herself to say no. She is terrified by Janet; one does not throw men who get fresh at parties. It is just not done. If they get fresh it is because you invited them to, and they are entitled to follow up the invitation. If the invitation was unconscious, it just shows what you really want.

Janet collects Joanna and Jeannine and goes to live with a 'typical American family' in Jeannine's world. The typical family is busy trying to force its teenage daughter to conform to its standards. Laura Rose should not be passionately interested in maths, she should not be happier dressed in jeans and floppy shirts than pretty dresses, she should be interested in boys, and babies, and not much else. Janet does what she can to comfort her, but both know she is up against her entire world.

Jael gathers in the three women who are her genetic counterparts and shows them a little of her way-born world. She intends to recruit them to her side, to continue the battle on their home grounds. This time it is calm, capable Janet who is revolted by the harshly violent Jael. Jeannine is fascinated; Joanna is unsure. Certainly the picture Jael poses is unpleasant, but the only free world for women is Janet's, where there are no men at all. As Jael says, that may be the only way.

The story is told mainly in sketches of the interactions between the three women, with occasional men or other women thrown in as required. There is no attempt to portray any men as more than mouthpieces for various attitudes, but it is totally unnecessary to do so. How often have we not heard similar arguments, been subjected to similar insults? How many of us who read this book were not young Lauras, growing up to be Joanna, dreaming of being Janet, but faced with the awful risk of becoming Jeannine or Jael instead?

-- Elaine Cochrane

MORROW'S BLACK COMEDIES

Elaine Cochrane reviews:

The Continent of Lies
by James Morrow
(Gollancz 575-03659-1;
1985, first publication 1984;
274 pp.; £9.95/\$A29.95)

A successful spoof must also be a successful novel, and The Continent of Lies is a successful spoof. Morrow takes every thud-and-blunder cliché and stretches it a little further from absurdity to hilarity.

Quinjin is a reviewer of dreambeans: the cephalapples, fruit of the noostree, which,

when eaten, induce the eater to experience a preprogrammed hallucination. His specialty is horror, but his interest is art.

With the dreambeans, the beanbuff always knows that he or she is dreaming. Someone, however, has invented the lotosbean, which induces dreams so vivid that the eater cannot tell them from reality. This someone is poised to release lotosbeans so horrible that they threaten the civilization of the universe. Quinjin, with his critical detachment and his vast knowledge of horrorbeans, sets out on a quest to destroy the lotosbeans and save the human race. His quest becomes more urgent when his beloved daughter is enslaved to the rogue bean.

Quinjin's search takes him to a cephapple convention, where conventioneers dress as characters from their favourite beans and he is shanghaied to appear on a panel; to strange planets; and to meet stranger people. All this is in the most wonderful tongue-in-cheek massacre of language. People wear chronamulets, not watches, they light their way with photorbs, not torches, and according to the Terransector Navy, 'the sight of a vulcanbomber barreling out of the sky and landing is enough to make "plants wither from stress, animals die from shock, children faint from terror, and adults forget that they have ever been toilet-trained".'

Vivid imagery abounds: the description of a bean-chewing session inside a dead grorg, for example, or of a planetoid-sized noostree fighting for its life. Action sequences crackle and sparkle so that you are almost lured into taking them seriously. The plot has an internal logic so often lacking when stories of this genre are written straight, and characters are beautifully true to type. Even the inconsistencies -- in one section, the noostrees require a methane atmosphere; for the rest of the novel they do not -- are very carefully placed.

All is not perfect. Adventure-fiction plots tend to be predictable and tedious. The Continent of Lies drags a little towards the middle, so that you wish Morrow had left at least a few clichés unsatirized. It is, however, an enjoyable read, a skilful blend of awfulness, horror, and humour.

This Is the Way the World Ends
by James Morrow
(Gollancz 575-03972-8;
1987; 319 pp.; £10.95/\$A32.95)

If the world is destroyed in a nuclear holocaust, is the average apathetic civilian of a nuclear state guilty of crimes against humanity because of that apathy?

James Morrow poses this question in This Is the Way the World Ends. The novel fails dismally, not because Morrow fails to give an answer, but because he fails to challenge the reader. The issues are fudged.

George Paxton, a Unitarian New England tombstone carver and civilian; Reverend Peter Sparrow, fundamentalist television preacher somewhere to the right of Jerry Falwell; Robert Wengernook, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs; Dr William Mandible, the middle-aged whiz kid who designed missile guidance systems; Brian Oberwhite, of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency; and Major General Roger 'Brat' Tarmac, Deputy Chief of Staff for Retargeting, Strategic Air Command -- all are plucked out of America at the instant of its annihilation so they can stand symbolic trial for war crimes, crimes against peace, crimes against humanity, and crimes against the future. Their accusers are the unadmitted: all the people who would have been born if their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had not died.

This has all the makings of a wonderful black comedy, but Morrow is unable to bring it off. Partly this is the result of his writing style: he will build towards some powerful image, then demolish it with a fatuous one-liner.

When Alexander Aquinas stood up, George saw that the forces arrayed against them were formidable indeed. The chief prosecutor was well over six feet tall. His head looked like a sculpture of itself -- rough-hewn, bleak, larger than life. His shaggy gray hair and thick neck suggested that he owned lion genes. Slowly he walked to the bench, turned, and stared toward the gallery with the intensity of a man having a private audience with an angel. He smiled.

(page 182)

Then, the same man, a few lines later:

His eyes trembled in his great skull like poached eggs.

(page 183)

Merron is capable of better: George Paxton's matter-of-fact walk through the horror of his burning home town; the descriptions of burning cities viewed through a submarine periscope: these are compelling reading. George Paxton's encounter with Ensigns Peach and Cobb is nightmare comedy of the first order.

The problems with this book lie deeper than the writing style. There is the fantasy premise itself: did unadmitted dinosaurs cry out for revenge because their ancestors failed to develop meteor defences?; should I be haunted by millions of kittens because I have had my cats sterilized?; should I be damned by one child for each month I fail to become pregnant, and Bruce for 400 million by X times per week?

The fantasy premise is tied to a kind of woolly determinism. The unadmitted are not merely potential humans denied their right to life: each unadmitted person is quite specifically the yet-to-be-conceived child (grandchild, great-grandchild, etc.) of parents killed in the war. Thus one character is able to state that his parents were killed in the Battle of Washington exactly two weeks before they would have conceived him. All very well, but if the future is that determined, the destruction of the human race must also be that determined. This means that his parents must forever be killed in the Battle of Washington; he could never have been conceived. This is not hair-splitting: for the Battle of Washington not to occur, the 'present' of the novel would have to be altered, so there could be no predicting which ovum would be released, and which sperm would fertilize it. The unadmitted cannot be the denied future of the present of the novel; they are the denied future of a present that never existed.

A further problem: if the unadmitted can intervene in the present to pluck out the six men who are to stand trial for the destruction of the human race, could they not collect instead a large number of men and women from cities not affected by the first strike, men and women who could continue the human race? Or some key figures who could prevent the holocaust? Of course, then the future of the unadmitted would not exist.

The failure of the novel is, however, more fundamental than these logical inconsistencies, and more serious. Six men are on trial for the destruction of the human race. Five of them helped design America's nuclear weapons and shape America's foreign policy. The sixth is a civilian who trusted them to act on his behalf. The unadmitted claim they want explanations, but make it clear they want revenge.

The adversarial system may be ideal for producing a desired verdict, but it is not as good at providing explanations. The prosecution claims it was possible to rid the planet of the nuclear threat. The defence claims the verdict will be a judgement not on nuclear war but on policies designed to avert, control, and mitigate nuclear war. Morrow's treatment of the arguments is fundamentally dishonest.

Through Tarmac, he states the case for armed deterrence, reduced to absurd terms: maybe when the case is reduced it is absurd. Through Overwhite, arms control

negotiations are shown as a sham, even though treaties are signed. Randstable's accurate missiles are shown to increase the threat of war while decreasing the megatonnage: a missile that is sure to reach its strategic target is more usable than one which may not. Wengernook explains the escalating scale of retaliations called 'damage limitation'. Prosecution witnesses, the unadmitted who would have campaigned for arms reductions and negotiated treaties, are shown to be idealistic nincompoops.

The Reverend Peter Sparrow genuinely believes the Soviet Union to be the Evil Empire. So, apparently, does every other character in the book. Lieutenant Commander Olaf Sverre, the unadmitted captain of the submarine transporting the men to their trial:

we could have left you to the flames, as we elected to do with them, the others. Their gimcrack Party, their bankrupt Marxism, their outrageous pretensions — all blessedly extinct. You, by contrast, are ambiguous. You don't add up. It was your ambiguousness that saved you, that alone.

(page 125)

Martin Bonenfant, unadmitted counsel for defence:

Why are there no Soviet defendants in this courtroom? Where is the Secretary General of the Communist Party? The Commander in Chief of the Warsaw Pact? The Minister for Defense? Their absence speaks volumes. The framers of the McMurdo Sound Agreement knew there was no point putting the Soviets on trial, so manifestly guilty was Moscow of turning the world into an armory and ruining the peace that was my clients' daily dream.

(page 188)

A prosecution witness who founded Generals Against Nuclear Arms admits that the treaty he helped bring about actually assisted Soviet expansionism.

This view of the Soviet Union is not challenged at any stage in the book, and that is the reason for its failure. There can be no meaningful discussion of weapons and weapons control while one side regards the other in this light. In failing to consider that the Soviet military face the same problems of national security as their US counterparts; that each side may well be sincere in its desire for peace and arms reductions, but have quite genuine but well-founded mistrust of the other's motives and honesty; Morrow has ignored the fundamental issues of the arms race.

Ultimately Morrow and his International Military and Civilian Tribunal conclude that the policy of deterrence through strategic balance worked, that the defendants acted as any reasonable men would have done. The defendants are found guilty because they did not see that this was no longer enough.

I would suggest that Morrow is just as guilty, because he fails to challenge the reader to consider that perhaps there is reason on the other side too: that only by acknowledging this can common ground for negotiations for peace be found.

-- Elaine Cochrane, July 1987

TEMPTATIONS OF THE NEARLY PERFECT

Diane Fox reviews:

The Door Into Ocean
by Joan Slenczewska
(Arbor House; 1986; US\$17.95)
(Women's Press; 1987; £2.95)

The blurb on the Arbor House edition of A Door Into Ocean compares it with Frank Herbert's Dune. Both books are long and grippingly readable, show larger-than-life characters enmeshed in political intrigue, war, and great social changes affecting galaxies. Both make much of

religion and are set on planets where people survive by living with the ecology rather than against it, and eventually use their survival skills to defeat mighty empires.

The differences are more noticeable than the similarities. In Dune the planet Arrakis is a desert, where a drop of water is a treasure, and the Fremen are warriors. In The Door Into Ocean Shora is an ocean world with no dry land. Its people, an all-female race called Sharers, are not only non-violent but find it almost impossible to express the concept of violence in their language.

Shora's neighbouring planet, Valedon, has dry land like Earth's, and the Valans are like us physically and mentally -- prone to wars, dictatorships, poverty, bigotry, sexism, greed, and exploitation. However, the author does not merely make them a mirror image of the peaceful Sharers. Valedon has a variety of cultures. One race, the Dolomites, distrusts technology and regards much of it as witchcraft.

Valans hold rocks and minerals in such esteem that they name themselves and their cities after them, and wear gemstones to indicate jobs and status. Metal and stone, and inorganic technology, were unknown on Shora until introduced by Valan traders. The Shorans retain a superstitious horror of 'unliving' matter. Instead they have an advanced biological technology, especially in the field of medicines.

The Sharers simply won't co-operate in being exploited. They don't lie or cheat, and see those who do as morally retarded -- to be rebuked, or even shunned, for their own good. Many Sharers regard Valans as insane, and want nothing to do with them.

However, Merwen the Impatient and her lifemate Usha the Inconsiderate feel that there is still hope for the Valans, and The Door Into Ocean begins with their visit to Valedon. Unfortunately, the locals see them as tramps, nuisances, and barbarians who don't even have proper identification, the police harass them, and very little seems to have been gained by the expedition. However, a naive local youth, Spinel, the son of a stonemason, is fascinated by the bald, purple-skinned strangers, and when they return to Shora he comes with them.

Shora is seen through Spinel's eyes, as well as through those of Merwen, her daughter Lystra, and Lady Berenice/Nisi the Deceiver, a Valan aristocrat, raised on Shora, who is torn between her Sharer friends and her Valan lover Realgar -- who is chosen to lead the Valan invasion.

Slonszewski shows the Sharers' world and culture detail by detail -- the great living rafts of matted plants on which they live, the bizarre ocean creatures, often deadly but all valued by the Sharers; the intricacies of Sharer language.

Their culture is built on co-operation (hence the name Sharers) and on communication with each other and with nature. Each verb implies that the person doing something is also being done to. When you make another person happy, or afraid, or angry, you share happiness, or fear, or anger.

This shows strongly in the second names, or self-names, that Sharers take when mature and confident enough to do so. Such a name implies a fault in the self-namer's character, but also, and less obviously, a fault in the way others treat her. This double-sidedness leads to intricate and unexpected elements in Sharer relationships.

Spinel is alternately confused, fascinated, and horrified, and very homesick. Lystra, who has good reason for hating Valans, resents him bitterly. Other Sharers, while less hostile, see him as a mere 'deformed' male. A grotesque

legfish steals his food, and he is repelled by such staples of Sharer diet as processed octopus innards. Worst of all, a Sharan micro-organism turns his skin the same purple as that of the locals. Spinel's reaction is irrational, hysterical horror, as if he had contracted a fatal disease.

But his impulsive nature is as much a strength as a weakness, leading him into generous and courageous actions that win the Sharers' respect, acceptance, and friendship. There's a hunt for the deadly shockwraith (a giant sea-wasp jellyfish); there's a confrontation between angry Sharers and a sleazy Valan merchant who has been caught selling psychologically addictive gemstones to a Sharer addict. There's a yearly migration of the awesome seaswallowers, mountainously huge creatures that remind me of Dune's sandworms -- magnificent, deadly, and necessary.

Spinel and Lystra become lovers. But his family's home town of Valedon has been taken over in one of the endless minor wars, and he must return.

Valedon is part of an empire, ruled by a Patriarch who is regarded as an incarnate God. His envoy, Malachite, suggests that the Sharers should become properly governed members of the empire. The Valedon conqueror sees this as an excuse to invade. Sharer refusal to co-operate has made economic exploitation too costly, or downright impossible. Even the seagoing Valan factories are being sabotaged when they cause too much pollution. The Valan military assert that it is high time these sea-dwelling catfish barbarians, who don't even have weapons or the sense to wear clothes, should be put in their places.

The Sharers have no concept of conquest or submission. They see the Valans as acting more insanely than ever. If told to do something she thinks wrong, a Sharer will sit down and refuse to budge. Sharers don't fear death or pain; unendurable stress causes 'whitetrance', a coma in which the Sharer may choose to die.

The book becomes grimmer and more intense as the infuriated invaders find that mere bullying and threats won't work, and resort to kidnapping, torture, brainwashing, executions and, finally, mass murder. The Valan leader Realgar becomes a war criminal whose actions cause his own men to mutiny.

The worst threat to the Sharers is not the likelihood that they might be wiped out, but the possibility of what they see as damnation: that the horror of seeing their loved ones killed might tempt them to kill. Even Realgar sees this, but continues to kill Sharers.

The Door Into Ocean reminds me strongly of C. S. Lewis's Perelandra, which also depicts an ocean world -- a beautiful, ever-fertile world of floating islands, strange beasts, and naked, brightly coloured people who have no fear of pain, evil, and death. The conversations between Realgar and Merwen remind me of the scenes in Perelandra where the demonically possessed Weston tries to corrupt the Lady. In The Door Into Ocean, Merwen is fully aware of the intentions of her enemy, and Realgar hasn't yet reached the point where killing him would carry no moral implications. The greatest threat to Merwen is when Realgar almost succeeds in convincing her that he is incurably and subhumanly evil. There's tragic irony -- the worst disaster to the Sharers is caused by Berenice/Nisi's misguided violence on their behalf, and much of Realgar's insane cruelty stems from his love for her -- despair when he thought her dead, and fury when he learns she is alive, but has turned against him.

Though strongly feminist in tone, The Door Into Ocean isn't all pro-women and anti-men. Some Valan soldiers are women, including the chief torturer and brainwasher, while a Valan male doctor and a male scientist are lovable characters. The Sharers are hardly perfect -- they can be quite bitchy, prone to bigotry,

(CRITICANTO - continued on p. 39)

THE GILLESPIE REPORT

This column is more the Map of SF Commentary Future than the Ghost of SF Commentary Past. These short comments will be the core of each issue, but I'll let in other reviewers from time to time.

You probably remember the way this column works. I make a skimpy dip of recent and not-so-recent sf and fantasy books, or books that would interest sf readers. I begin with the books I like best. I finish with the books I like least. In the middle there is some sort of order of merit.

FORGOTTEN LIFE

by Brian Aldiss (Gollancz 575-04360-5; 284 pp.; £11.95/\$A29.95)

Forgotten Life, Brian Aldiss's best novel for many years, is a feast for the appreciative reader and the literary detective. It is not a science fiction or fantasy novel, but it is essential reading for Aldiss fans and the general reader. Forgotten Life tells of three people: Joseph Winter, who has died recently, Clement Winter, who is researching his brother Joseph's letters and diaries, and Sheila Winter, a famous fantasy writer who also happens to be Clement's wife. At first sight, Joseph's 'forgotten life', as revealed in his papers, is Aldiss's own. Some sections come directly from essays that have appeared in the two Serconia Books collections, The Pale Shadow of Science and ...And the Lurid Glare of the Comet. Others are concentrated versions of the autobiographical material already used in the Horatio Stubbs novels. Is Joseph Winter 'really' Brian Aldiss? No. Joseph proves to be a silly fellow who made one great discovery at the end of his life. Clement Winter, an anxious, tentative person not at all like the Aldiss I've met, proves to be the most important character in this novel. He begins the pilgrimage of discovering his own forgotten life only after Joseph dies. The character who is most like the known Aldiss is Sheila Winter: strong, resolute, living by her pen, her wit, and a clear sense of her own destiny. Is this so? Even Sheila has much to discover about herself. Aldiss's imagination has been set ablaze by these people. It's as if, in returning from Helliconia, he has discovered a rich verbal and conceptual world that he has denied himself for some years. Funny, mysterious, unputdownable, and often very beautiful, Forgotten Life is Aldiss's magnum opus (for the time being).

THE VOICES OF TIME

by J. G. Ballard (Gollancz 575-03515-3; 1985, original publication 1963 as The Four Dimensional Nightmare; 197 pp.; £8.95/\$A30)

THE TERMINAL BEACH

by J. G. Ballard (Gollancz 575-03514-5; 1985, original publication 1964; 221 pp.; £8.95/\$A30.95)

THE DAY OF FOREVER

by J. G. Ballard (Gollancz 575-03770-9; 1986, original publication 1967; 126 pp.; £8.95/\$A30.95)

EMPIRE OF THE SUN

by J. G. Ballard (Gollancz 575-03483-1; 1984; 278 pp.; \$A19.95)

Why did J. G. Ballard write Empire of the Sun? Probably because people kept asking him: 'Where do you get all your crazy ideas from?' Ballardian ideas. Ballardian images. Images of beaches, empty swimming pools, weird landscapes, and even that stadium of concrete blocks from 'The Terminal Beach'. Empire of the Sun shows that those surreal dreamscapes from his science fiction stories are actually autobiographical. During World War II, while he was a boy living with

his parents in Shanghai, Ballard was interned in a prisoner-of-war camp. Empire of the Sun is a novel based on this experience. It's a good book, but not as interesting as Ballard's early science fiction stories, which Gollancz has reprinted in the three volumes listed above. Written mainly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they are Ballard's real autobiography. Empire of the Sun is a concordance to the greater work.

Ballard's sf stories used to annoy reviewers in fanzines. They complained that his work was 'anti-science'. They never quite made it clear what this meant. Ballard's main characters do not take technological steps to defeat terrible disasters. They relish disaster. This was too much for the fans. Science, for them, was the sum of all those processes that protect people against disasters: the cosmic safety blanket. Ballard's characters throw off their safety blankets. The origin of Ballard's approach can be seen in Empire of the Sun. Jim, the main character, loses his safe colonial world. His parents disappear; he finds himself in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. He does not panic. He regrets nothing. He discovers how to survive. More importantly, he discovers the rich importance of every impression that life can offer the receptive mind. This combination of emotional detachment and a thirst for sensory and intellectual impressions can be seen even more clearly in the science fiction stories than in Empire of the Sun.

Admirers of Empire of the Sun will probably not go back to the early stories -- they're merely science fiction, aren't they? (Reviews I've seen have more or less taken this line.) If readers reach back, they will find a courageous spirit. In Ballardian futures, nothing is flinched from. All possibilities are welcomed because they can be made into patterns of art. Art itself is the subject of many of his stories. Ballard's own art is nearly perfect in The Voices of Time and The Terminal Beach collections. It's a pity he felt forced to explain himself in Empire of the Sun.

THE SLAYING OF THE DRAGON: MODERN TALES OF THE PLAYFUL IMAGINATION

edited by Franz Rottensteiner (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 15-182975-6; 1984; 303 pp.; US\$14.95)

I must apologize to Franz Rottensteiner for taking so long to review The Slaying of the Dragon. Although it is the best fantasy collection since Disch's Strangeness, it has been ignored, and is probably remaindered already. If you see a copy, buy it. Some of its pleasures are familiar already. Stanislaw Lem's 'The Mask', a nightmare about self-discovery and the construction of a personal world-view, is his finest piece of fiction other than Solaris. Ballard's 'The Drowned Giant' and Jorge Luis Borges' 'The Lottery in Babylon' are not their authors' best work, but worth seeking if you haven't read them yet. The best stories new to me are Mircea Eliade's 'With the Gypsy Girls' and Carlos Fuentes' 'Aura'. Both are passionate ghost stories: tense mysteries based on sexual passion. All the stories point to some essential mystery of humanity, a mystery made explicit in supernatural fiction, but basic to all our experience. Among Rottensteiner's other contributors are Dino Buzzati, Julio Cortazar, Italo Calvino ('Adam, One Afternoon') which is also a ghost story), Ilse Aichinger, Donald Barthelme (an unreadable piece called 'The Emerald', the only failure in the book), and Joyce Carol Oates. Rich and delicious entertainment.

THE SEA AND SUMMER

by George Turner (Faber & Faber 571-14846-8; 1987; 318 pp.; £10.95/\$A29.95)
(DROWNING TOWERS)

by George Turner (Arbor House/William Morrow 55710-038-1; September 1988; 318 pp.; US\$18.95)

I've written three reviews of this book already, so I won't add a fourth. But I should note that The Sea and Summer (now published in USA as Drowning Towers) is the best science fiction novel since M. J. Engh's Arslan. It has been ignored in Australia, except by Australian Science Fiction Review, Van Ikin, and (ahem) The Melbourne Report and Overland Overseas, it has already picked up the

Arthur C. Clarke Award (British) and second prizes in the John W. Campbell Award (trans-Atlantic) and the Commonwealth Writers Award. If it has not won any Australian prizes, it could be because Penguin, Faber's Australian agent, has not entered it in any. The best paragraph of Van Ikin's review (Sydney Morning Herald, 10 September 1988) says: '...there is nothing despairing about The Sea and Summer; if anything, it is heady in its eagerness to participate in the struggle. Years ago the poet James McAuley expressed his sense of the Zeitgeist by saying: "In spite of all that can be said against our age, what a moment it is to be alive in!" The stunning achievement of George Turner's novel is that it does say all that can be said against our age, yet still comes out on the side of being alive. It really is the Great Australian SF Novel.'

INVERTED WORLD

by Christopher Priest (Gollancz Classic SF No. 13; 575-03993-0; 1987, first published 1974; 251 pp.; £3.50/\$A11.95)

THE SPACE MACHINE: A SCIENTIFIC ROMANCE

by Christopher Priest (Gollancz Classic SF No. 22; 575-03994-9; April 1988, first published 1976; 363 pp.; £3.50/\$A11.95)

Inverted World has not been appreciated enough, either in Britain or America. Not only does it have the most interesting sf idea in 40 years (read the novel for details), but it has a character who embodies that idea. Much could be written about the misanthropy of Helward Mann, and probably has been, but I haven't seen a clear exposition of the parallels between the person, his society, and the astonishing world he lives in. Also I admire Priest's clear, understated prose; deceptive 'plain story-telling' that hides a maze of questions and contradictions.

It is possible that The Space Machine is as audacious as Inverted World, but I've not seen the similarity. As the name implies, The Space Machine is a pastiche of H. G. Wells's books, especially The Time Machine and The War of the Worlds. As such, the first 60 pages or so are delightful. But the 'journey to Mars and the process of returning to Earth as passengers of the War of the Worlds' Martian invaders makes painfully tedious reading. Priest has hinted in conversation that the whole book is a remarkable metaphor for something. If you've spotted it -- if in fact you are an admirer of The Space Machine -- send me your thesis.

FIRE AND HEMLOCK

by Diana Wynne Jones (Berkley 425-09504-5; December 1986, first published 1984; 280 pp.; US\$2.95)

Berkley marketed this novel in America as fantasy. Diana Wynne Jones must be pleased, as her work is mainly marketed as children's or young adult fiction in Britain. As such, they are the best work in their category since Alan Garner's major novels. When I mentioned to people that I had just discovered Fire and Hemlock, they looked at me in pity. They, of course, had discovered her work years ago. Fire and Hemlock is indescribable, mainly because I don't know the legend of Tam Lin upon which it is based. Polly is a girl who finds herself remembering an entire alternate life she led in childhood. Slowly she pieces together the period in her life when she was swept into a world where fairy characters live side by side with modern mundane people. Polly, of course, has to save a hen, and the denouement is as tantalizing as those of Elidor and The Owl Service. If anybody out there knows what this book is about, please write your essay for SFC.

THE CHAIN OF CHANCE

by Stanislaw Lem, translated by Louis Iribarne (Jove/HBJ 515-05138-1; April 1979, first Polish publication 1975, first English publication 1978; 189 pp.; US\$1.75)

ONE HUMAN MINUTE

by Stanislaw Lem, translated by Catherine S. Leach (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 15-169550-4; 1986; 102 pp.; US\$13.95)

FIASCO

by Stanislaw Lem, translated by Michael Kandel (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 15-130640-1; first Polish publication 1986, first English publication 1987; 322 pp.)

The Chain of Chance is not easy to read. Even the most patient reader might be forgiven for throwing it aside in the middle section, as I nearly did. Persevere. The last section works well, and the whole novel makes a lot more sense if read in connection with Lem's theoretical works, such as Imaginary Magnitude and (now) One Human Minute.

The Chain of Chance is made up of two disturbing, hallucinatory episodes separated by an expository lump. The expository lump turns out to be interesting because it explains nothing. In the first section, a dozen tourists go mad, or die during or after visits to the same Italian resort. The main character, retracing the steps of the tourists, nearly loses his life during a bizarre incident at the airport terminal. He has still not solved the puzzle. Various boffins offer non-explanations. The main character tries out his own method again -- retracing the actions of the tourists. Lem has rarely written better than in the final section in which we see the main character going nuts, although he does not know he is going nuts.

One Human Minute is more satisfactory than The Chain of Chance because here Lem tells us his theories straight instead of dressing them up in ponderous fiction. (Lem's fiction has become ponderous recently; see my review below of Fiasco.) One Human Minute is made up of three speculative essays. In 'The World as Cataclysm', the third of them, Lem destroys the idea that life was inevitable on Earth. We're the product of chance events, catastrophic events, and the odds against our existence are such that we can never calculate them: '((It's as if a) bottle, in falling, will hit a football kicked by one of the children playing in the yard, will thus bounce and fly through the window of the elderly lady on the floor below who keeps goldfish in an aquarium, will fall into the aquarium, sink, and fill with water, unbroken. Everyone will agree that, although highly improbable, such an event is still possible; people will see it not as a supernatural phenomenon, a miracle, but only as an extraordinary coincidence.' Chance, then, is humanity's great friend, not its enemy. Most belief systems are designed to hide this perception. They say that nothing in life is the product of chance -- or only trivial events, such as the throw of the dice. Instead 'The laws of Nature act not in spite of random events but through them.' There is a lovely clarity and inevitability in all this when Lem explains it. The same can be said for the second essay, 'The Upside-Down Evolution'.

Lem's most recent novel in English, aptly named Fiasco, is the story of the crew of a spaceship that discovers a planet whose population is engaged in precisely the total micro-miniaturized war outlined in 'The Upside-Down Evolution'. Instead of discovering this in an elegant number of words, the crew of the spaceship Hermes circle the planet Quinta while working out the puzzle. This tedious process takes about 300 pages. Fiasco lurches into life only at its beginning and its end. The first section, set on Titan, seems to have little to do with the rest of the book. Its narrative of exploration of a wholly alien environment is echoed only at the end, when a human being explores the surface of Quinta. The last sentence finishes with 'he realized that he had seen the Quintans'. That's more than I did. A 322-page mystery with no revelation is very annoying.

DOROTHEA DREAMS

by Suzy McKee Charnas (Arbor House 87795-777-0; 1986; 308 pp.; US\$16.95)

THE VAMPIRE TAPESTRY

by Suzy McKee Charnas (Pocket Books 671-83484-3; November 1981; 294 pp.; US\$2.75)

Dorothea Dreams is a satisfying fantasy novel, but it's not the fantasy element that gives the satisfaction. A ghost makes itself felt in the increasingly vivid dreams of Dorothea Howard, who lives by herself in a house in the hills near Albuquerque, New Mexico. Dorothea, unwilling to paint although she is a skilled painter, builds a collage of objects into a gigantic rock wall near her house. As she finishes the wall, people break into her life, although she values her solitude. Ricky, an English friend who is dying of cancer, stays for some time and helps her make sense of her nightmares. A school group arrives. Dorothea allows them in, not knowing that one of the boys, Roberto, has a gun and is holding the whole group hostage. Dorothea Dreams is very much the story of Roberto, his sister Blanca, and other Hispanics of Albuquerque who have been thrown out of their homes. The strength of the novel rests on two pillars: Dorothea and Ricky as one, and Roberto and Blanca as the other. Charnas's triumph is showing how Roberto changes from a rebellious, energetic boy into a thug when he sits behind a gun. He doesn't really change at all, but events throw him off balance. Injustice, especially that suffered by Hispanics in the American Southwest, is a major theme of the novel. This is balanced by a sense of pattern and compensation in human affairs. Charnas's main literary strength is her emotional grit: her ability to bring life to good, workmanlike, flinty prose, which in turn gives life to the people we meet in the novel.

After reading Dorothea Dreams, I went back to my copy of Suzy McKee Charnas's earlier novel The Vampire Tapestry. It might be hard to find today. (Pocket Books seems to have closed down its sf and fantasy list.) With any luck, there will be a British edition or a new American edition. The Vampire Tapestry is an entirely non-supernatural, realistic novel about a vampire. Waking in our century, he has learned enough to survive. Or has he? People keep seeing through his disguises. One disaster follows another, as he tries to maintain his food supply and his detachment. The Vampire Tapestry is a sober but enthralling account of the ways in which people become entangled with each other. For that is the vampire's undoing, you see; he becomes human. And ordinary humans prove to be the vampires.

What a pity Suzy McKee Charnas writes so slowly. Seems as if I have about three years to wait for her next novel.

FIRE WATCH

by Connie Willis (Bantam Spectra 553-26045-6; July 1986, first published 1985; 271 pp.; US\$3.95)

LINCOLN'S DREAMS

by Connie Willis (Bantam Spectra 553-27025-7; May 1988, first published 1987; 228 pp.; US\$4.95)

Just when I thought science fiction had gone moribund, up popped somebody who writes well, plays with ideas instead of preaching, and can even give that literary thrill first experienced when I started reading science fiction. Connie Willis is my sf hero for the 1980s -- not yet a great writer, but somebody who knows what good story-telling should be. She writes in the introduction to one of her stories: 'I could not wait to become a writer and learn to... trick and mislead and hold back information and make one thing look like another and hide the clues and leave the red herrings out in plain sight and feed out the line little by little till the reader's hooked, and then land him! And I did learn all those things, with the inevitable result that I rendered myself incapable of ever being surprised again. But I can still do the surprising. I can still be

the one who makes the reader lean back and try to figure out how he was set up.' We're all used to sf writers who boast about their own virtues. Here's one writer who boasts accurately.

Some of the pieces in Fire Watch (since I'm a very easily surprised person) kept their clues securely hidden from me. Only in 'A letter to the Clearys' did I feel that I knew what the author was doing. A family waits for the 'letter from the Clearys'. Soon it becomes obvious that it will not arrive. There are no more Clearys in the world. Members of the family set out on expeditions to find other people left after The Catastrophe -- but meanwhile hide all traces of themselves from marauders. Only at the end of the story did I realize Willis's point: that large numbers of families might be equally adept at hiding all traces of themselves, that the 'Clearys' might indeed be out there somewhere. But nobody says this. The story, like the others in the collection, is made up from delicate touches and double takes.

Lincoln's Dreams is a fantasy novel that recently won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. It is an extraordinary achievement but, like so many of the interesting sf novels of the 1980s, not science fiction. Annie, the main character of the novel, suffers from very vivid dreams. The dreams prove to be, as Jeff Johnston discovers, transcriptions from the experience of Robert E. Lee as he conducted his battles during the American Civil War. So why is the novel called Lincoln's Dreams? I'm not sure. Annie's therapist is researching Lincoln's dreams, the ones he had shortly before his death. And somehow he has set up Annie as an unwitting subject for his investigations. Maybe this is science fiction after all; a dark and twisted morality tale about the dangers of the experimental method. To read the book is like being in the middle of a dream that will not end until you finish the book. Begin by 7 p.m. and you should finish before bedtime.

MARY AND THE GIANT

by Philip K. Dick (Gollancz 575-04243-5; 1987; 250 pp.; £11.95/\$A35.95)

THE BROKEN BUBBLE

by Philip K. Dick (Arbor House/William Morrow 55710-012-8; 1988; 244 pp.; US\$16.95)

RADIO FREE ALBEMUTH

by Philip K. Dick (Grafton 586-06936-4; 1987, first published 1985; 286 pp.; £2.95/\$A8.95)

In his otherwise brilliant The Novels of Philip K. Dick, Kim Stanley Robinson discounts the importance of Dick's non-sf works, only one of which was published in his lifetime. Perhaps Robinson doesn't like them because he read them in manuscript, a severe test for any book. In particular, Robinson disparages the amount of detail used by Dick in these books, and describes them as dull compared with the sf novels. Robinson also sees them as basically the same book written ten times. Philistines, of course, say the same about Dick's sf books.

Don't be put off reading Dick's non-sf novels because of Robinson's comments. Delay no longer. We have been stopped for thirty years from reading a major American writer of fiction, because his publishers and agent shunted him irrevocably into science fiction. You know all those writers who are now trying to recapture the 1950s by researching the fine detail about that period? They're wasting their time. Dick looked around him, saw everything, and wrote these piercing novels about his own period. Here are definitive documents about the 1950s in America, without sentimentality or a smokescreen of 1980s' concerns. Here is much of Dick's best writing. People spring to life in Mary and the Giant and The Broken Bubble in a way they rarely did in the sf novels. These people meet, fight, love, and ~~live~~ in separate ways. The Nature of Reality has not yet raised its transcendental head. Instead, Dick's characters seek the best way to live in an essentially sterile society. Mary and the Giant has the

best party scene since (although it was written before) the one in Breakfast at Tiffany's. In The Broken Bubble, the struggle for existence is felt as sharply as The Grapes of Wrath. The irony is that Americans would later remember the 1950s as an age of prosperity. Dick shows it as an age of exploitation. No guarantees, except moments of love that individuals can offer each other.

Radio Free Albemuth, probably written during the early 1970s but unpublished until recently, uses much of the material that also appears in Valis. Radio Free Albemuth, however, makes sense. It is both workmanlike political sf and a breakthrough in experimental narrative for Dick. As in Valis, he divides his fictional persona into two. In this novel, they are Philip K. Dick and Nicholas Brady. To Phil he ascribes much of his own pre-1970s autobiography. To Nicholas Brady he ascribes the visions he saw in the early 1970s. Both of them live in an alternative America, which is ruled by the dictator President Ferris. Phil and Nick discover strange facts about Ferris. They find themselves in the middle of a net drawn in by the malignant forces that now rule America. At the end of the novel, all dissent has been eliminated, until a whisper of hope is heard in the last pages. Radio Free Albemuth is a much better book than Dick's other last hurrah, the trilogy of Valis, The Divine Invasion, and The Transmigration of Timothy Archer.

SPACE DEMONS

by Gillian Rubinstein (Omnibus/Puffin 14-032199-3; 1986; 213 pp.; \$A4.95)

BEYOND THE LABYRINTH

by Gillian Rubinstein (Hyland House 947062-43-2; September 1988; 170 pp.; \$A19.95)

Australian teenagers and children are lucky. They don't have to put up with the endless array of dull prose-smiths who are the backbone of 'Australian literature'. They have their own brilliant writers, people with originality and liveliness. Gillian Rubinstein is one of the best. She is an able fantasy/science fiction writer, and she has a startling talent for bringing her characters to life. Her specialty, like Tolstoy's, is unhappy families. Both Space Demons and Beyond the Labyrinth show how the 'ordinary Australian family' is actually a cauldron of hell for all but its dullest members.

In Space Demons, four characters both escape their problems and magnify them by falling into the world of a new computer game from Japan. (Yes, I know this was done in the film Tron. But all the reviews said that Tron was dull.) Entering this world becomes addictive. When the characters discover that it feeds on the worst aspects of their own personalities, they can find a way to beat the game.

At first Beyond the Labyrinth seems merely a variation on another old sf idea: the lone alien visitor to Earth. Again, Rubinstein plunges straight to the heart of a difficult family situation before introducing the sf element. Victoria Hare spends a couple of months with a family who live on Spencer Gulf, South Australia. She misses her missionary parents and Africa. Her closest relatives, the family she stays with, seem to be at war with each other. Brenton Trethewan, fourteen years old, decides each move of his life by throwing dice. (Another familiar idea; this time the idea matters.) Victoria and Brenton find the alien person, seemingly a child the same age as they are, on the beach. She becomes the most important person in their lives. Fates entangle. There can be no happy ending -- only two alternative difficult endings. Choose your own by throwing the dice.

CREATOR

by Jeremy Leven (Hutchinson 09-141250-1; 544 pp.; \$A16.95)

I just realized that it's been eight years since I bought this book. (Eight long years. If the hardback is still around, it's probably priced at \$35.) Since then, a film has been made of the book. It starred Peter O'Toole, and

disappeared from Melbourne cinemas almost as soon as it arrived. I can't guess what the director did with this book; it seems designed to be unfilmable. Creator tells of a year in the life of Dr Harry Wolper, who is dying. He is using his biochemical skills in an effort to create life -- in particular, to recreate his long-dead wife, Lucy. Meanwhile, Boris, a character in a book he is writing, threatens to take over his life. Boris persuades his creator to let him live his own life, despite Harry's attempts to write nothing but ghastly events for Boris. This is tricksy stuff, and Jeremy Leven can swing on the high trapeze of words. For the first half of the book, Leven pulls so many stunts -- conundrums, crazy adventures, wild thoughts -- that it seems he will never get back to earth. Creator becomes very boring, until suddenly it comes to life. Boris's girlfriend Barbara is stricken by a cerebral haemorrhage, and Boris tries his best to save her. Creator becomes the story of every person who has deeply loved someone who slips beyond reach. Harrowing, but wonderful reading, despite the strange ending. Leven has as great a feeling for people as he has for aphorism: 'No matter how we are parcelled into egos, libidos, and ids, into psychotics, neurotics, and character disorders, our resolve is firm. Chemistry and physics have not led us to a new understanding of the human psyche. And all the atomic, hydrogen, and plutonium bombs that science can produce will never give us the power necessary to overcome the strength of a single man used to resist knowing the truth about himself.'

MYTHAGO WOOD

by Robert Holdstock (Berkley 425-08785-9; June 1986, first published 1984; 274 pp.; US\$2.95)

I've discussed this novel before. All I can do here is remind you to buy it in this (Berkley) paperback edition or in the British paperback edition. Mythago Wood is the most successful genre fantasy novel for some years, because it is not twee, complacent, or damned domestic, like most of the other fantasy books. The characters, as the blurb puts it, 'entered the heart of the legend', but the book reminds us that the people who form the stuff of legend would have been brutish, short, smelly, and very nasty.

THE SKOOK

by J. P. Miller (Hutchinson 09-160100-2; 1985, first published 1984; 307 pp.; £8.95/\$A18.95)

The Skook is one of those fantasies that is so crazy, unpredictable, and pleasurable that I can't work out why anybody wrote it, but I'm glad he did. Spanish Barrman, betrayed by his wife and drifting in life, is chased by a motorcycle gang into caves. They set off an explosion that would seem to entomb him. He crawls through a maze of caves and finds a deep underground chasm that seems to be linked to the far-off sea. There he sets about surviving, despite a close encounter with a prehistoric beast and a complete lack of resources. To his rescue comes an evanescent magical creature called a skook. At this point we realize, if we hadn't before, that The Skook is not a realistic story. It's a fabulous fable made up of seemingly realistic details. All the reader can do is enjoy Barrman's encounter with the skook. Miller touches on matters spiritual here, but it's a light touch. This is faux naif writing of a sophisticated type -- so sophisticated that I wondered whether Miller wasn't a great talent tossing off his first novel. Not so. The book's blurb says that Miller has been a novelist and screenwriter (Days of Wine and Roses) for many years. Maybe The Skook is what a writer needs to write in order to get him through midlife crisis.

RUSSIAN HIDE AND SEEK: A MELODRAMA

by Kingsley Amis (Penguin 14-005738-2; 1981, first published 1980; 251 pp.; £1.50/\$A4.95)

Russian Hide and Seek is dedicated to Margaret and Brian Aldiss, and it is

appropriate that Brian's discussion of the book (in ...And the Lurid Glare of the Comet) led me to it. Russian Hide and Seek is set in a world where Soviet Russia has long since made Britain a satellite state. A few of the bored Russian overlords, troubled by the destruction their colonial rule has caused in Britain, join a plot to overthrow the central Soviet government and restore Britain to its natives. The result is both a thriller (of course the counterrevolutionaries will fail, but what will trip them up?) and a realistic study of the way colonialism corrupts both the colonizer and the colonized. It's obvious that Amis wrote the book in order to warn Britons against the constant Threat of the Evil Russian Empire. (Amis is the best-known example of the post-war Angry Young Men who became Boring Old Farts. Amis still writes well, however.) Does he realize that Russian Hide and Seek is actually a brilliant study of Britain's colonial days? Change names and dates and you would have to change little else. Even this conspiracy probably happened in India in the 1880s.

MINDSWAP

by Robert Sheckley (Gollancz 575-03705-9; 1985, original publication 1966;
216 pp.; £8.95/\$A24.95)

DIMENSION OF MIRACLES

by Robert Sheckley (Gollancz 575-03706-7; 1985, original publication 1968;
190 pp.; £8.95/\$A24.95)

JOURNEY BEYOND TOMORROW

by Robert Sheckley (Gollancz 575-03707-5; 1985, original publication 1962;
189 pp.; £8.95/\$A24.95)
(Gollancz Classic SF No. 15, 575-04122-6; 1987; 189 pp.; £3.50/\$A11.95)

What can one say about Sheckley that hasn't been said before, especially by Brian Aldiss in his famous essay ('Why They Left Zirn Unguarded: The Stories of Robert Sheckley', This World and Nearer Ones, 1979)? Take one innocent character, preferably a very ordinary joe, give him a wonderful invention that enables him to scoot around the universe, and he will end up in a spectacular number of deadly, complex, and funny situations. Only a miracle can save him, and even that miracle is likely to cause trouble.

That's basically the plot of Sheckley's two most famous novels, Mindswap and Dimension of Miracles. In Mindswap, Marvin Flynn swaps minds with a Martian, but finds he cannot get back to his own body. In Dimension of Miracles, Carmody sets off around the universe, but cannot get back to his own Earth. It's fitting that Douglas Adams supplies the blurb to Dimension of Miracles. Without Sheckley there could not have been Adams. When he says 'Robert Sheckley is one of the great funny writers' he is probably saying under his breath 'And thanks for all the fish, Bob'.

Journey Beyond Tomorrow is rather different from Sheckley's other work from the 1950s and early 1960s. The main character, Joenses, is innocent, but he is not an anguished little guy. He is, I suspect, a pleasant version of Heinlein's Michael Valentine Smith — a character who puts a mirror up to a flawed world, rather than up to his own face. Journey Beyond Tomorrow has the first hint of the transcendental elements that would become important in Sheckley's later writing. In 1962, however, Sheckley stuck to rollicking comedy.

Why is Sheckley still unappreciated in sf circles, despite the fame of these novels? In recent years he's unsettled fans by producing books that are increasingly different from each other and from his comedies of the 1960s. But even in the 1960s he was an aficionado's secret treasure. It's because he offers no fake comforts. His universe is remorseless; it's not on humanity's side. In particular, it is not on the side of the rich and powerful. The innocent and defenceless might squeak through, but don't count on it.

THE MEN WHO MASTERED TIME

by David Butler (Heinemann 434-09906-6; 1986; 262 pp.; £10.95/\$A35.00)

I know about this book only because one of my best correspondents recommended it. It seems to have had no publicity anywhere in the science fiction press, although it should have been a contender for all the major awards. It is a tongue-in-cheek mock-Wellsian story about the friendship between Augustus Steerforth and his schoolboy friend, Inayat Khan. Part of the charm of the book is that the reader is never quite sure whether Butler is making fun of the English public school tradition or besotted by it. That Inayat Khan will prove to be the book's villain is demonstrated when he cheats during a school game of cricket. Khan spends his life cheating time and space as well, but nothing as evil as cheating at cricket. The double surprise ending, based on an accurate knowledge of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's life and poetry, makes a fine conclusion to this entertainment, which is pitched perfectly between Buchan-like melodrama and Aldissian humour.

GREASY LAKE AND OTHER STORIES

by T. Coraghessan Boyle (Penguin 14-007781-2; 1986, first publication 1985; 229 pp.; US\$6.95/\$A9.95)

T. Coraghessan Boyle is so much Flavour of the Year that he was interviewed recently in Rolling Stone. He's not a science fiction writer, but he has a sense of history and destiny. Three of the stories in this sprightly volume fit my definition of sf. The best story is 'On for the Long Haul', about a man who decides to build a foolproof bomb shelter for his family. 'Ike and Nina' is a wry piece of speculative alternative history, and 'The New Moon Party' is an alternative future story cum political satire. Boyle likes the flavour of scrumptious language, and he tells Stories That Want to Be Stories. His new novel is reported to exist, but Reading's of Carlton hasn't tracked a copy for me yet.

THE PLANET ON THE TABLE

by Kim Stanley Robinson (Futura 7088-8232-3; 1987, first publication 1986; 241 pp.; £2.95/\$A9.95)

Jenny Blackford, of the ASFR collective, is a woman of strong passions. In ASFR iii, 1, January 1988, she declared: 'I think I'm in love... I read Planet on the Table. Love!... I can even pinpoint the exact time I fell in love. It was on the last page of "Ridge Running"... I sat up in the bath, astonished.' No more. You'll have to write for that back copy of ASFR to find out what Kim Stanley Robinson did to Jenny Blackford in the bath. I, of course, am a less emotional person, and I merely emit odd cries of joy when encountering good bits in these stories. The best of them, 'The Disguise', is the best sf story of the 1970s. (Except Lem's 'The Mask', of course, but I don't know the date of its first Polish publication.) Reading it for the third time, I find it as clever and sardonic as ever. I hadn't read 'Ridge Running' before. After one perusal, I still don't know what it's about. Obviously Jenny Blackford does. 'Venice Drowned' is a favourite of mine: a tribute to today's Venice, even as it lies twenty feet down; a rousing sea adventure; a ghost story. 'The Lucky Strike' and 'Black Air' are also ghost stories — the ghosts of people as they might have been. Robinson has a compact, clear, muscular style and, in these stories, the ideas go with it. He has lots of admirers, too. (I disagree with Jenny on one point. The book's introduction, Kim's conversation with James Joyce, is a high point of the book, not one of its low points.)

ALWAYS COMING HOME

by Ursula K. Le Guin, compositions by Ann Barton, art by Margaret Chodos
(Harper & Row 06-015456-X; 525 pp. + musicassette: Music and Poetry of the
Kesh; 1985; US\$50/\$A89 (hb)/US\$25/\$A44.50 (pb))

Only Ursula Le Guin could invent a book-and-music package such as this and persuade a publisher to issue it. Always Coming Home is not a novel, but it is fiction. It is not utopian fiction, but it does try to let the reader inhabit its congenial society. And it is not only fiction, but a seamless combination of words, art, and music. At first glance, Always Coming Home seems to be merely a compendium of information about a far-future people, the Kesh, who live at the head of a drowned valley in what used to be California. Only gradually do we find that Le Guin is writing the intimate lived experience of individual Kesh. Some characters, like Stone Telling, give us personal histories. We see the lives of most of the other Kesh in glimpses. Life-affirming rituals are the constant regulators of the lives of these people. It is as important to die well as to live well. The arts, especially the performing arts, are as important as those activities we call work. Always Coming Home shows the most careful, but most passionate writing we have seen from Ursula Le Guin so far. Emotion runs most strongly in the plays and poems about death and reincarnation.

Is this the life Le Guin thinks she has lived, or the life she would like to have lived? Always Coming Home is neither a realistic account of a far future nor a prescription for paradise. Other people, more warlike than the Kesh and more like us, live over the next range. It's never quite clear how the Kesh defend themselves against military forces, or whether we should wonder about such matters.

I thought I had some idea of what this book was about until I wrote this inadequate review. Now I know I don't. A much better account is Yvonne Rousseau's in the January 1987 issue of ASFR. And even Yvonne, I suspect, has barely touched the sides of the immense chalice called Always Coming Home.

HUYSMAN'S PETS

by Kate Wilhelm (Bluejay 312-94219-2; January 1986; 247 pp.; US\$15.95)

During its first half, Huysman's Pets is a dextrous equivalent of ensemble acting. Various people, not knowing each other, are flung together by a zany set of coincidences. They meet when they all become concerned about a 'rest home' in the country, an estate that turns out to be a prison for highly gifted young people. Stanley Huysman, who set up the project, has been dead for some time. His secret is both sought and protected by various dangerous types. When everybody meets at the end, the Big Secret turns out to be one that is all too familiar to science fiction readers. And even the Bigger Secret, the one revealed in the last few pages, got a yawn from me. The memorable elements in Huysman's Pets are the people themselves: the couple who buy a jerrybuilt house, only to discover that it hides a counterfeiting plant; the author who sets out to write Huysman's biography and wishes he hadn't; his ex-wife, who keeps bumping into her ex-husband all over the place; and Lenn Lauder, the hapless Secret Service tough who finds that nothing is easy anymore, not even being tough.

ALL THE TRAPS OF EARTH AND OTHER STORIES

by Clifford D. Simak (Avon 380-45500-5; August 1979, first published 1962;
278 pp.; US\$2.25)

You would be hard put to find this particular edition of All the Traps of Earth, but it's probably been reprinted often since 1979. I read it because Mark Linneman was giving a talk to the Nova Mob (Melbourne's sf discussion group) on Clifford Simak, and I needed to catch up on his work. I was surprised at how few of these stories had the melancholy country tone that you usually find in Simak's novels. During the 1950s Simak was at his best, as is shown by some of the stories here.

I particularly liked 'No Life of Their Own', a loony comedy about visiting aliens, farm folk, and people who disappear when they step into a jim-dandy little time machine. They become strange ghostly figures, nearly in our world, but not quite. 'Crying Jag' is also a pleasant piece of craziness. 'Drop Dead' is the classic story about the terrestrial colonists landing on a seemingly innocuous but deadly and mysterious alien planet. A nicely ambiguous ending. Other stories include 'All the Traps of Earth' and 'The Sitters' (both soggily Simakian, but memorable), 'Installment Plan' (over-long), 'Condition of Employment', and 'Project Mastodon'. You've probably read all these stories before. I hadn't. My pleasure.

TOOL OF THE TRADE

by Joe Haldeman (Morrow 688-07245-3; 1987; 261 pp.; US\$15.95)
(Gollancz 575-04118-8; 1987; 261 pp.; £10.95/\$A31.95)

Except for Kate Wilhelm, sf writers have been wary of mixing the science fiction and thriller genres. Sf fans, after all, want Other Worlds, even if they are merely simplified versions of our own. Thriller fans want Authenticity: lots of facts and figures, detailed pictures of well-known but slightly exotic locales, and people who live next door but turn out to be spies. Grit rather than gloss. In Tool of the Trade, Joe Haldeman has mixed the genres skilfully. The sf invention is a small wristwatch. It emits high-frequency sound waves that enable Nicholas Foley to command any person to do anything. This includes telling people to forget everything that's just happened. Foley is a 'sleeper', a middle-aged man living well but quietly in Boston, who is trained to be a KGB agent when needed. The CIA twigs that he exists. To escape detection, Foley uses his wristwatch at an ever-increasing rate. Eventually he leaves a pattern of non-existence. A fantasy device becomes the user's trap. Neat, concentrated writing; detailed exploration of interesting situations. A novel that should have earned a few awards from the sf community, but didn't.

MATILDA AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT

edited by Damien Broderick (Angus & Robertson/Sirius Paperbacks 207-15734-0; 1988; 263 pp.; \$A12.95)

I reviewed this in The Melbourne Report (sent out in my FAPAZINE to most people receiving this issue of SFC) and The Age (where I gave an incorrect plot summary of Lucy Sussex's story), so I won't do it all over again. Much more detailed reviews have appeared in The Age Monthly Review (Rosaleen Love) and Australian Book Review (Marie MacLean). Matilda at the Speed of Light is the fourth of Angus & Robertson's 'report cards' on the state of Australian sf. The first two were the Pacific Books of Australian SF, edited by John Baxter in the late 1960s. Damien Broderick edited The Zeitgeist Machine in the 1970s. Matilda is not so obviously a 'Best Of' as the earlier three books. Damien has avoided many obvious items, particularly those appearing in Van Ikin's Science Fiction anthology (UQP, 1982). But he's picked up on some stories that should have been reprinted before, especially Francis Payne's 'Albert's Bellyful'. (Here's a bit of trivia. When Frank offered it to MUSFA's Yggdrasil magazine in 1977, it didn't have a name. When I was typing the stencils for Yggdrasil, I gave that story its current name. And it stuck.) Leanne Frahm's is the best short story I read in 1988. (My notes say: 'A real zipper with a kicker in its bum.' Informative notes.) Other favourites of mine are Cherry Wilder's 'Odd Man Search' (which I think has already become the basis of a novel) and George Turner's 'Not in Front of the Children'.

THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK

by John Updike (Penguin 14-010218-3; 1987, first published 1984; 316 pp.; \$A8.95)

I haven't seen the George Miller film of The Witches of Eastwick, but reviews indicate that it makes explicit what is merely implicit in the novel -- that Darryl Van Horne is the devil come to town. Jane Smart, Alexandra Spofford, and

Sukie Rougemont are witches in both the novel and the film. Darryl Van Horne is the new man in the small New England town of Eastwick. He is rich, reclusive, attractive, and single. The three witches throw themselves at him, and each, in a way, succeeds. The friendship between them unravels, and eventually they foreswear magic. The devil, if that's what he is, eludes them. The Witches of Eastwick is the best written of the books I'm reviewing in this column, but it leaves the reader dissatisfied. Details are endlessly wonderful, particularly of the witches' pranks. But having thought up a nice conceit, Updike has no idea what to do with it. In the end he lets the idea sag under its own weight, leaving nobody satisfied.

WHO GOES HERE?

by Bob Shaw (plus 'The Gioconda Smile') (Gollancz 575-04259-1; 1988, first published 1976/1977; 253 pp.; £2.95/\$A8.95)

VERTIGO

by Bob Shaw (Gollancz 575-02559-X; 1978; 160 pp.; £4.50/\$A14.50)

DAGGER OF THE MIND

by Bob Shaw (Gollancz 575-02612-X; 1979; 173 pp.; £4.50/\$A14.90)

A BETTER MANTRAP

by Bob Shaw (Gollancz 575-03083-6; 1982; 192 pp.; £6.95/\$A22.95)

In his own unemphatic way, Bob Shaw is a constantly satisfying sf writer. He reminds one of the best of the Carnell writers, although he didn't publish with Carnell's magazines. Shaw's prose is workmanlike, his ideas well developed, and his characters, though rather ordinary, are central to his novels and short stories.

What most of Bob Shaw's fiction lacks is humour. A peculiar thing to say about a writer who has contributed some of the funniest articles ever published in fanzines. Yet Shaw avoided humour until he wrote Who Goes Here?, probably because his publisher kept telling him that 'humour doesn't sell'. Perhaps it doesn't. Who Goes Here? remains Bob Shaw's only humorous novel. It's a very good one, relying mainly on situation comedy for its effects. Private Peace has joined the Space Legion, for reasons he cannot remember. He wants to get out. He wants to find out how he was shanghaied. He spends the rest of the novel trying to answer unanswerable questions. There is a peculiar 'happy ending'. In its own way, Who Goes Here? is as anti-authoritarian as Harry Harrison's Bill the Galactic Hero. (I don't remember anything out the novelette 'The Gioconda Smile', which now appears in this paperback edition.)

In most of his novels, Bob Shaw shows characters of dogged stoicism. Placed in tense situations without warning, they scramble their way through the plot, never quite achieving a 'happy ever after' ending. Vertigo is the most satisfying Bob Shaw novel since Ground Zero Man (recently reissued as The Peace Machine). In a society where everybody travels by anti-gravity harness, policeman Robert Hasson finds himself grounded because he suffers from vertigo. Sent to recuperate in Canada, he meets a situation that forces him to return to the skies. The plot is a bit predictable, the scenes of aerial high jinks are the best Shaw has written, and the characters are worth meeting.

Dagger of the Mind owes something to the novels of Philip K. Dick. Shaw's character suffers so badly from hallucinations that eventually he cannot tell which reality he's inhabiting. These scenes are well done. If the book does not seem to triumph, it is because Shaw concentrates on the melodrama and not on the humorous detail that Dick often brought to similar tales. Again I wonder why Shaw suppresses his talent for humour. A funny version of Dagger of the Mind might have brought Shaw the fame that eludes him in America.

I like the Better Mantrap collection, although most of the stories are not very good. I gave a high rating to only one story, 'Frost Animals'. And yet I like

Shaw's modest, doggy-friendly approach to short stories so much that I would recommend a Bob Shaw collection above one from a more prickly writer. A Better Mantrap adds up to more than its parts, and would definitely be one of those books to buy for those people who don't really think they like science fiction (but would rather like to try).

BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR 10

edited by Terry Carr (Pocket/Timescape 671-42262-6; July 1981; 434 pp.; US\$13.50)

BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR 11

edited by Terry Carr (Pocket/Timescape 671-44483-2; July 1982; 438 pp.; US\$13.95)

BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR 12

edited by Terry Carr (Gollancz 575-03156-5; 1983; 430 pp.; £9.95)

BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR 13

edited by Terry Carr (Gollancz 575-03513-7 (hb), 575-03557-9 (pb); 1984; 378 pp.; £9.95/\$A31.95 (hb), £4.95/\$A14.95 (pb))

BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR 14

edited by Terry Carr (Gollancz 575-03745-4 (hb), 575-03747-4 (pb); 1985; 376 pp.; £9.95/\$A31.95 (hb), £4.95/\$A17.95 (pb))

BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR 15

edited by Terry Carr (Gollancz 575-03912-X (hb), 575-03913-2 (pb); 365 pp.; £10.95/\$A34.95 (hb), £4.95/\$A17.95 (pb))

BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR 16

edited by Terry Carr (Gollancz 575-04084-X (hb), 575-04085-8 (pb); 1987; 388 pp.; £10.95/\$A34.95 (hb), £3.95/\$A15.95 (pb))

CIRQUE: A NOVEL OF THE FAR FUTURE

by Terry Carr (Fawcett 449-23556-4; 1978, original publication 1977; 223 pp.; US\$1.75)

THE SCIENCE FICTION HALL OF FAME, Vol. IV: NEBULA AWARD WINNERS 1970-1974

edited by Terry Carr (Avon 380-89710-5; July 1986; 434 pp.; US\$4.95)

At the most basic level, Terry Carr's 'Best of' collections have been the benchmark of sf short-story writing because Carr predicted the Hugo and Nebula winners and nominees more reliably than any other anthologist. This was despite the fact that he had to prepare his list of contents well before either the Nebula or Hugo nominees were announced. Terry Carr, it seemed, saw to the centre of the body science-fictional, and divined its collective innards. Perhaps that's why I didn't like most of the stories he chose. Usually I would agree with three or four stories in each collection, and hate the rest of them. I would finish a Terry Carr collection believing that I knew what the sf industry was doing (nothing much, except maybe outside of USA), and where it was going (nowhere). Perhaps the effect became circular. Maybe editors published stories that Terry Carr might pick up for an anthology, assuming that that was the sort of story that won Nebulas and Hugos.

But Terry Carr is now dead, and it seems unlikely that anyone will replace him. Gardner Dozois is trying to fill the void by publishing a Giant Anthology every year. I haven't caught up with any of his volumes yet. Other anthologists have never been as good at producing a readable package. Locus reported that Robert Silverberg would continue the 'Best of' collections, but no 1987 collection has appeared at the time of writing (November 1988).

Terry Carr was indispensable, that's all. If some of his collections seemed dull, it was because sf has lots of dull years. Gems that appear in the above-listed anthologies include Clifford Simak's 'Grotto of the Dancing Bear' (from No. 10), Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Venice Drowned' and Damon Knight's 'Forever' (from No. 11), Ian Watson's 'Slow Birds', Connie Willis's 'The Sidon in the Mirror', and Richard Cowper's 'The Tithonian Factor' (from No. 13), John Varley's 'Press Enter' and Connie Willis's 'Blued Moon' (from No. 14), and Michael Bishop's

'A Gift from the Graylanders', Robert Silverberg's 'Sailing to Byzantium', Connie Willis's 'All My Darling Daughters', and John Crowley's 'Snow' (from No. 15).

It seems likely that Terry Carr knew he had little time left when he edited No. 16. Perhaps that's why he made it the most consistently enjoyable of these collections -- but it still shows what is wrong with current sf. Stories I enjoy include Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Escape from Kathmandu', Robert Silverberg's 'Blindsight', Judith Moffett's 'Surviving', and John Varley's 'Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo'. There are no bad stories, and most of them have some memorable quality. But there are almost no new ideas here, only smooth rewriting of old ideas. Silverberg's 'Blindsight' is the only surprising story here: a convincing puzzle piece with a twist I had not seen before. Terry Carr put vast amounts of work into these anthologies; is this all he could find?

Some of us believe that Terry Carr should have written far more of his own fiction and spent less time editing other people's. Cirque was his only novel. Buy it if you can still find it. A plot summary makes it sound gormless. I quote the back-cover blurb: 'Millennia in the future, Earth has become a backwater planet... Its one jewel is the City on the Abyss... But in the Abyss there lives the Beast... And now, after centuries, it's climbing out of the Abyss to claim its own...' And behold, there is the City, and sure enough, there is the Beast. But there are also people in this story. Apart from nice scenic setpieces, the book is made up entirely of its characters, and that's unusual in sf. Cirque is not a masterpiece but, like Terry Carr's short fiction, is a worthy memorial to the man.

(I mention The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Vol. IV only because Terry Carr is officially the editor. Since the collection was limited to the Nebula Winners 1970-4, he was not able to choose the stories. I rarely agree with award winners, but the collection includes some stories I like: 'The Missing Man' by Katherine MacLean, 'A Meeting with Medusa' by Arthur C. Clarke, and 'The Day Before the Revolution' by Ursula Le Guin. 1973 scores the bullseye: 'The Death of Doctor Island' by Gene Wolfe, 'Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand' by Vonda McIntyre, and 'Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death' by James Tiptree Jr. Three of the Nebula winners came originally from anthologies edited by Terry Carr.)

LITTLE, BIG

by John Crowley (Bantam 553-01266-5; September 1981; 538 pp.; US\$8.95)

I'm hard put to say why I dislike Little, Big, since everybody else seems to like it a lot. Crowley has a lush but firm hand with the English sentence, and anybody wanting to praise the book could pick paragraph upon paragraph to justify a case. Whether you like the book or not depends on what you take its story to be. Smoky Barnable, in my account, marries Daily Alice Drinkwater, and hence is captured by a fairy family who live in a vast house deep in the American woods. This family sees itself as conducting a timeworn battle against its enemy who is, I presume, humanity. The family does not actually do much, since all events turn out in its favour. Worse, members of this family know how and when things will turn out well for them. The only person who never twigs to what is going on is poor old Smoky Barnable, who dies at the end without becoming aware of the nature of the people he was among. Fundamentally there is no story at all, although there are many events. If the ending is inevitable, nothing can be said to have happened. Since these damned fairies set up everything to bring about the inevitable, they can do anything they like. They are absolutely complacent. Little, Big is anti-human. The essence of being human is that nothing is certain, that any calamity or miracle might occur next minute. That's what makes life worth living. More importantly, it what makes novels worth reading. With absolute certainty comes absolute boredom. Which, in the end, is my reaction to Little, Big, no matter how delectable its sentences.

THE FACELESS MAN

by Jack Vance (Gollancz 575-04052-7; 1987, first published 1971; 206 pp.; £2.50/\$A7.95)

THE BRAVE FREE MEN

by Jack Vance (Gollancz 575-04053-X; 1987, first published 1972; 224 pp.; £2.50/\$A7.95)

THE ASUTRA

by Jack Vance (Gollancz 575-04052-1; 1987, first published 1973; 187 pp.; £2.50/\$A7.95)

Like many other series, Jack Vance's 'Durdane' trilogy begins well, and disappears into pointless rigmarole by the third book. Only the first volume, also known as The Anome, has much reason for existence. Its pastoral world is the main attraction. Gastel Etzwane crosses it continually, travelling by overhead windlass-powered carriage. He seeks the Faceless Man, the planet's anonymous ruler (familiar from other Vance novels). Tracking him down occupies the first book. Battles and adventures litter the other two volumes, which are diverting but not memorable.

WHAT HAPPENED TO EMILY GOODE AFTER THE GREAT EXHIBITION

by Raylyn Moore (Donning Starblaze 915442-51-2; 1979; 188 pp.; US\$4.95)

This novel comes from the first batch of Donning Starblaze books, and therefore is probably no longer available (especially as the company has changed owners since 1979). But I caught up with What Happened to Emily Goode after the Great Exhibition recently, and am running this review in the hope that somebody will reprint it. After the Great Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia, Emily Goode enters some kind of time warp. (They're all over the place, you know.) Pitched forward to the Philadelphia of 1976, she finds it not much to her liking. Emily Goode is a lady of taste and discretion. She is not at all amazed by a hundred years of technological improvements. She decides that the later world is tacky and down at heel. 1976 suffers from a drop in standards. Moore makes gentle fun of her all-too-superior heroine, but she is much less gentle in lampooning our current 'civilization'. Emily Goode springs from an original view of life of an author who should be much more widely known in the sf field.

THE CHANGELINGS OF CHAAN

by David J. Lake (Hyland House 908090-82-X; 1985; 170 pp.; \$A14.95)

WEST OF THE MOON

by David J. Lake (Hyland House 947062-44-0; 1988; 249 pp.; \$A22.95)

The Changelings of Chaan came close to winning the Australian Children's Book of the Year Award in 1986, which means that it was highly successful. It's not hard to see why; certainly it is Lake's most satisfactory novel yet. It tells the story of John Hastings, an English boy, and Ajo, a prince of Chaan, a country that somewhat resembles Thailand. They seek the Four-Jewelled Crown, a symbol that will, of course, save Chaan, which is currently under attack. In order to retrieve the Crown, the boys must go backward in time and through mysterious regions of experience. Here Lake triumphs. Whereas until now he has been a bit plodding and earthbound in his adventure novels, in The Changelings of Chaan he steps the light fantastic, the dance of the gods, with spirit and energy. The book is a ripping good yarn until the boys return to the present day — families, mum and dad, all that boring stuff. (But even Enid Blyton's characters had to put up with parents from time to time.) Chris Johnston's maps and Stephen Campbell's jacket design and illustrations make this a pleasing book to own.

West of the Moon is a much less satisfactory book. Lake returns to the ploy he uses in most of his early sf books: pretending to put difficulties in the way of his main characters, but actually giving them success on a plate. Mark and Meg Tremain step through a fairly peremptory tunnel between universes, and arrive

in a medieval-type kingdom that is beset by difficulties. Mark and Meg have no resources but their attractiveness. Everything falls in their favour. Needless to say they rescue the kingdom, after a few upsets. Mark's easy complacency and snobbery are hard to take. Here is the ultimate yuppie hero for a younger yuppie generation.

Yet if I were thirteen years old, would I prefer David Lake to Gillian Rubinstein or Diana Wynne Jones? Of course I would. I would be fascinated by the endless details of Lake's kingdom, and would enjoy the sure success of its hero. I wouldn't want to read books that faithfully mirror a teenager's domestic difficulties. Buy David Lake for your kids, even if you disapprove of his writing.

FLIES OF A SUMMER

by Peter Kocan (Angus & Robertson 207-15775-8; May 1988; 175 pp.; \$A17.95)

I reviewed this in Dreams and False Alarms 5, which should have gone to any person receiving this magazine. This is an elegant little Australian novel, as well suited to the youngadults' market as to the general fiction or science fiction markets. Kocan draws humour, adventure, and irony from a situation familiar to sf readers: the total takeover of Earth by an alien race. Humans have been deprived of their history. A group of children, brought up by the aliens, seek a way of escape. I wouldn't have thought such an old sf situation had any new life in it. Kocan proved me wrong.

UP THE LINE

by Robert Silverberg (Gollancz 575-04038-6; 1987, original publication 1969; 250 pp.; £2.95/\$A7.95)

TO LIVE AGAIN

by Robert Silverberg (Gollancz 575-03989-2; 1987, original publication 1969; 231 pp.; £2.95/\$A7.95)

A TIME OF CHANGES

by Robert Silverberg (Gollancz Classic SF No. 3, 575-03820-9; 1986, original publication 1971; 221 pp.; £2.95/\$A7.95)

TOM O'BEDLAM

by Robert Silverberg (Gollancz 575-03773-3; 1985; 320 pp.; £9.95/\$A26.95)

Here are Robert Silverberg's two best novels of the late 1960s, plus the only Silverberg novel published so far in the 'Gollancz SF Classics' series. They are worth comparing with Tom O'Bedlam, the most recent Silverberg novel I've read.

Up the Line and To Live Again show that Silverberg's strength has always been deft melodrama, not the Deep and Meaningful Emotional Angst he was peddling in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Up the Line is a jaunty tale of time paradoxes, with lots of sex thrown in. It has a memorable last scene, showing that famous historical scenes are probably so chockful of time travellers that there is no room for bona fide historical characters.

To Live Again is just as jaunty: a lurid tale of sexy, rich, and powerful people who take on other people's bodies in order to remain immortal. The vile and complex strategies undertaken by the body snatchers are complicated and even rather amusing. I'm not sure whether Silverberg meant to write a comedy.

A Time of Changes is not, however, one of sf's classics, no matter what Gollancz says. It's a plodding, pedestrian, silly book, one of the weakest of the novels Silverberg produced in his days of self-proclaimed great literary writing. (I can't remember whether or not he used that phrase about himself. But in the early 1970s he certainly made claims that any writer, let alone an sf writer, would have

difficulty defending against readers with a sense of humour.) If Gollancz is committed to including Silverberg in its SF Classics series, why not pick one of at least a dozen other books? My vote would go to Downward to the Earth. Others (not me) would choose Dying Inside, especially after the praise that Aldiss and Wingrove gave it in Trillion Year Spree. Better still, why not an omnibus volume of Silverberg's very best short stories?

In conversation, a local sf writer and critic sneered at the clipped, threadbare style used by Silverberg in Tom O'Bedlam, but a glance at the book will show that his style has improved since the overwrought books of the 1970s. Ponderousness has given way to snappy, demotic descriptions and dialogue, used economically to reveal situation and character. Tom O'Bedlam switches rapidly from one set of characters to another, a device that works here, although in most sf books it doesn't. In a post-holocaust California, Tom O'Bedlam has visions of aliens who will visit Earth to rescue humanity. Other people begin to experience these visions as dreams. Various groups move north, driven by their dreams. They converge on a psychiatric hospital, whose therapists and patients have been conducting research into the dreams. Individual passions merge into the general passion. Should people trust Tom O'Bedlam or not? Do the aliens exist? Which humans can be trusted? Silverberg constructs his tale tightly, making much of the characters. Irony rules events. I like this latter-day Silverberg very much.

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS

by James Morrow (Gollancz 575-03972-8; 1986, first published 1986; 319 pp.; £10.95/\$A29.95)

This is the Way the World Ends is the oddest good book I've read in years. I found it odd because I couldn't work out what was happening in it. When Morrow told me at the end, I didn't believe it. Something in me balked at a novel in which most of the characters are ghosts of a future that didn't happen. The future, that is, which is the one that was not obliterated by nuclear warfare. Yet these ghostly figures are corporeal enough to try and execute the people who caused that war. And the trial takes place in Antarctica, after the holocaust. Somehow James Morrow's anger makes this weird machine of a book work. So does his sense of humour. Put them together and you have something like the scorching fire that burns through books like Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five. Morrow is not as smooth a cook as Vonnegut. He splats poisonous custard pies in the face of the reader. I'll stand in line for the next one.

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF HALLEY'S COMET

by John Calvin Batchelor (Granada 586-05990-3; 1984, first published 1980; 424 pp.; £2.95/\$A8.95)

In Australian Science Fiction Review, ii, 6, November 1987, Russell Blackford puts such a persuasive case for the works of John Calvin Batchelor that I'm reluctant to register dissent. Without having read Batchelor's latest, American Falls, I will say that Batchelor runs out of steam half way through a novel. The Further Adventures of Halley's Comet begins with a wonderful concoction of weird characters who seem over concerned about the return of Halley's Comet in 1986. All the forces of Big Money are here, represented by people who carry the ghosts of the Vietnam War around in their heads. The pages telling of the craziest days of the Vietnam War are the most passionate in the book, echoing Batchelor's brilliant exposition (in The Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica) of the New Benthamite justification for that war. Is Batchelor the kind of raving pinko that sf fans fear? Not by Australian standards. He relishes the circus-like pizzazz of Big Capitalism, but also relishes the lunatic contradictions that undermine it. What Batchelor does not like is building a convincing plot. The plot of The Further Adventures of Halley's Comet rumbles on to the end, but I became tired of the book before page 200. If Batchelor would cut his novels in half, they would be more convincing.

DANGEROUS VISIONS

edited by Harlan Ellison (Gollancz SF Classic No. 16, 575-04144-7; 1987, first publication 1967; 544 pp.; £6.95/\$A19.95)

Many sf readers will find this one-volume edition of Dangerous Visions useful as a replacement for the awkward three-volume British paperback editions that have been issued over the years. Many will discover it for the first time, and perhaps wonder what all the fuss was about. The fuss, in this case, was Harlan Ellison's use of Dangerous Visions to proclaim the 'New Wave' of sf in America. (Judith Merril must have been annoyed, since she had been talking about the 'New Thing' since the early 1960s. Her own England Swings was the anthology that Dangerous Visions should have been. Most of the stories in England Swings came from Michael Moorcock's New Worlds magazine, where the New Wave really began.) Dangerous Visions seemed a curiosity in Britain and Australia because the New Wave had already broken before copies of this anthology became available. Which of these stories remain interesting twenty-two years later? Perhaps someone reading Dangerous Visions for the first time could write to me. The pieces I remember with affection include 'Faith of Our Fathers' by Philip K. Dick (probably because I reread it recently), J. G. Ballard's 'The Recognition', and Samuel Delany's 'Aye, and Gomorrah...'. Three stories out of thirty-three. I hope The Last Dangerous Visions has a better average, if and when it appears.

(Leo and Diane Dillon's original illustrations have been preserved in the new Gollancz edition of Dangerous Visions.)

FLOATING WORLDS

by Cecelia Holland (Gollancz SF Classics No. 26, 575-04280-X; July 1988, first publication 1975; 542 pp.; £3.95/\$A14.95)

If Floating Worlds is a 'neglected sf masterpiece', as Kim Stanley Robinson is quoted as saying on the front cover of this edition, part of the reason for that neglect could lie in the novel itself. It is an odd mixture of dissimilar elements: a flat, no-nonsense style more suited to kitchen-sink drama than sf; an sf environment that reminds me more of an Ottoman harem than an outer-space city; and characters who are somehow both more and less vivid than their background. Since Cecelia Holland is well known as a historical novelist, I suspect her of writing historical fiction disguised as space drama. Is, as the title suggests, the model for this novel the Japanese court of feudal times? How does one reconcile the odd mixture of gritty realism (in the style) and operatic melodrama (in the plot)? Try the first 50 pages of this book. You will be either bored stiff or hooked for another 500 pages.

ENDER'S GAME

by Orson Scott Card (Century 7126-0794-3; 1985; 357 pp.; £2.95/\$A8.95)

To read Ender's Game is like taking a long slow bite into a vast piece of chocolate, only to find at its centre nothing but a piece of dung. Ender's Game kept me reading to the end, since it is an accomplished example of the education-of-a-young-genius fable. Not that Ender sounds much like a genius, but he is much younger than the other clods, and he is better at learning to fight mock battles. I became annoyed by the sadism that underlies much of Ender's education, but did not realize how essential it was until I reached the end of the book. In a peculiarly self-congratulatory way, Card has produced the ideal education for a young fascist killer. Admirers of this book (who gave it the Hugo Award, and persuaded me to read it) say that Card shows some ironic purpose in this novel. I don't see it. The dry, flatfooted crunch of jackboots treads in the prose and the story-line. I won't be reading any more novels by Orson Scott Card.

SOME WILL NOT DIE

by Algis Budrys (Donning Starblaze 915442-52-3; 1978, parts originally published 1954, 1957, 1961; 179 pp.; US\$4.95)

This is one of those books that demonstrates what is Wrong With the State of Science Fiction Today. Some Will Not Die is really not much more than a Rambo of the future: fighter survives in a totally hostile environment; hell is other people; etc. The politics of the book are as right wing as you would find in any comparable sf book today. The difference -- between Pournelle in the 1980s, say, and Budrys in the 1950s -- is that Budrys's story is tense, well paced, vividly imagined, and nearly unputdownable, while Pournelle's work (for instance) is stodgy, preachy, slack, and guaranteed to produce sleep in the most distressed insomniac. If readers put up with such stodge today. It takes an enterprising small company like Donning/Starblaze to bring out a B-grade 1950s book that puts 1980s' books in the shade.

NIGHTMARE SEASONS

by Charles L. Grant (Doubleday 385-15956-0; 1982; 185 pp.; US\$10.95)

Writers of horror fiction seem divided between those who write so subtly the story disappears up its own infundibulum, and stories that are so gaudy that you need to squint to avoid the flying clichés. Charles Grant inclines towards the latter. He sets up four very nice horror situations in the one small town, Oxrun Station, somewhere in New England. This is the right rural location for subtle country shivers. But Charles Grant is too fond of the purple paint can. He treats us to a series of horrific melodramas, each crazier than the one before. Who cares about credibility? Throw subtlety out the window. For those who enjoy high-scream horror, buy this book. For myself, I wish I could get to work with an editor's red pen and trim Nightmare Seasons to the book I think it should have been.

THE WAR HOUND AND THE WORLD'S PAIN

by Michael Moorcock (Timescape 671-43708-9; 1981; 239 pp.; US\$12.95)

THE CORNELIUS CHRONICLES, Vol. II:

THE LIVES AND TIMES OF JERRY CORNELIUS

THE ENTROPY TANGO

by Michael Moorcock (Avon 380-75003; August 1986; first published: Lives and Times, 1976; Entropy Tango, 1981; 341 pp.; US\$3.50)

If I say that I think Michael Moorcock is a lazy writer, don't get me wrong. I know nothing of his work habits; he might work sixteen-hour days, for all I know; but he is still a lazy writer. Take The War Hound and the World's Pain, for example. The cover blurb sums up the story well: Graf Ulrich von Bek, 'killer, survivor, mercenary captain of fearful repute' takes refuge in a mysterious castle in the middle of a mysterious forest. 'The lord of the Castle is Satan himself... Lucifer will relinquish his claim on von Bek's lost soul, but the price of success is a quest that Lucifer cannot undertake. The Devil wishes to be reconciled with God...' Moorcock's rendering of this situation is excellent, making the reader anxious to find out how he resolves the moral and theological complexities of the situation. He doesn't. He is content with a barren tale of endless slogging over medieval landscapes. If only Stanislaw Lem had thought of such an idea. Or Calvino. Or even Durrell Schweitzer, whose fantasy books on a similar theme have all the dark agony that is missing in World's Pain.

The Jerry Cornelius novels and stories were another failure of Moorcock's, all the more noticeable because many of them appeared in the otherwise stimulating New Worlds magazine of the late 1960s. Although many New Worlds stories still seem fresh today, the Cornelius tales have dated completely. What did Moorcock have in mind when he invented Jerry Cornelius? A humorous killer anarchist, Cornelius appeared to have no moral viewpoint, except to make things difficult

for the powerful warmongers running the world in 1969. Anarchy and killer fantasy extended to the plots of the novels, few of which made sense. Some of this was fun at the time, but it's hard to guess who would read The Cornelius Chronicles in 1989. The only good Cornelius story was Norman Spinrad's 'The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde', which you might find in a Spinrad collection somewhere.

SOLDIER OF THE MIST

by Gene Wolfe (Gollancz 575-03928-0; 1986; 335 pp.; £10.95/\$A31.95)

THE URTH OF THE NEW SUN

by Gene Wolfe (Gollancz 575-04116-1; 1987; 372 pp.; £11.95/\$A34.95)

Usually I will not review books I simply don't understand. For this reason I'm not reviewing Gerald Murnane's latest novel, Inland (at least not until I've read it again). But in the sf field Gene Wolfe must be noticed. His achievement has been so substantial over the last twenty years that two new novels, appearing within a year of each other, must be recognized in some way. But I don't understand them.

Soldier of the Mist is about a mercenary soldier of the Greece of 479 BC. Latro has suffered a head wound that makes it impossible for him to remember events from one day to another. He writes down the events of each day each night so he can remember his own life in the morning. The purpose of this device evades me. I kept feeling that I should have read all the history Wolfe read while researching the book so I could make something of it. Soldier of the Mist is a meandering voyage around the ancient world, with Latro an oddly dispassionate observer, and his friends constantly annoyed that he cannot remember them in the morning. In this book Wolfe's style is threadbare and unresonant, and Latro isn't at all interesting. We suspect that he has witnessed important events and seen great visions, but I don't have the background knowledge to give them significance. Perhaps somebody will write to me to tell what all this is about.

Peter Nicholls, in Foundation 41 (Winter 1987) has already written a glowing review of The Urth of the New Sun, the sort of detailed appreciation that few sf books receive or deserve. But Nicholls doesn't convince me that The Urth of the New Sun is necessary, or even interesting. Gene Wolfe's 'Book of the New Sun' tetralogy seemed to exhaust the possibilities of Severian and his far-future Urth. Why the need for a fifth novel? Wolfe seems anxious to answer this question, since much of The Urth of the New Sun is a tick-the-box reminder list of people or events from the tetralogy. This fifth novel promises to answer the question: how will Severian save Urth? After reading The Urth of the New Sun I still don't know. Maybe I'm dense. Maybe I don't like Severian, and never did. (If he's a new Christ, he's a cold fish. And I don't believe he is 'his own man', as Nicholls asserts; he's as manipulated as all those other boring sf 'hermes'.) I suspect that Wolfe wrote this book too fast, and did not allow it the marinating and conking time he allowed for the first four volumes. Some essential aesthetic delight is missing here.

I don't get the point of a Gene Wolfe story or novel on the first reading. I realize this. But I don't feel impelled to read Soldier of the Mist or The Urth of the New Sun again. Perhaps I will, and will be proved wrong again. Or maybe a friendly correspondent will enlighten me.

MORE THAN HUMAN

by Theodore Sturgeon (Gollancz Classic SF, No. 2, 575-01448-X; 1985, original publication 1953; 233 pp.; £2.95/\$A7.95)

I read Sturgeon's More Than Human about ten years ago, because everybody said how wonderful it was. They were wrong. It has a clinging clamminess that seems like somebody running a hand over wet rubber. Sturgeon's short stories from the

same period have a directness and emotional punch that are missing from More Than Human. As many recent commentators have noted, Sturgeon puts his characters through hell, and seems to enjoy all that wonderful horribleness. So do lots of other people, since More Than Human is one of sf's classics, whether you or I like it or not.

THE UNTELEPORTED MAN

by Philip K. Dick (Berkley 425-06252-X; July 1983; first publication of first half, 1966; 202 pp.; US\$2.75)

(LIES, INC.)

by Philip K. Dick (Gollancz 575-03449-1; 1984, original material 1964; 199 pp.; £7.95/\$A23.95))

Once upon a time, Philip K. Dick wrote a novella called 'The Unteleported Man'. This appeared in Amazing Stories in 1964, and was one of the stories that made me a fanatical fan of Dick's work. In 1966 (I am told on page 199 of the Gollancz edition), Dick wrote 30,000 words of extra material for the Ace book version, but that extra material was not used. After Dick's death in 1982, an entire manuscript (minus two pages) turned up. Two versions of the 'complete' The Unteleported Man now exist, neither of them readable. One is the Berkley edition, under the original title. The other is Gollancz's Lies, Inc., edited by John Sladek. This, according to ace literary detective Damien Broderick, is not only unreadable because of its style but is almost incoherent. It contains overlapping and contradictory plot elements, second thoughts, the lot. This is the 'why bother?' project of the decade. In either edition, the added material is the worst writing of Dick's career. The original novella remains one of his better stories, and is quite clearly marked off from the later stuff. It would have been kinder to Philip Dick's memory to reprint the 1966 Ace short novel edition.

-- Bruce Gillespie, November 1988

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making remarks about the fact that fleshborers (piranha-like creatures) are part of the ecology, but Valans are of no use at all. The possibility that the Sharers might use biowar, even to the point of genocide, is remote, but does exist. The passive resistance methods of the Sharers are taken up by oppressed groups on Valedon itself. Spinel is one of the leaders. Another is an elderly cleric who belongs to a Patriarch-worshipping cult whose Patriarch seems a quite different Being from whomever is running the empire.

Despite the high seriousness of its themes and the intelligence of its treatment of the confrontation between good and evil, The Door Into Ocean isn't an unduly solemn book. It is full of wit and inventiveness, and even reminds me at times of the Star Wars trilogy. Joan Slonczenski delights in entertaining details — unusual creatures, bizarre customs, odd character quirks — so that the book is a rousing good read as well as satisfying to the mind and refreshing to the spirit. It is unique, and anyone interested in good sf should read it.

-- Diane Fox, October 1987

(*brg* The Door Into Ocean won the 1987 John W. Campbell Memorial Award.)