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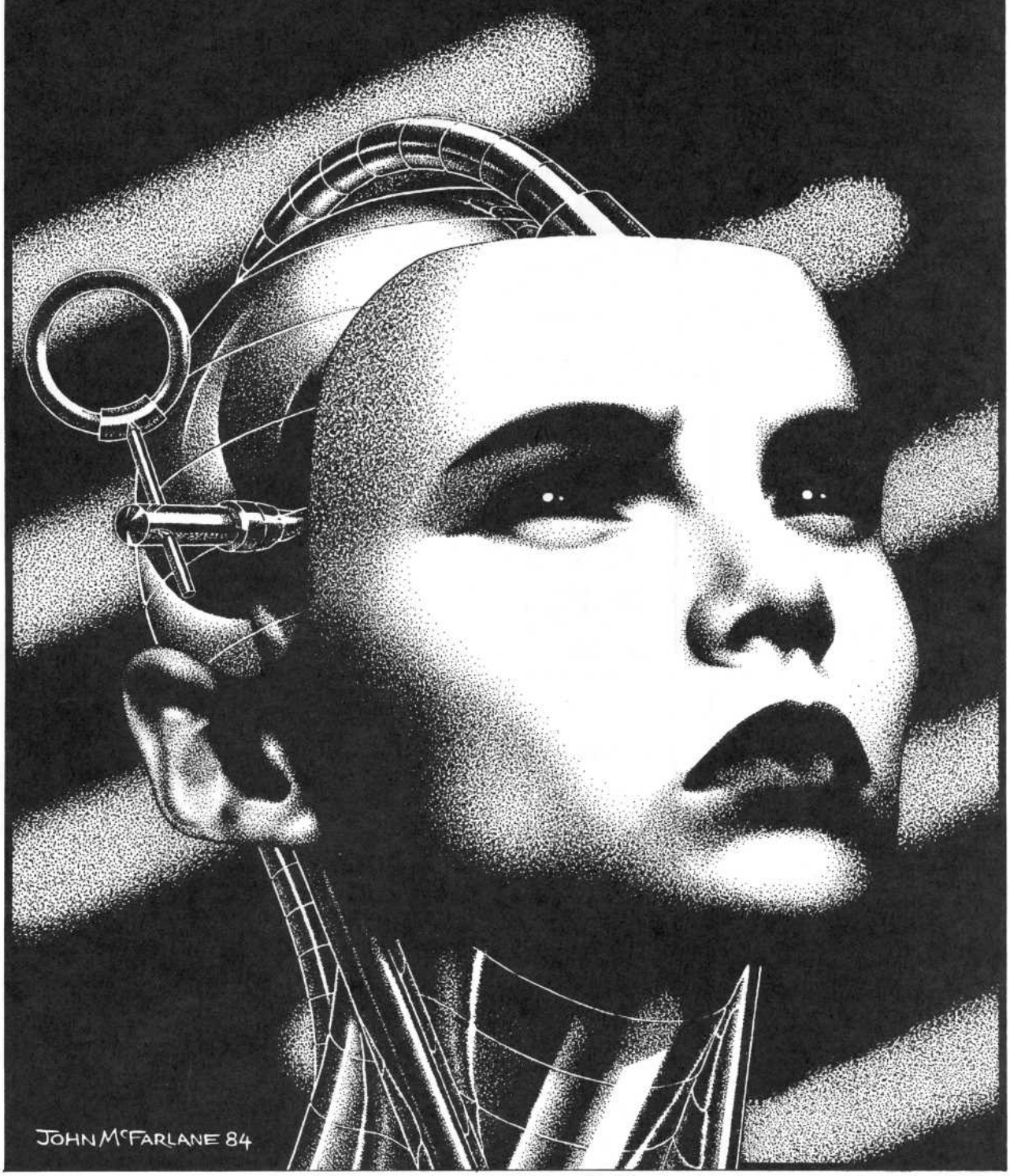
VECTOR



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CONTRIBUTORS

Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by a stamped envelope if they are to be returned. Submissions are preferred in typescript, with double spacing throughout. Footnotes should be numbered consecutively and grouped on pages separate from the text. Contributions should be in the range of 2000-6000 words, though shorter or longer submissions will be acceptable. Vector publishes essays, art, interviews, reviews. Please note there is no payment for publication. Members who wish to review books for Vector should write to the editor.

ADVERTISING

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DEADLINES

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MEMBERSHIP

The British Science Fiction Association is an amateur organization, formed in 1958, which aims to promote and encourage the reading, writing, and publishing of science fiction in all its forms. We publish - Vector, a bi- monthly critical journal; Matrix, a bimonthly newsletter/magazine; Focus, a biannual forum for writers and Paperback Inferno, a review magazine of the latest paperbacks. Other services include Orbiter, a postal SF writers' workshop, an SF Information Service, a postal Magazine Chain and an SF Lending Library. Membership costs £7.00 per year. For details write to:- Sandy Brown, 18 Gordon Terrace, Blantyre, Lanarkshire. G72 9NA or if you live in the USA:- Cy Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred, Detroit, Michigan, 48213, USA. The chairman of the BSFA is: Alan Dorey, 22 Summerfield Dr, Middleton, GRT Manchester.

EDITORIAL

Geoff Rippington

If you glance down the contents listing you would most probably find it difficult to discover a common link between the various pieces. But, remarkably (because it was not intended) the whole issue not only has a strong theme, but a theme that is extremely topical.

Most of you, I expect, have seen the short list for the Booker Prize and have noted with surprise and pleasure, mixed with disappointment, the name of J.G. Ballard. Not of course that we SF readers should be surprised as even five years ago, Ballard, in the words of the Nicholls' Encyclopedia was; 'one of the most important writers to work through the imagery of SF' - we have always known how good a writer he is. I said mixed with disappointment because the book in question Empire of the Sun (Gollancz £8.95) is, by all accounts, nothing to do with the science fiction genre or even the imagery of SF. Robert Nye, reviewing the book in the Guardian, takes the next step and tries to disassociate Ballard from his previous work; "the book deserves to be considered quite apart from his former work, not least because it marks a decisive break with his past reputation as essentially a science fiction writer.' - the implication being, if he is a SCIENCE FICTION WRITER, he cannot be any good...Leaving aside the historical factors of how this attitude came about, why is it still prevalent today?

Let's play that favourite game of the science fiction genre; "What If?". What if Ballard had written a novel on the same subject as Empire of the Sun which is just as good as his present one, but had decided, for some reason known only to him, to use the 'imagery of SF'

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CONTENTS

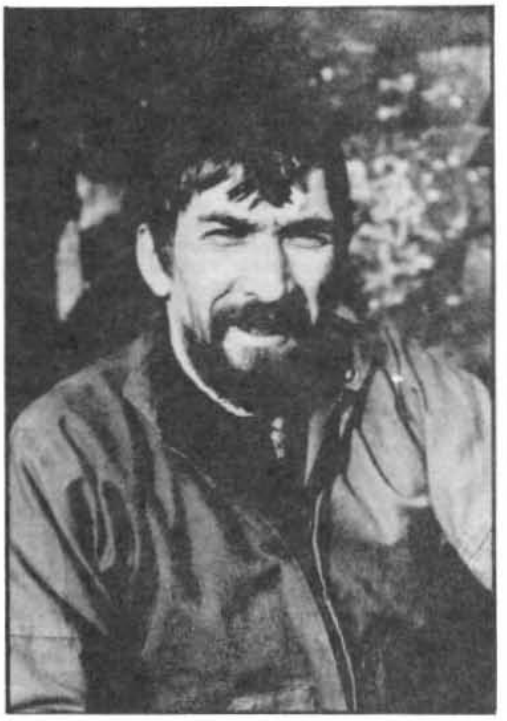
If you had borrowed a time machine in 1979 and for some obscure reason followed the history of the BSFA publications to the present day, you would most probably have a right to be confused. Let me put it another way - I'm confused so I am sure you must be! But whether we like it or not this confusion seems to be part of the BSFA's make-up (the reason for this I'll leave for you to decide). So let me put you straight - this magazine might be the same size, and might even look like the previous Matrix but it isn't - it is that Premier magazine; the one that is on the tip of everyone's tongue (but they never remember it); the one that publishes editorials which completely mystify a good 80% of the membership; the one that is having a new editor in the New Year as the present editor gave advance warning in May that he is reluctantly forced by circumstances - new job, new house and, if all goes well, 1st new member to the family on November 5th - to step down; the magazine whose contents are rather good this issue, so stop wasting your time reading this and get on to reading: VECTOR MAGAZINE: THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION.

ARTWORK: FRONT COVER BY JOHN MCFARLANE INTERIOR ARTWORK BY ALAN HUNTER.

M John Harrison:

The Condition Of Falling

ANDY DARLINGTON



M. JOHN HARRISON PHOTO CREDIT BRIAN CROPPER

You must remember this...

Track your mind back. "NEW WORLDS" magazine? England's New Wave? The heat-death of the Science Fiction universe?

M. John Harrison: "I began on "NEW WORLDS" in 1968; by then Michael Moorcock had been editing it for four years. The ideological terrain had long been mapped out in his editorials, and in guest editorials by writers such as Ballard and Aldiss. The unprecedented Arts Council Grant and equally unprecedented pornography charge were already historical". Yet through Harrison's short stories - and the novels that followed - it soon became obvious that he understood "the depths and subtleties of the genre to an extent that elevated his work far beyond that of his contemporaries" (editor of "SOMETHING ELSE" magazine).

Born in 1945 M. John Harrison's first professional sale was to the long-extinct "SCIENCE FANTASY" in 1966, followed by hard S.F. contributions to the "NEW WRITINGS IN SCIENCE FICTION" anthology series. His later work was featured in "QUARK", the excellent Savoy Dreams collection, the prestigious AGAIN, DANGEROUS VISIONS - and, of course, "NEW WORLDS", for which he was literary editor from 1968 to 1975. His elegantly crafted and meticulously fine-tuned critical essays for that journal launched damning invective against his chosen victims, a ritual literary slaughter that allowed no quarter, attacking all writing that he deemed imperfect, and all ideas that were mundane, hackneyed, or over-used.

In this way he set the standards against which his own work must be judged.

He lived in Camden (London) with what he claimed to be "the largest domestic cat in the world", relocated north to Glossop, and then to his current address, a small cottage on a steep hillside overlooking the Yorkshire village of Holmfirth - producing, a fistful of critically acclaimed novels on the way. The Committed Men, The Centauri Device, The Pastel City, A Storm of Wings, and In Viriconium; fantasies, according to "THE GUARDIAN" newspaper, "grounded in M. John Harrison's sense of reality" with the ability to "realise the unreal by brilliant selection of detail".

We met to discuss The Ice Monkey, a new short story collection he describes as part of a transitional process of moving out of the Science Fiction ghetto and into some less stylistically restricting definition. "My next book will have absolutely nothing whatever to do with S.F." he declares. "My stories and my fictions from now on will be human. They will have the human sympathy of a single human being for other single human being".

In the flesh he's often difficult to interpret. He's entertainingly self-opinionated in a style that's instantly recognisable from his "NEW WORLDS" essays. In a style that makes this conversation a lethal amputation from the genre he claims to be abandoning. A vehemently eloquent parting broadside at both Old and New Waves; but I get the impression that he's also fueled by a nervy energy that's humanly sensitive to any retaliatory slight.

M. John Harrison is "late evidence of the "NEW WORLDS" phenomenon". A writer whose style evolved out of - and transcended - the New Wave heat-death of the Science Fiction universe. Now he continues to embody its restlessly challenging and uncompromising spirit.

You must remember this...

DARLINGTON: Did you grow up reading conventional SF?

HARRISON: I grew up on everything. I read Science Fiction along with Boy's School Stories, Girl's School Stories, T.S. Eliot, books about horses. From the age of eleven to about age twenty I read genuinely omnivorously. I preferred fantasy with a religious flavour if I could get it - C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Tolkien. I adored T.S. Eliot from the moment I read the first line of "The Wasteland". And I still do.

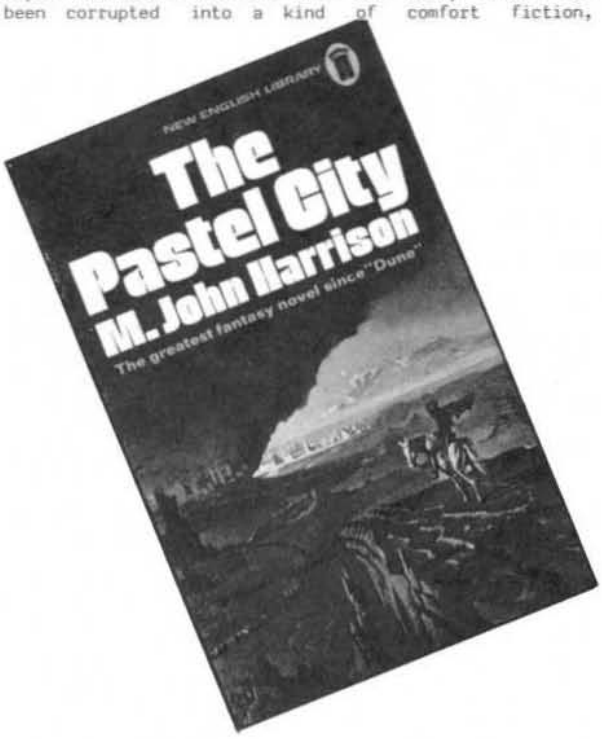
DARLINGTON: Was J.G. Ballard an influence on your development?

HARRISON: At about twenty this omnivorousness stopped, and I began to read only Science Fiction. This happened for two reason; the first is that I discovered J.G. Ballard. I became literally obsessed with his work for the two to three years that followed. So yes, he did influence The Committed Men, and one or two of the early short stories - "Visions of Nonad" for instance. The second reason was that I began to work on "NEW WORLDS" and I didn't have time to read anything but review copies - and of course, they were all SF. It ruined my head until about 1976 when I finally packed it all in. During that time I never read a good book, never even read a decent book. I reckon at the age of twenty, although I was everything you would expect a young writer to be, that is - naive, not very good, etc. etc. - I could at least have BEEN a writer. But by the time I was twenty-four/twenty-five, I could only be a S.F. writer, because then I was reading nothing else. My whole head had become stuffed with the rubbish, even though I hated most of it, it still went in. It was like being force-fed with dirty dripping. And it went in every single month - a hundred, two hundred American paperbacks on that sort of grey paper that smells of excrement. About four years ago I decided I would get rid of the last vestiges of all that stuff in my library. I just chucked the whole lot out. I don't read S.F. of any sort anymore. I reckon you are what you eat, solely. Science Fiction was a very expensive blind alley as far as I'm concerned. It allowed me to earn a living and make a very small reputation within the field, although nowhere else. The technique

of S.F. writers is so POOR. They don't KNOW anything, they don't READ anything but Science Fiction. It's not their fault, although to an extent it's their fault as much as it is their readers. The readers won't read anything but S.F.. They are like children who won't eat meat 'cos it hurts their teeth (with a sneer), or it makes them feel sick. So they eat cake all the time. Science Fiction publishers are there like confectioners, to supply lots of cake. The whole "NEW WORLDS" and the whole New Wave movement in S.F. was blown from the start by the very fact that if you eat nothing but cake then eventually your jaw atrophies. There is nothing else you CAN do. You may desperately want to be a great writer and say something worthwhile, but if you've spent your entire life reading and writing pap you haven't got a chance. You've got no techniques.

DARLINGTON: You once wrote a "NEW WORLDS" essay "The Literature of Comfort", which divided the history of Science Fiction into an approved S.F. of ideas (Wells, etc), and an escapist S.F. of comfort, which you traced from Frank Baum.

HARRISON: Yes. I remember the article. I dunno, it's a long time ago. I probably wouldn't agree in the sense that I don't think about things in those terms anymore. For instance - you say 'ideas' - I don't think writing is about ideas. I haven't for five or six years. Polemicists, propogandists, philosophers and politicians write about ideas. People who write fiction or poetry, they don't have 'ideas'. I don't want to go into it any deeper than that without my notebooks! But, I don't know... I still don't like escapism. I still think that S.F. is a literature of comfort mainly. Even the New Wave - the "NEW WORLDS" - style New Wave of the late 60's and early 70's - has been corrupted into a kind of comfort fiction,



particularly by many American writers, the so-called Labour Day group. Those people have simply stripped the nastier elements out of the New Wave, repackaged the sex, and sold the whole thing as 'Brotherly love' with lots of sex and furry animals. All of which has no interest for me at all. It's only purpose is to comfort people. If they NEED to be comforted that badly, then I suppose that's fair, but I don't think they do. I don't think anybody is in a poor enough shape to need Ursula Le Guin! I never have done (laughter). Really they should just stiffen their spines and get on with their lives - NOBODY needs Ursula Le Guin!

DARLINGTON: Critics invented a useful, and perhaps appropriate, phrase, "the school of cosy disaster". Originally they used it to describe the pre-New Wave tales of John Wyndham.

HARRISON: Yes. Of course, he specialised in the Middle-class disaster where everything was alright again at the end of the novel. If we all pull together and be nice and decent, thoroughly decent and Middle class, we shall get through. Remember the T.V. series "The Survivors"? That was straight 'cosy disaster'. Did you notice that there was always one lower-class person per episode? Like a token black. In every episode there was one, and he always spoke with a gnarly speech and touched his forelock and all that sort of thing. Horrible programme. It's a nice description though, 'cosy disaster'. We've specialised in it in Britain. Until - I was going to say, it wasn't until Ballard and Aldiss came along that we had any disasters that WEREN'T cosy - but they were grinding different axes anyway. You couldn't really call their things disaster stories. My The Committed Men was a not-very-cosy disaster.

DARLINGTON: New Wave was conceptual literature in that it was consciously reacting to the 'cosy' Science Fiction that preceded it. It wasn't market-orientated writing. The Atrocity Exhibition was conceptual S.F. in that it formed a manifesto, a statement about what J.G. Ballard thought Science Fiction SHOULD be doing.

HARRISON: That's true. It was a reaction, and a destructive one too, it was iconoclastic. The trouble is - is it worth producing that amount of iconoclastic energy to break up and let air into the hermetic escapist dreams of children? Is is worth it? Was it worth all that running around foaming at the mouth saying "this is terrible stuff"? I'm not sure it was. In fact, I'm quite sure it wasn't. It's not my place to criticise Jimmy (J.G.) Ballard - but what a waste of talent to be only reactive. To exist only in reaction against something which is palpably and obviously rubbish. It wasn't necessary. The Dada art movement was necessary in its time. It reacted against the entire monolith of established art - that's a lot. But Science Fiction wasn't very much. It was just a little genre which nobody took very seriously, which frankly, isn't of much use. S.F. has only been of use within literature when it was polemical. That is to say, when it was "1984", when it genuinely was a fiction of ideas, as in Huxley or Orwell. That seems to me to be the limits of its worth when it's considered as part of literature. In fact the movement in what you would call avant garde or modern S.F. today is very much towards a fiction of ideas. It's a Socialist fiction. I'm not interested in that.

DARLINGTON: Many of the more radical elements of SF now seems to have been absorbed into mainstream.

HARRISON: I don't know to be honest. I haven't been near a shop that sells it for two or three years. I haven't read any for so long.

DARLINGTON: While the mass pulp market for good new S.F. seems to have vanished entirely.

HARRISON: It was bound to happen. They printed too much of the stuff during the boom. The bust is always bound to come after the boom. Publishers never learn that sort of thing because they are very slow people.

DARLINGTON: Perhaps by deflating the escapism of Science Fiction you were also destroying its practical applications, its use as a comfort fiction? Perhaps people buy S.F. like they buy records. They dance to the record without being overly concerned about how technically well it's assembled or how aesthetically pure its motivations.

HARRISON: What you're talking about is a process of sawing off the bough that you're sitting on. We may have done that, intellectually, and over a long period of time. I don't think we did it as far as the people who just bop to the record are concerned. They went on just buying the stuff, and the publishers - who, of course, are only concerned with people who bop to the record - went on selling it to them.

DARLINGTON: But much of the Science Fiction that is popular today - the "Star Wars"/"Star Trek" syndrome - is a reversion to pre-New Wave mentality. The type of material you were attacking.

HARRISON: Oh yes. I agree with you. If what you're saying is that we sawed off our own particular bough, we did. And I think it was inevitable. And for about four writers it was a good thing. The writers who were good enough to make something out of the condition of falling. Of realising that there was no bough left. Thomas Disch. Ballard. Aldiss. One or two others. But then, they had always wanted to be writers who said something about the world, about people. They had always wanted to be proper writers. Writers in the tradition of writing - which S.F. isn't. It's not in that tradition. And sawing off that bough, in a way, gave them the confidence. You've got to go for it in the end. You've just got to decide to do it. Tom Disch hasn't written anything that you could describe as Science Fiction for some time.

DARLINGTON: You describe your current book, The Ice Monkey, as part of a similar process of moving out of Science Fiction.

HARRISON: The book is very transitional in the sense that it still tries to use SF or Horror or some other genre to make its point. Perhaps the points are now so human, and so concerned with human being, that the S.F. is distracting. It's taking the readers attention away from the point. The Science Fiction element in "Running Down" for instance, is where the chap is conceived to be so cynical, unpleasant, and miserable, that his own self-disgust affects his environment. It was a good enough image in 1975 when I couldn't talk directly about people. As a writer I wasn't technically capable of simply looking at people. But that doesn't seem to me to be much of a solution nowadays. If I were writing that story now there wouldn't be any S.F. in it. There wouldn't need to be, because I now feel that my technique is good enough for me to look directly at people, and write about people.

DARLINGTON: But Science Fiction imagery provides a rich vein of contemporary mythology that can be used in a Symbolist sense. Much of what you describe as the S.F.-content of The Ice Monkey stories is little more than the kind of symbolism in some of Kafka's work. I think it would constitute a considerable loss to your stories if you amputate that element.

HARRISON: Exactly. It is, in fact, Symbolism. The stories are symbolist stories. Even the cruder ones in there, written as long ago as 1975, are structured exactly the way a symbolist would have structured them. Exactly like Catherine Mansfield, or a post-Symbolist, a kind of proto-Modernist like Virginia Woolf would have. There are no plots per se. The thing proceeds by parallelism and contrast of symbols and images. The whole idea was to be a symbolist, but at that time, rather a crude one. Whereas now I'd hope to do a little better and not need aliens from outer space at all. I don't think you need them. You can cut them out and still write the same story. Still make the same comment about being human.

DARLINGTON: There are advantages to working in a genre. There's a guaranteed minimum market.

HARRISON: You've got a guaranteed audience. You've got a livelihood. But I realised that the genre wasn't allowing me to say anything and at the same time I realised that if you really want to say what you want to say, you've got to take the risk of not having that guaranteed market. You've got to move out. It's no good promising yourself to write a wonderful non-generic book one of these days. What you've got to do is finally cut loose and do it. There's a very difficult Rock climb in the Peak District called 'Cut loose or Fly'. Flying being slang for falling. I just decided to cut loose. You must commit yourself to the effort even if you suddenly find yourself hundreds of feet up in space with only two directions - up or down. You must take the risk. I decided to do it. Which means I shall probably become very poor very quickly. But then I wasn't all that rich to start with. For me, from now on, after fifteen years of writing about robots, all I ever want to do again is write about human being. I don't say that I won't ever write S.F. again. The Bank Manager may need me to! But I wouldn't be interested in it and I won't even bother trying to fake interest. People are much more interesting.

DARLINGTON: Do you think in terms of an audience? Are the people who are going to read your stories a consideration?

> '.... he whistled off down Henrietta Street, ready to walk as far as he could. He looked inland, at the hills looming though squalls of rain. Soon he would climb up among them and let the wind blow those clean childish little sins out of him and away.' "Strange Great Sins" by M. John Harrison (Interzone 5)

HARRISON: No. But on the other hand, oddly enough, I've found that I've got a bigger audience since I decided to be me and do what I wanted to do. When you do that - when you make that decision for the first time in your life - you mature as a writer and you develop a very obvious, very typical, voice. And people are bound to hear it. They are bound to be interested in it one way or another. I seem to have had more response since I stopped trying to be a generic pop-corn writer. Since I stopped just grinding it out, and started to speak with my own voice. Certainly it's had more effect on the people who do read my stuff. The critics who write about it are much more affected by it - presumably because it's more honest, and because of that the voice is more distinctive. A lot of Science Fiction is so philosophically and meta-physically crude. Some S.F. writers are very matter-of-fact chaps, for so-called imaginative people they are very very blinkered. They seem to have the mentality of school Physics teachers. You suspect that - although they blather on about him all the time, they have no understanding of Einstein or relativity. One of the reasons I didn't earn much of an income as a Science Fiction writer - as a so-called profession writer - is that my standards were a bit too high. The stuff I wrote never actually made it as good, rubbishy, readable, generic S.F. - because it was always too fastidiously well-written. If I hadn't done my side-trip into S.F. I might very well have matured a little bit earlier. In my case, I'll admit that being a professional for fifteen years has given me certain techniques. Techniques for sucking the reader in despite himself, for facing him with things he wouldn't normally read - because he can't stop reading, because he wants to find out what happens. These are techniques you don't learn from reading Virginia Woolf. These are techniques that you learn - god help you - from writing crap. And the ability to suck the reader in and keep him there while you do your operations on him, I suppose, is worth learning.

The Michelin Guide To SF

DAVE LANGFORD

Does anyone remember the Critical Standards debate? This was a long time ago in a Vector far away, when Kevin Smith's "Towards a Critical Standard" editorials tried to outline a methodology or classifying SF books and arranging them in some kind of objective order of merit. Creeping subjectivism naturally made this a goal to aim at rather than to achieve, a Platonic Ideal of the ultimate SF reference work. Now David Wingrove, another erstwhile Vector editor, has tried to assemble just such a book, The Science Fiction Sourcebook (Longman 320pp £8.95); which does rather bring to mind one of Brian Aldiss's definitions of SF: "hubris clobbered by nemesis."

Surrounding the 180-odd pages of author-indexed "Michelin Guide" are essays on the history of SF (Aldiss), various sub-genres (Brian Stableford, at length), writing (twelve oddly assorted writers), publishing (Malcolm Edwards), critiques and magazines (Wingrove) and Looking Forward to Reading Battlefield Earth (Amis). All are competent and unsurprising, aimed at the newer reader. (Aside: a casual glance through the magazine index reveals no entry for Ad Astra, Extro, SF Digest, Omni, or the US Vortex.) Rather than review the book in detail, I want to ponder the rating system of the Guide.

Each of 880 authors gets a brief biographical/ critical entry of typically 100 words or less (C.J. Cherryh's seems the longest, nearly two columns), followed by "star ratings" of one to four works. Up to five stars are given to each book/ story cited, in each of the four categories Readability, Characterization, Idea Content and Literary Merit. (Ten stars, as in H.R.F. Keating's similar volume about detective stories, would have been better and allowed more fine tuning.) Bearing these in mind, can you guess what the authors in List 1 have in common?

The answer: none of them scores the coveted five stars in any category for any of their cited SF/fantasy. (The implication is that the cited works are the author's best. If not, why not? Barry Longyear's Elephant World seems to be the only listed book scoring zero in every category: god knows I carry no torch for Longyear, but this looks like spite, since his often-praised short "Enemy Mine" gets no mention at all. Shorts by many other writers are cited.) I'm not saying all these writers deserve a five-star seal of approval--- the list, which could be longer, is chosen to annoy everyone a little.

To provide the necessary perspective on the star ratings, the Sourcebook appears to be say this: None of the writers in List 1 can draw characters as good as J Chalker's (he consistently gets five stars for characterization) Gorblimey. None can achieve the originality of Tom Reamy's Blind Voices (five stars for idea content. Although a pleasant book, it's neither been influential nor does it contain anything not prefigured by Sturgeon and Bradbury). None is as readable as my own The Space Eater, ho ho.) (You think I'm joking, don't you?) None can ascend that supreme pinnacle of literary merit and gain the five such stars allotted to the stodgy Web Between The Worlds by Charles Sheffield.

Five stars for readability means you're consistently more readable than the notoriously compulsive Bester, Harness, Vance or van Vogt (in addition to everyone else in List 1).

Five for idea content means you're consistently more original and influential then anything by Blish, Budrys, Pohl, Sladek or Wolfe (in addition to...).

Five for characterization sets you above any efforts of, besides List 1, Angela Carter, Cowper, Dick, Alasdair Gray, Herbert, Pangborn, Roberts and D.M. Thomas.

Five for literary merit is the biggie, and gives you the edge over, inter alia, Aldiss, Beagle, Dick and Gray again, Huxley, Lem, Nabokov, Orwell, Mary Shelley, Swift, Twain, Vonnegut and Wells, none of whose listed SF/fantasy makes the grade.

What does make the grade? I will tell you. Exactly eight books score the big five stars in every category. These are Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles and Fahrenheit 451, Crowley's Little, Big, Farmer's To Your Scattered Bodies Go, Golding's The Inheritors and Darkness Visible (what's that second one doing here?), and Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed. A somewhat er, varied batch, several of whose acknowledged merits do not exactly include top marks for zippy readability.

Another twenty books/ stories receive five starts in three categories. Thus Blind Voices and White's Hospital Station would be perfect if they were only a little more readable, while The White Hotel ---like the slightly higher-scoring Web Between the Worlds---would be perfect if only it had better characterization. Budrys's Who? and Rogue Moon both need just one further star's worth of Idea Content to reach the big time, and all that stands between Crowley's The Deep and utter perfection is the tiniest lack of Literary Merit.

This, in John Clute's oft-repeated words, is a game which has no ending. This shambles of inconsistent ratings isn't really the fault of the twelve contributors responsible...although there are places where they're unjust, as with Eric Frank Russell, whose "thrillers about invisible or superhuman enemies" are excusably dismissed as "routine", after which two such (Sinister Barrier, Three to Conquer) and none of his others are given star ratings as --- by implication --- Best Buys. Or take the case of Charles L. Grant, who'd have got better ratings if he'd written no SF novels, as then he'd have been assessed (like Cabell or Eddison) on his considerably better shorts and fantasies. Kipling, most of whose many collections include some fine fantasy/SF, is faintly damned as an author "two of whose short story collections might be considered to include SF stories, although this is more a use of the supernatural than speculative material"--- this on the same page which awards whole constellations of merit to Stephen King.

LIST 1

Richard Adams
Kingsley Amis
Poul Anderson
Hilary Bailey
T.J. Bass
Barrington Bayley
Ambrose Bierce
Lloyd Biggle Jr
James Blish
Robert Bloch
Marion Zimmer Bradley
John Brunner
Ed Bryant
Mikhail Bulgakov
Anthony Burgess
William Burroughs
Samuel Butler
James Branch Cabell
Ramsey Campbell
Joy Chant
Suzy M. Charnas
G.K. Chesterton
John Christopher
Hal Clement
D.G. Compton
Susan Cooper
L. Sprague de Camp
Peter Dickinson
Thomas Disch
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
E.R. Eddison
George Alec Effinger
Charles G. Finney
E.M. Forster
Randall Garrett
Charles Harness
Russell Hoban
Chris Hodder-Williams
Robert P. Holdstock
Fred Hoyle
Shirley Jackson
Colin Kapp
Garry Kilworth
Rudyard Kipling

LIST 1

Damon Knight
R.A. Lafferty
Tanith Lee
Fritz Leiber
H.P. Lovecraft
Elizabeth Lynn
Vonda McIntyre
Compton Mackenzie
Arthur Machen
Barry Malzberg
Julian May
Walter M. Miller
Naomi Mitchison
C.L. Moore
William Morris
Larry Niven
Andre Norton
Edgar Allan Poe
Christopher Priest
Thomas Pynchon
Mack Reynolds
Salman Rushdie
Bertrand Russell
Eric Frank Russell
James H. Schmitz
Norman Spinrad
Brian Stableford
Robert Louis Stevenson
Jack Trevor Story
Theodore Sturgeon
William Tenn
Wilson Tucker
George Turner
Lisa Tuttle
A.E.van Vogt
John Varley
Vercors
Jules Verne
Gore Vidal
Joan Vinge
Voltaire
Evelyn Waugh
Franz Werfel
Kate Wilhelm

Clearly, different contributors have different ideas of the book's scope.

And they all have different views of the books. Here's the fatal flaw. The noblest attempt at establishing an objective critical standard, a formula which will infallibly generate the correct star ratings, is poisoned by the varying subjective approaches of the people who do the work. (For example: if I had had any say in the G.K. Chesterton piece here, you can bet the excellent Chesterton would not have been consistently rated below the intermittently competent Jack Chalker in every category.) Studying the results as above, I suspect that the better critics tend to be more sparing with their praise, more reluctant to dish out five-star ratings... little knowing that behind their backs, the not-so-good critics are showering top marks on pet authors. Add to this the hypothesis that by and large, the better critics are asked to assess the better authors, and perhaps my list of anomalies isn't so inexplicable after all.

Consistent critical standards? At times like this I have a cold feeling that the ideal really is unattainable, that the only way to carry on is with as much honesty as possible along one's usual path of merry subjectivism... and that unless he'd tackled the massive, Johnsonian task of writing every entry himself, David Wingrove's Michelin Guide was doomed from the start to founder in the sloughs of inconsistency. Hubris clobbered by nemesis.

Again Whodunnit

David Barrett

[THE ROBOTS OF DAWN by ISAAC ASIMOV. Granada 1984,] [419pp., £8.95. ISBN 0-246-12304-4]

The standard, and highly offensive rejection letter from "Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine" reads in part as follows:

> 'Most stories are rejected because they lack a new idea or theme. A great many of the ideas that may seem innovative to an SF newcomer are in fact over-familiar to readers more experienced in the field... Another common cause... of rejection is the obvious lack of basic English compositional skills on the part of the author... Finally, your story may have been rejected... simply because it failed to rise far enough above the other 849 seen that month.'

The plot of The Robots of Dawn is straightforward. Dr Han Fastolfe, the great roboticist of Aurora, is accused of roboticide - causing mental freeze-out in a humaniform robot he had designed and built. Plainclothesman Elijah Baley of Earth is called in to clear his name. It is important that he succeed: Fastolfe's political opponents want all further planetary colonisation to be done by Aurorans - or rather, by Auroran humaniform robots, so that no human need get his hands dirty - while Fastolfe would support Earth's exploration and settlement of other worlds. If he is proved to be innocent, his views are likely to prevail in the Auroran World Legislature; if not, his reputation will be sullied, and Earthmen will be condemned forever to fester in their caves of steel. Hence the fate of Earth, if not the Universe, hangs on Baley's success. (By this point, p22, I was already yawning. Still, there were less than 400 pages to go.) In true Asimovian style, we then have numerous false leads, Lije Baley accuses everyone in sight, then wonders why his witnesses are a mite unco-operative, and in the last ten pages of the book it is finally revealed (ShockHorrorAmazement) who actually dunnit.

This book is a very late sequel to The Caves of Steel (1954) and The Naked Sun (1957), and references to both abound. Han Fastolfe appeared in the former, and Gladia Delmarre, in whose home R. Jander Panell was 'killed,' is from the latter. And, of course, Baley's faithful ol' buddy is also here:

> 'He saw a thoroughly human shape, with a broad, high-cheekboned face and with short bronze hair lying flatly backward, someone dressed in clothing with a conservative cut and color scheme.
> "Jehoshaphat!" said Baley in a nearly strangled voice.
> "Partner Elijah," said the other, stepping forward a small, grave smile on his face.
> "Daneel!" cried Baley, throwing his arms around the robot and hugging tightly. "Daneel!"' (p30)

This touching little scene confirms that Asimov still writes about emotional interaction with all the literary skill and deftness of Mills and Boon. Being Asimov, though, he has to give the robot's point of view as well:

> 'The robot was holding him lightly, allowing himself to be hugged, judging that the action gave pleasure to a human being and enduring that action because the positronic potentials of his brain made it impossible to repel the embrace and so cause disappointment and embarrassment to the human being.... The insurmountable First Law of Robotics states...'

Just in case the reader has forgotten the Three Laws, they are repeated and explained and elaborated on, singly or together, interminably, throughout the book.

Asimov has always had a love of chapter titles; for example, 'Conversation with a Commissioner' and 'A Roboticist is Confronted' in the earlier books. This time the titles are characters' names: 'Daneel', 'Giskard', 'Daneel and Giskard', 'Again Daneel and Giskard', etc. The system falls down because there are more chapters than characters, and because Giskard appears in Daneel's chapter and vice versa, as does almost everyone else. Also, the 19 named chapters are subdivided into 84 numbered chapters, so why bother?

Asimov has not yet cured himself of the habit of hyper-melodramatic chapter endings, nor of embarrassingly cliched writing:

> 'He struggled desperately to open his clogged throat, to call to Daneel for help - He could make no sound - ' (p61)

> '...he raised it high and brought his arm down to hurl it at Baley. And Baley, caught utterly by surprise, barely managed to cringe back against his chair.' (p87)

> '"Let's get all of it into the open, so that we may be able to see light in what now seems darkness."' (p164)

> '"So talk! Now!"' (p213)

References, passim, to characters and events in The Caves of Steel and The Naked Sun are to be expected. What took me by surprise, though, was Dr Fastolfe telling Baley the 'legends' about Susan Calvin and the telepathic robot (pp82-3) ('Liar!':1941), and Andrew Martin and Little Miss (p191) ('The Bicentennial Man': 1976), and about the possibility that:

> '"there may come a day when someone will work out the Laws of Humanics and then be able to predict the broad strokes of the future, and know what might be in store for humanity, instead of merely guessing as I do, and know what to do to make things better, instead of merely speculating. I dream sometimes of founding a mathematical science which I think of as 'psychohistory...'" (p108)

[The Foundation tetralogy: 1951, 1952, 1953, 1982]. There are legitimate plot reasons for one of these references, but I feel that their main function was to establish a unified framework for all of Asimov's major works. In any case, it seems a clumsy conceit.

Clumsiness if one of the hallmarks of this novel:

> 'Baley cried out (gasped out, rather), "Straighten the vehicle, Giskard!"' (p323)
> '(Giskard) said in his contentless voice...' (p328)

Toneless, perhaps, but contentless?

> '"Let me take the opportunity of once again apologising for the scurvy trick I played on you with respect to the Personal."' (p101-2)

The extreme formality and 'scurvy trick' don't

quite blend. Using the Personal, by the way, equates to the American phrase 'going to the bathroom.' I am convinced that Asimov is preparing a learned paper on the anthropological implications of toilet taboos; he seems to spend half the book discussing them. He also displays an odd fascination with the genitalia of humaniform robots; Gladia is speaking to Baley before showing him the body of R. Jander:

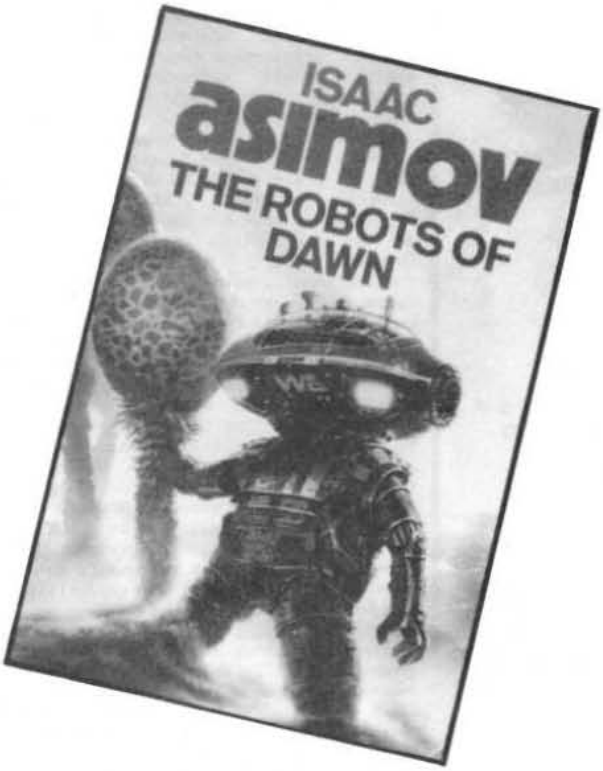
> '"Nothing was lacking and those portions which might be expected to be erectile were, indeed, erectile. Indeed, they were under what, in a human, would be called conscious control. Jander could tumesce and detumesce on order. He told me so when I asked him if his penis was functional in that respect. I was curious and he demonstrated."' (p145)
> 'The body was, perhaps, not quite human. The muscular contours were somehow simplified and a bit schematic, but all the parts were there: nipples, navel, penis, testicles, pubic hair, and so on.' (p149)

I have visions of the robot filling an internal small polythene bag with a suitable synthetic fluid before performing coitus in accordance with First and Second Law directives.

As the robots are so human in appearance, why does the cover show a particularly chunky and mechanical, decidedly non-humaniform robot, and in an alien and totally non-Auroran setting? Reading the thoughts of the person at Granada responsible for such decisions, 'It's Sci-Fi, it's Asimov, it's robots - I don't need to read the thing - where's Chris Foss's phone number?' They also didn't bother to Anglicize the spelling; that's laziness.

Asimov has written some damn good short stories over the years, but he was never particularly good at novels. He doesn't seem to have improved much over the last thirty years. This one bears one of the hallmarks of a first draft: everything is explained at interminable length because the author is thinking it out on paper; but the second draft he knows where he is, so he can cut down on the verbiage - but it seems Asimov never got that far. If it had been written by any lesser mortal it would have been rejected on the first reading.

I can almost see the rejection letter...



Worthy, but.....

Martyn Taylor

[THE DAY LASTS MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS By Chingiz] [Aitmatov. Macdonald 1984. 352pp., £8.95. ISBN 0-356] [-09375 1]

A Russian book. A modern Russian book. A Soviet book. Not, perhaps, the sort of book to sell in millions and be made into a film by John Carpenter, but a thing of weight and significance. I call it 'a book', which it certainly is, but I hesitate to call it 'a novel'. We shall see why.

In his brief preamble, a call for mutual understanding and an end to the arms race, Aitmatov declares his allegiance to socialist realism and states - 'The main object of socialist realism, in my view, is to present the image of the working man.' In the west the term 'socialist realism' conjures a composite image of dull epics set in a tractor factory and those flag draped forward leaning colossi seemingly so typical of the artists and sculptors who celebrated the immediate post Revolutionary fervour. It is Sholokov rather than Solzhenitsin. It is a dish that does not appeal to our palate. Worthiness is not our cup of tea. As a model of a worker hero, though, Aitmatov's central character, Yedigei, serves well. He is named Burranyi Yedigei after the railway junction where he has worked for forty years since returning from the war shellshocked. Burranyi is miles from nowhere in an area of steppe called the Sarozek, which is one of the last places on this earth a man might choose to live and work. While he is ignorant, in that he is unlearned, Yedigei is by no means stupid or unthoughtful - a stark contrast to one of the book's principal educated characters, who combines examination success with thoughtless stupidity in an all too familiar way! In his heart he has a lode of Islamic poetry which translates the rigours of his life and endless work - work to which he is stolidly devoted in a way which draws the contempt of younger men blind to any dignity in hard physical labour. As befits a modern worker in a socialist state he sometimes thinks on the complexities of life, and if you can hear the gears grind when he does so at least he knows in which channel flows the tide of history. But he is not simply Pravda's dream. Yedigei is a mensch. No doubt about it. He is mucho macho, Big John in person. He is a big man who feels he is not yet out of his prime even though he is 58 years old, a passionate man who can be prideful and angry, whose pride and passions sometimes lead him outside the bounds of what is proper (and safe) to the dignity of a socialist worker. In many ways he is one of a kind with his camel, the magnificent Karanar, an animal which doesn't know what tiredness is, who is cock of his walk, as obstinate and enduring as only a camel - it seems - can be. But when the season is on him Karanar is the terror of the steppe, insatiable in his rut. Oh yes, if Yedigei stood next to me in a strange pub I should know him instantly; I might want him to stand a little further off, but I should know him.

Given that Aitmatov devotes 350 pages to creating Yedigei this is hardly surprising. When you give a reader as much information as Aitmatov gives it would be strange indeed if we did not have some sort of picture by the end. The problem is that the aforementioned Solzhenitsin would have created an equally complete picture in so many words and, what is much more important, done what Aitmatov signally fails to do, breathe life into his character. As ideas Aitmatov's characters are strong - the stalwart Yedigei, the wily old Kazangap, his ne'er do well son Sabitshan, the doomed former schoolteacher and prisoner of war Abutalip, ever Karanar - and within the context of the very solidly plotted, realistically described story which Aitmatov has devised it would have taken just a tiny spark of that genius which is at the heart of any storyteller to bring them all sparkling into life. A clue to the reason why that spark is missing is contained within the text. There is a character, Yelizarov, who is a scientist who came to the Sarozek on a brief business visit and stayed on years to get to know the people and their lives. There is no doubt that

Yelizarov loves Yedigei and his fellows. By his diligent observation and recording he has made them briefly famous, Yedigei's picture in a national journal, no less. There can be no doubt that Yelizarov is Aitmatov. It is equally plain that Yelizarov can never be anything but an interested outsider. Like Aitmatov he knows all about the people of Burranyi, all the facts and figures, but when he writes about them he writes about their externals. Which is what Aitmatov does. His intellectual knowledge is formidable, but he does not write from the inside. As an educated, compassionate anthropologist's dissertation this is an interesting book, but it lacks the vital internal animation of a novel.

The story is 'slice of life' with side dishes of history and fantasy. The 'life' works well as an accurately reported way of people behaving. Old Kazangap has died, and his great friend Yedigei determines that this fine old khazak must be buried with all due simple respect at the traditional burial ground, Ana Beit, some 30 kilometers distant. By all the force at his command Yedigei bullies a respectful attitude into his neighbours and Kazangap's worthless son. At the end of their journey they discover a cosmodrome has been built on Ana Beit, and the military jobsworths send them back to bury Kazangap in the steppe. Along the way we are told of Yedigei's war, how he came to Burranyi and why he stayed. How he caught the golden sturgeon for his young wife Ukubala and how he lusted impossibly after the wife of a fellow railway worker, the former school teacher Abutalip who was captured during the war but escaped to Yugoslavia where he fought with the partizans and who has been seen to write and, fatally, to write a diary of his wartime experiences showing them not to be 100% congruent with the war as seen through the eyes of Josef Stalin.

Interspersed with the contemporary Aitmatov gives us some of the histories and the legends of the Sarozek. It is a testimony to the content of his book that Aitmatov keeps the reader's attention despite the flat pacing of the story and the monotone of the auctorial voice. He describes the poetry in Yedigei's soul, but nowhere does he give us any in his prose which lacks any sort of suggestive imagery. Aitmatov tells it all exactly how it is, no less and no more, as though he were delivering a learned treatise.

Quite how inept Aitmatov is at the creation of a work of fiction rather than the assembling of component parts in textbook order may be seen when he leaves behind the stuff of his observation. The historical items are noticeably less 'real' than the contemporary scenes despite their higher content of physical action, the product, I suspect, of long hours in the library rather than long hours of imagination. Yet beside the space element running through the book these scenes are prime examples of the novelist's art. Improbability of organisation is not uncommon in SF, but however improbable the arrangements must be believable. Aitmatov gives us a joint US/USSR enterprise, the Demiurgos programme, which is superpower paranoia in concrete form with a duplicated control system on an aircraft carrier moored equidistant between Vladivostok and San Francisco, and a single astronaut from each country labelled 'Paritycaptain 1/2' and 'Paritycaptain 2/1'. Surely Aitmatov cannot be unaware of the impossibility of the Soviets allowing one of their men to be alone in space with an American, or to allow said American free run of Soviet hardware? In his description of the purging of Abutalip he acknowledges the institutional paranoia of Russian bureaucrats, so why this absurdity? Of course, I may be missing something subtle, or this may be a particularly dreadful translation, but I don't believe so. Aitmatov is simply hopelessly out of his depth. The entire notion seems like something dreamt up by a hack at the behest of some apparatchik who wants to see Wings of the Fatherland print some 'nobility of socialist science' pieces. And if his hardware and organisation is straight out of some Soviet version of 'Tomorrow's World' his astronauts don't even reach <u>that</u> level of credibility. His two astronauts blithely take off with some recently encountered aliens without so much as a by your leave to ground control, leaving only a note couched in terms which a reminiscent of the very worst 'beautiful higher beings' excesses of the later books in Doris Lessing's 'Canopus in Argos' series - without even a hint of

Lessing's humour, insight, or verbal felicities. Astronauts are 'can do' engineers riding the hot end of specifically programmed machinery which cannot function without them. If it could they wouldn't be there. They are men who won't break wind without the permission of ground control if it isn't in the game plan as worked out by the thousands of scientists on the ground. Aitmatov paints today, and today's astronauts would never, ever behave as his do. I fail to see how any half way informed reader could take these passages without a glaze of stupefaction coming into his eyes. Of course they could have been demanded by some bureaucratic formula, but if that is the case how has Aitmatov 'got away' with allowing Yedigei dissident and nationalist sentiments, and a strong Islamic faith, without so much as a hint of censure? At the end of the day I am thrown back on my impression that Aitmatov writes convincingly - if not movingly - about what he has seen, but his ability wanes steadily as he moves away from his own experience.

My first expectations of this book were of something worthy, but dull. The first few pages dispelled that impression, but as grey page followed grey page and the story never got off the ground I was restored to that impression. This is a worthy book. Anyone wishing to learn something of khazaks and Khazakstan can read The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years in the confident expectation of being edified. But it is dreadfully dull. Chingiz Aitmatov proves all too clearly that it is possible to know all the necessary ingredients of a story, and how to put them in order, and still not have a clue about telling that story in such a way that it comes alive. So, a book, yes. A novel? No.

SF's Coelocanth

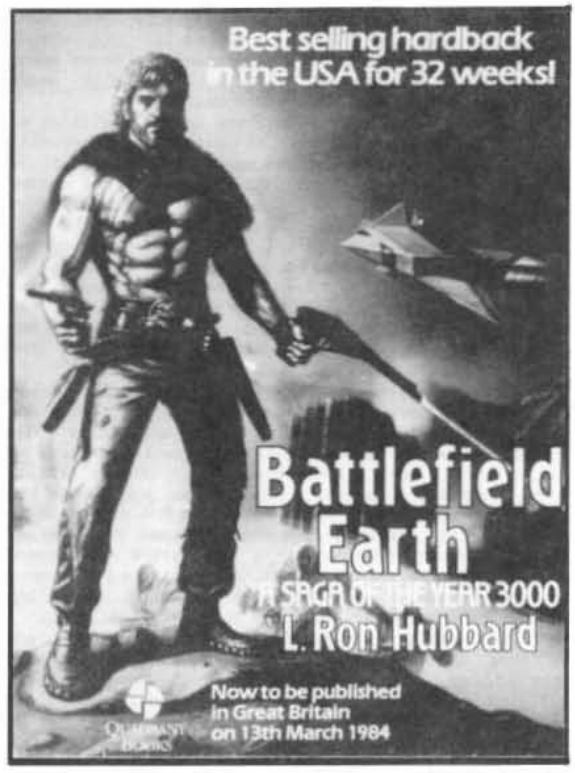
Edward James

[BATTLEFIELD EARTH : A SAGA OF THE YEAR 3000: by L. Ron]
[HUBBARD. Quadrant Books 1984. 819 pp., £8.95]

Our worthy editor expressed amazement that someone should want to review this monster. But anyone interested in SF must also be curious about the first book in 40 years by someone who was once an important SF writer, the first book written since his foundation of the world's first SF religion (Christopher Evans' phrase, not mine), and a book which has caused immense controversy in its progress up the best-seller lists in the States. What does it tell us about Hubbard? What does it tell us about the SF buying public in the US (assuming that it is being bought by SF readers rather than by Scientologists)?

It is rather difficult to approach the book in any other way than this, as an historical curiosity. It has no literary merit whatsoever. Its style is positively coelocanthine (thought by experts to have been extinct since the 1930s, but brought to shore to cries of amazement by St Martin's Press in 1982). It creaks from one climax to another in an effortlessly clumsy (and often ungrammatical) prose, enlivened only by the appearance of a much-loved SF cliche or stereotype Chinaman. The basic plot has been aired many times before, by Heinlein with more economy and Russell with more humour. What humour there is may sometimes, I am afraid, be unintentional. The names, for instance, if intentionally ludicrous, certainly destroy the mood of realism Hubbard tries to create. Could you believe in aliens with names like Zzt (by hook or by crook I'll be last in the Galactic 'phone book), Numph, Schleim, Rogodeter Snowl and - wait for it! - Roof Arsebogger?

The plot is this. The Earth has been taken over by vicious aliens (with the help of a loan from the Galactic Bank). Only a few tribes of human survive, dismissed by the Psychlo conquerors as mere animals. One of these animals, from Colorado, Jonnie Goodboy Tyler, with the help of his stone club and an astounding technical ability, wipes out the entire Psychlo race (apart from a few tame ones) and shows man's innate superiority over all other races in the Galaxy by being able to decipher the secrets of Psychlo technology. After 819 pages of relentless detail (you realise the amount of time I am saving you by revealing the end) he has managed to impose peace upon the Galaxy and make himself a trillionaire in the process. The ultimate story of self-help.



It would be all too easy to dismiss the book with a sneer as a piece of incompetent and indeed amateurish writing designed to cash in on the author's notoriety. But George Hay has made the point (in Foundation 28, July 1983) that scientologists have been much concerned in recent years with the growing reading problems suffered by the younger generation. The short paragraphs, the painful lack of sophistication, may all be designed to help the thousands of semi-literate young people who loved Star Wars but who have never got through a book. Battlefield Earth is well constructed to hold the slow reader, who will months later reach page 819 with triumph and who will be there gratified to read about the first book written of Jonnie Tyler, translated into 98,000 galactic languages: 'It was not as good as this book, for it was intended for semi-literate people'.

What would semi-literate people learn from Battlefield Earth, apart from the virtues of ambition and self-help? Hubbard's own philosophy and propagandist aims emerge plainly, particularly in the last section, which deals with the reconstruction of Earth. This is the world that Hubbard wants, run by competent technologists who offer freedom from domination by others (even if it means you yourself have to dominate), freedom from taxation and government interference, freedom from intellectual elitism (including that purveyed by churches), and good old-fashioned family values. Jonnie realises that learning languages or mathematics was not going to teach his son Timmie about 'the vital things in life'; he takes him off to Colorado and teaches him to ride horses (without a 'sissy' saddle) and to kill wild animals with a club. (His daughter Missie 'was fine and she helped her mother very well and learned all about real tanning and cooking and things like that. But it was Timmie who got the attention' (p.818).) The 'modern' architecture of the 20th century 'wasn't architecture but just a cheap way to throw rubbish in the air and get paid for it' (p.769). All good populist stuff. Scientological obsessions do make their appearance as well, however. Tyler discovers, after his genocide of the Psychlos, that the Psychlos had not been the real enemy at all: it was the sinister Psych(lo) catrists (psychiatrists, geddit?), the intellectual descendents of carnival mountebanks, who formed a 'medical scientist cult' to warp Psychlo minds, and control their Empire.

Battlefield Earth is a fascinating insight into the mind of the SF writer who has had more of an impact on the non-SF world then perhaps any other. It is anti-intellectual, amoral (seldom concerned with the ethics of human action), immoral (full of casual and unthinking violence and callous selfishness) and ill-written. If in addition it had any sex it would probably sell very well.

The word Robot was coined in Prague by Karel Capek in 1920, when the play RUR was published (it was staged the year after). This event thus preceded by seven years the christening of our genre by Gernsback. Capek never heard of science fiction before his death.

From this fact derive all the unique qualities of modern Czech SF. One might call it extremely literarily oriented. The borderline between mainstream and our SF is sometimes difficult to draw. Moreover it was not called science fiction for a long time, until practically the present boom which originated towards the end of the 70's and that brought us not only several interesting new authors and several good books, but also some books of SF theory. One such author is, Mr. Slobodnik, who represents the Slovak branch in our movement. Another is the young Czech author and journalist Mr. Neff, who has unearthed some very interesting information about the birth of the Robot.

The word itself means 'work' in Russian, but in Czech it means 'serf labour', so hated in the feudal age of the Counter-reformation. Karel Capek originally had in mind the word Labor, taking it from Laboratory, so we might today have laborontronics, labororization and the dangerous Labors. But would we? Would LUR be so successful the world over as RUR was? This is a theoretical question concerning names of literary heroes. Because the Robot is a literary hero beyond doubt, practically the only one that originated in modern Czech writing and is known all over the world, with the possible exception of the Good Soldier Schweik. When I went to the Pacificon in Oakland 20 years ago hardly any fans knew this. However, things have changed for the better. They have also changed back home. SF is translated and eagerly read and even written. Sometimes it's even considered as a danger to young talent! One of our leading critics recently told me that every other author who is beginning to write is trying to write science fiction.

To explain the situation I have to bother you with a short lecture about traditions. It was Chateaubriand himself who called Bohemia and Prague "centres of fantasy, heresy and magic." Behind this statement lay the Czech heretical tradition dating from the Hussite wars, and the secret brotherhoods and sects thereafter, that bred saints, martyrs and magicians as well as a flourishing of all "secret" esoteric arts and sciences, especially in the reign of the mad Habsburg Rudolf the Second. This Emperor invited to Prague leading European scientists, artists, alchemists, astrologers and sorcerers: Kepler, Tycho Brabe, Arcimboldo, Hayek, Sandivogius, Kelly, to name only a few. Rabbi Loew, creator of the Golem lived in the Jewish quarter, and they say Ahasuerus was seen around there. History of the Prague Jewish quarter is full of special secrets and dates back practically to the origin of the city itself, as you can read in Mayerink and Kafka. They say Dr. Faustus lived in one of our squares towards the end of his life; Descartes came there before the Battle of the White mountain; and Comenius before he emigrated and wrote his famous Labyrinth, a work of fantasy and magic. Last, but not least, that fascinating personality of Wallenstein owned half the city during the great crisis of the Thirty Years' War, a condottiere who was given to astrology and wanted to change history before his assassination by Piccolomini and others.

After the Thirty Years' War the Czech nobility and intelligentsia, if not exterminated, fled abroad, being replaced by Austrian, Spanish and Italian gentry. The country was forcibly re-Catholicized. The time of the Czech Risorgimento followed some 200 years later. Thanks to this a multi-level cultured developed in the country. Thus down to our own day you can find unknown manuscripts by Cervantes in the libraries of a certain Bohemian palace; you can read tales and novels about Prague and Bohemia written in German - Franz Kafka and Mayerink were mentioned already - and if you are lucky you can see the famous films of the silent screen, The Student of Prague with its doppelganger theme, and the The Golem. Above all you can marvel at the rebirth of literature written in Czech, especially the fantasy which is of interest to us today.

The founder figure here is considered to be Jakub Arbes (1840-1914) a journalist, political prisoner, and author of many "romanettes", as he termed his longer fantasy stories. He was a pupil of Poe, Verne and E.T.A. Hoffmann; is most original where the atmosphere of the city is concerned, and was already one who wrote about time travel.

Karel Capek (1890-1938) is the second figure, today internationally known. He was strongly influenced by Wells and Shaw and Anglosaxon literature in general. For a long time after writing it he was unhappy because people did not understand his play RUR. "It is a comedy about truth and people", he told the Saturday Review in 1923, "But the audience is interested only in robots. I didn't intend to create machines, but artificial biological beings. But the world wanted mechanical danger, because it is more fascinated by machines today than by biology..." His next book The Factory of the Absolute wasn't however such a success as RUR. Nor was Krakatit, a novel that in a way anticipated the atomic bomb. Both these titles are novels and so is his best work War with the Newts, published in the thirties perhaps as an allegory of fascism. His other works - The Insect Play, The Makropulos Secret, etc. - are well known, so I would only like to mention that his heroes are very different from the usual action type of the SF productions we know. A touch of humour is added, which seems to be a characteristic of fantasy in Czech.

Other names: Jan Weiss (1892-1972) author of a great book: House of a Thousand Floors. This fantasy originated during a typhoid dream when he was a prisoner of war in 1915. He almost died during the experience and returned to it in his writing ever after. He was not much interested in science and has been regarded as a disciple of Poe.

Frantisek Behounek (1898-1973) was a colourful

Reason And Rationalism

JOSEF NESVADBA

Seacon 84 Guest of Honour Speech

personality: a physicist, pupil of the Curies, member of the Nobile expedition to the North Pole, he survived the crash of his airship. He wrote mainly for young people and reminds one of early Lem. In this he carried on the tradition of SF proper as it existed in Czech in the early 30's, mainly as reading for older children (Triska, Rypl, Hruby, Foustka, Babula).

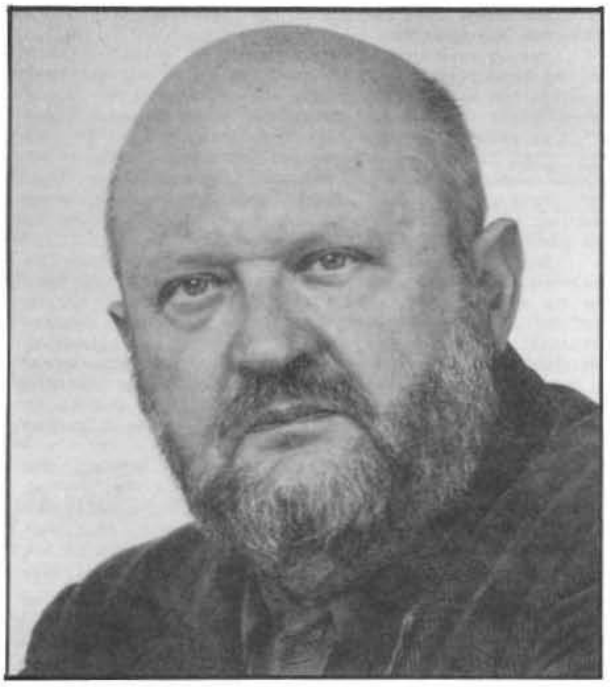
Ludvik Soucek was a stomatologist and colleague of mine, born in the same year 1926 and dead four years ago. He is a very popular author in my country, a prolific writer who became successful mainly through books on parascience.

Last, the contemporary ones, authors of promising books - a dozen names perhaps. There are of course others among the fans. Up to now we have 25 active clubs in Bohemia. I am sure I have omitted someone and am also sure, that on this very day an unknown young Czech author - or authoress? - is writing the truly big book, better than everything I have mentioned. But what will be the theme of this book? What are we discussing at our meetings?

The limits and boundaries of SF, first of all. There are people, not only among fans, who dislike "mainstream" literature and would like to live perpetually in an underground world. And there are others who would like to understand SF as a "truer" literature inspired by knowledge and the development of knowledge.

In this connection our themes are obvious: the threefold crisis we face today (economy, industry, ecology), the whole concept of progress (where too much emphasis is laid on technical progress and too little on the progress of the human personality, or so it seems to many people), and of course the question of war and peace.

Where do I stand in all this? Here are a few words about myself. Before the war I was a pupil at the Pragie English Grammar School, which was closed by the Nazis shortly after they occupied Prague. But I had a lot of books to read, mostly be Wells, Huxley and Shaw. Wells's Outline of History was my only source of independent information. Later I tried translating. After the war I published my translation of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Some people trace his influence in my writing. Certainly my story The Lost Face was influenced by a quotation of Coleridge about his face. I tried to translate modern English poetry and served an as interpreter when Dylan Thomas visited Prague in 1947. One morning he made me tell him what I was writing about. "It sounds like science fiction," he commented, and wasn't too excited... That was the first time I heard about the genre. I was writing plays and dreamed of a career in the theatre. Very few if any of my plays were performed and none with any success. One day I began to write synopsis of the plays I had already written or intended to write. The first book was called Death of Tarzan, a collection of



short stories published in 1958. It was a success back home. Later, when the title story was filmed, I had some trouble with the Burroughs family because of the name. So did Mike Moorcock, who also began his writing with a Tarzan story, as he told me much later. I wrote two other such books in a three-year span after that. I was trying to convey to the reader what I thought about the world, its fate and development. This interested me more than psychology. The stories were more or less anecdotes - or metaphors, or paradoxes, if you like. They were called science fiction when Avram Davidson published some of them in the 'Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction' in 1962. For some reason they were also translated in Europe. It was the period of the "new novel", and for the prevailing literary taste they were too full of message, so they were called science fiction even in Germany where there was no market for this genre at the time.

In 1964, twenty years ago, I was invited to Oakland, thanks mainly to Don Wollheim. This was my first trip to the States, my third to the west, and it was a revelation. I met a lot of writers, among them Silverberg, Anderson, Pohl, Simak and the fan Forrest Ackerman. I also met for the first time the other European guest John Brunner, who had already written about my stories. We had a marvellous time. The fashion at the time was for biological science fiction, sociobiological stories, new themes. I sold one of my genetic stories to Judy Merril, or rather she sold it for me. Wollheim published my 'Vampires Ltd' story in his Year's Best, and we discussed the possibilities of biotechnology and automation. Science was highly thought of. It seemed that in the approaching time it would automatically bring peace, that we would understand each other through the language of science and become citizens of a scientific world without frontiers. The Cold War seemed to be over with the Korean War and we were all full of hope... and also young. My book was published by Gollancz and Taplinger later on, and here Brian Aldiss was of help.

I travelled a lot in those years. The invitation to Oakland reached me in the Czech hospital in Haiphong, Vietnam. I returned to the States in 1966, full of hope that my Vampire story might be filmed. I had several good films shot in Prague and wrote more SF. But it was not good. It was a reworking of old themes. I started to write a big novel about a science fiction writer, his country and the world. I worked for almost ten years on the project and its success cannot be compared with the success of the short stories. For various reasons, moreover, I was not a full-time writer at the time.

I took my medical degree in 1950 and since that time have been working in another field regarded as eccentric by our standards at home, namely group psychotherapy. This work entirely consumed me for the first part of the seventies. I was also looking for new experiences. Until that time I had avoided writing about the psychology of my heroes, for fear that my patients might feel themselves cheated. But soon after my name became known as a writer I began to run into another difficulty. People hoped to achieve fame through being treated by me. I tried to combine both my roles, to become a writer-psychotherapist, so as not to get letters like this one:

"Dear doctor, I am a schizophrenic, an invalid, and an avid reader of your stories. My disease started when I went to the neighbouring city and wanted to sign a treaty of cosmic peace in a UFO. Perhaps you could use my experience..." Neurotics wrote to me about their family problems or their lack of families. Soon I realised how interesting these letters were, not because of their contents. With my colleagues I tried to develop something we called "psychotherapy through correspondence" by utilising the style of our patients as an expression of their personality pattern. It was the time when Berke corresponded with Mary Barnes here, and their letters became a literary success. In my view nobody until then had analysed the style. This could be of aesthetic value, too. But I mention this only in passing. Much more important was the change that occurred in psychology and psychiatry during the seventies. In my youth, advances in behaviour theory and behaviour techniques, under the influence of Pavlov, Watson and Skinner, seemed to be removing all the mystery from psychiatry and psychology. Even Freud wanted to study man as an object of scientific analysis, in order to explore laws which would enable us to forecast and control human behaviour, in the same way as scientists in other fields. But towards the end of the sixties many people, particularly the young, looked for other ways. They experimented with psychedelic drugs, meditation, Eastern religions and occultism. In psychology there was talk about human values proper and the deeper meaning of life, and so-called humanistic psychology was born - inimical to science as we knew it.

It is this same trend that I think we are witnessing in our genre: the birth and success of parascience in the first place, fantasy and sword-&-sorcery, and so on. Science fiction these days is very short on science as we knew it. New mysticism and mythology is in progress Can we accept this? I am troubled, as I can remember the very same process from the thirties, when astrologers were employed by the brownshirts in Germany, for instance. This is only a symptom, but it seems that when we abandon reason and rationalism a major crisis ensues... or vice versa.

In my country these tendencies are not so strong; we still live in a boom period for SF proper. However, parascience is also eagerly read, and this inspired me to write an "anti-Daniken" book in the early seventies (Delusions of EN). Later I turned to my own science, namely psychology and psychotherapy, and wrote two more books.

The first one is called Drivers Licence for Parents. It was inspired by the birth of my daughter when I was almost fifty. For a psychiatrist who spends much of his life digging out his patients' infantile experiences, such an event is of revealing importance. I would call the book "child-rearing fiction", whose theme is the

interaction between generations. It is also an experiment in an idyllic dystopia.

"Ideas of an Old Psychiatrist" is the subtitle of the second book, which is called Minehava the Second Time, and it's just that: ideas, visualised as inventions, that would simplify the process of psychotherapy. It could easily be termed psychofiction. I also tried to combine it with popular information, an experiment that I would like to repeat.

Just now I am finishing a bigger novel. It's subtitled "sex fiction", but it tries to understand not only human sexual behaviour but also our aggressive drives, instincts, thirst for knowledge, arts and brotherhood, simply the whole "psychosexual evolution" as we call it. Set in a near future, it could also be called "Notes from the End of this Millennium", for it is evident that if we could answer the questions; What sort of being is man? What determines his behaviour? - we could also answer the question: What will his future be? How this millennium will end.

Today we don't feel the enthusiasm for scientific advance that we felt 20 years ago. But should we abandon reason because of that? Everything we wrote about has materialised: robotics and automation, microelectronics and computers, biotechnology and space exploration. But this didn't result in a scientific world at peace. On the contrary, the very microelectronics we dreamed of leads to a new arms race and new tensions. The economic crisis will not be solved by robotics, there will be no robot revolution - they will silently take the place of all cheap labour instead. And the endangered species Man can be manipulated further through his own sciences: his embryos stolen and re-engineered, his limbs and organs stolen and replaced, his very thinking controlled.

It is evident that our themes today are different when compared with the themes of the sixties. It is the duty of every one of us to speak for himself and find his own.

Personally, I see my theme - apart from debating with parascience and the new mysticism - as stressing the value of the individual human being as such, in its entirety, in its wholeness, confronted with population explosion on the one hand and the danger of atomic extermination on the other. Everyone of us is important. Everyone of us is a source of hope and should be treated as such.

It is also important, it seems to me, to communication between our different worlds, and between individuals to create mutual understanding. Here science fiction can play an important role. Ours is perhaps the only genre that is indeed international, understood and read in east and west, north and south, because our themes and our problems matter everywhere. It is our duty to uphold these links... be it only through meetings and discussion such as we are having here.

Bunyan Revisited

Ken Lake

[VALENTINE PONTIFEX by ROBERT SILVERBERG. Victor]
[Gollancz Ltd 1984, 347pp., £9.95. ISBN 0-575-03444-0]

Let's face it, this isn't science fiction. Lord Valentine's Castle (1979/80) was the first in this series and is a tale of adventure set in a mythical environment masquerading as a planet but with some aspects (the comparative height of certain mountains, the functions of the Isle of Sleep) which defy acceptance by any logical person. I confess this fooled me at first - I kept waiting for the "scientific" explanation which would set my mind at ease over these non-standard features: I am still waiting.

The Majipoor Chronicles (1981/2) took the story off on a new tack and was generally attacked by the critics for being a fix-up, using a fairly blatant gimmick to take the reader through the highspots of Majipoor's history and cultural development in the form of a series of poached memories. To be honest, I thoroughly enjoyed the book for what it was: a series of exercises in depicting - and empathising with - strange cultures which still managed to hang together despite the re-use of the same mystical features which placed the original book outside the SF canon.

Now with Valentine Pontifex we pick up the story of our volume one hero, and show his interaction with the hero of volume two. We trace them through many adventures, yet this is by no means just an adventure story: having set the scene in the earlier works, Silverberg now embarks quite openly on a Pilgrim's Progress. Motivations begin to matter more than actions, dreams and portents loom larger than life, every stage of Valentine's anabasis has at least two deeper levels of meaning - this is an allegory, and if one is prepared to accept it on that basis, many of the otherwise annoying tricks and trappings cease to bother and become part of an old and honoured form of story-telling with a moral.

I confess before I embarked upon the actual reading, I saw what I thought was a screamingly funny comment by Dave Langford (in Cloud Chamber 28), and made a mental note of it with the thought "damn - I wish I'd said that first!" In brief, it read "A powerful plot thread is the struggle concerning whether Valentine should become Pontifex... Readers will be in an agony of suspense, unless of course they have cheated by reading the book's title." The point is, however, that it's perfectly obvious from the start to the reader that this is to happen; it's Valentine who can't or won't accept it, and we watch his reactions with growing interest and involvement as this tangled tale unwinds, knowing that the denouement is inevitable but savouring the hero's struggles and troubles.

Having said that, I must enter my caveat: there is, unfortunately, a very great amount of agricultural dissertation among the intrigue and the adventure. Since every plant is alien, and most have names to which I can affix no semantic connotation, I never managed to see the niyks for the halatingas and consequently fear a lot of the meaning escaped me. However, in the same way that Lady Chatterley's Lover can be read as a guide to game-keeping, so this work can be used as an introduction to the plants (and plagues) of Majipoor.

But a much greater caveat must perforce be recorded about the conversations in the book - they are, for the greater part, dire. Setting aside those boring 'refresh my memory' interpolations, whether conversational or recitative, we find such inconsequential chitchat, such a textbook example of 'the American novel' in all its turgid glory, that it reminds me of nothing more than an immense canvas of Custer's Last Stand with every goddamn wrinkle on every goddamn Indian meticulously painted in.

The lover of adventure seeking some action, the mystic in search of enlightenment, the SF fan who has admired so much of Silverberg's earlier work, will be looking for something inventive, imaginative, challenging and even enthralling. Had this novel one-tenth of the power of Up The Line (1969), The World Inside (1970), A Time of Changes (1971) or Recalled To Life (1972), or indeed one-tenth of the insouciance of Lord Valentine's Castle, or of the charm of The Majipoor Chronicles, one might have forgiven its frequent longueurs.

But such gems as "my life has been only a chain of strange accidents," "I believe the message is for you alone, my lord," and indeed "you are the world, lordship" leave one in that state so admirably encapsulated by the late great Dorothy Parker as "tonstant weader thwowed up."

Sorry about that. If you are addicted to Mills & Boon, you may enjoy this work. If not, you will cry for Silverberg's descent into bathos, or simply write him off as an old hasbeen who has totally lost interest in his own creation but can't forego the royalties that one more tired old slog will bring him (till the game is up).

Ultimately, though, this whole trilogy falls down on one basic fault of historical impossibility: Silverberg postulates that a society living on a giant world, with nothing more than horses and primitive means of mechanical transport and living in a medieval style with blatantly medieval enjoyments (jugglers and stilt-walkers, for example) and equally medieval gallantries and Palace intrigues, would at the same time be able to maintain worldwide peace (apart from the threat of the 'Amerindians' of the planet, the original Shapeshifters whose threatening power lurks behind every action and thought) where the sovereign lord can set off on transcontinental caravan journeys and meet with basically welcoming subjects everywhere. By this basic flaw in visualisation, he forfeits our willing suspension of disbelief right from the start, to the detriment of our appreciation. A pity.

Close To Home

Paul Kincaid

[THE TITHONIAN FACTOR By RICHARD COWPER Gollancz 1984.]
[160pp., £7.95 0 575 03440 8]

I have always preferred Richard Cowper's short stories to his novels. I suppose because in his novels the plot is to the fore, whereas in the stories he tends to concentrate more on atmosphere. Like Keith Roberts, the writer Cowper most closely resembles, he is a master at creating atmosphere and a sense of location. The image of the remote monastery in 'The Custodians' lingers long after the memory of what actually happens there has faded. And for me 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn' will always be superior to the sequence of novels that followed it.

What a pleasure, therefore, to be able to welcome a new collection of his short stories, particularly at a time when fewer short story collections then ever seem to be being published.

I have mentioned already that atmosphere is the strong point of Cowper's stories. In fact the thing that emerges most clearly from these stories is a sense of nostalgia. The most common structure he uses is of a looking back to some earlier time that had a sort of rosy glow attached to it; and as often as not there will be a flashback within this flashback.

If the plot line of these convoluted stories were straightened out, they would probably be as slight and as simple as the plot lines of his novels too often are. But by looking back at the key events, instead of simply recounting them, what happens becomes less important than the feelings and emotions generated.

A case in point, and to my mind the most typical and the most successful of the stories in this collection is 'The Scent of Silverdill'. The narrator looks back on a childhood when he played on the near derelict wasteland that had been a spaceport. But there are still a few people who work there, and the boy makes friends with an old man who had visited Mars before it was declared independent. The old man has a tale to tell that does create a sense of the alien, but it would certainly not stand as a story in its own right. However, tied up as it is with the old man's regrets for lost opportunities, the boy's longings for the unattainable, and the overall nostalgia for childhood, it becomes a most compelling and enjoyable piece.

It is interesting that of the six stories in this collection, three are concerned with childhood, and two of them, 'The Scent of Silverdill' and 'What Did The Deazies Do?', have the form of looking back to childhood. 'What Did The Deazies Do?' is the closest to home of all the stories, and seems to be the story that Cowper was most comfortable writing for the writing is assured, and the story is decked out with incidental detail that establishes the time and place more effectively than any other story. The setting is a remote East Anglian village before and during World War Two, and concerns a gateway through to another world or another plane of existence. The glimpses of this other world are suitably atmospheric but imprecise. The picture of local life, the spirit of place and of time, the sound of country speech which convinces rather than seeming contrived, all are very precise, and show Cowper at his best.

The third story of childhood, 'Brothers', is not quite so effective as these other two, perhaps because it is told through the eyes of the boy rather than looking back upon the incident. Again it is set in a remote country village, with the rural atmosphere and accents well realised, indicating that Cowper is at his best when he lets the strain of English pastoralism show through in his writing. But this time it is not so precisely located in place or, more importantly, in time, and this is perhaps a defect. The story concerns a boy whose brother is returning from military service. The boy hero worships his brother, but during the course of the story learns of the grim deeds he has had to do, and the ways it has changed him. A nice idea, but too simply, too straightforwardly told to be as effective as it might be.

The title story of the collection, 'The Tithonian Factor', also employs the flashback within a flashback device. Again by this method Cowper is able to give a depth and a strength to the story that might otherwise be no more than an interesting irony. A drug is discovered that confers immortality, some time after that mankind conquers death naturally by some sort of evolutionary change that seems to involve allowing the soul to fly free, but those who took the "Sempiterna" drug are unable to enjoy this freedom. Many another writer might have simply made this irony the centre of the story, but by having one of the new breed look back on her encounter with a sempitern, and then having the sempitern look back to her reasons for taking the drug, Cowper is able to

milk stronger emotions with his story.

It is notable that the two stories that do not employ nostalgia or childhood as their central devices are the two weakest in the book. 'Incident at Huacaloc' concerns a tourist at some ancient Inca remains who finds herself caught in in Incan ceremonial. It is a fairly good story, but Cowper doesn't seem really comfortable away from English, or at least European, landscapes. And there is a certain 'So what?' aspect to it all. If the story had been presented in his more usual manner, as a memory with its added perspective, I am sure the events described would have been much more evocative.

As for the final story, 'A Message to the King of Brobdingnag', it is a straightforward ecological disaster story recounted from the beginning to the end. And since the end is telegraphed several pages before the story actually finishes, it doesn't even manage to generate the usual tension. Again the story is presented as an ironic tale - the protagonists set out with the best of intentions to discover an answer to world hunger, but as an unexpected side effect they unleash something that is beyond their control. But even the irony has been done before.

'A Message to the King of Brobdingnag' comes in the collection immediately after 'The Scent of Silverdill', and this juxtaposition at least serves to highlight what Cowper is best at, and what he should leave alone.

A Tangled Web

Chris Bailey

[THE GOLDEN GROVE by NANCY KRESS. Bluejay Books 1984,] [250pp., $13.95. ISBN 0-312-94180-3]

Something is happening in America. Here in Britain, safe behind the barricades of Ballard, Aldiss, Harrison, et al., we have been firing salvoes of scorn across the water at the gimcrackery, verbosity, conceit and plain weariness to be found variously in the works of Heinlein, Niven, Anderson and many others. But now there seems to be emerging a band of American writers who match idea with emotion and plot with character; look out for Carter Scholz, Greg Frost, Lewis Shiner, Lucius Shepherd and Kim Stanley Robinson.

On the strength of three or four interesting short stories, I might have added Nancy Kress. Now, having read her second novel, The Golden Grove (the first being The Prince of Morning Bells), I am not so confident. Second novels are the ones that are meant to sort out the writers from the also-rans, and The Golden Grove should mark this divide in Nancy Kress's case. After all, it has a lot going for it, being a downbeat, bittersweet novel of character; alas, the author bodges it, although not without revealing a deal of talent en route.

So what is wrong? Well, there is the setting. In Focus 6, Garry Kilworth wrote of the importance of setting - if that feels wrong, the rest will not follow. While The Golden Grove is a fantasy purportedly set in classical Greece, Nancy Kress's scenario is perfunctory in the extreme, being an island, called Island, plonked in a nameless sea. The glory of Greece is invoked only in the characters' names, an obsessive concern with their clothes, and the occasional goblet of wine, which makes me wonder why the novel was not set in any one of a number of equivalent present-day environments, for then the author might have been able to breathe more life into her book. And on the island there is the 'Golden Grove' itself, pivotal to the lives and activities of the characters. We are told that it is a place of 'radiance', of 'heightened awareness', of 'singing lightness'; we are told plenty about spiritual uplift but experience little, certainly not enough to appreciate how the Grove might be important to the drama. Transporting your readers to a higher plane is no easy task, of course, but Nancy Kress's cosy vagueness comes nowhere near the mark; that she could have done better and persuaded us to believe genuinely in the properties of her grove is shown in one brief scene, the revelation of a new 'spider stone' growing at the centre of the now devastated copse, a moment in which she creates an undeniable magic.

The novel's lack of a sense of physical actuality does at least serve to point the spotlight at the characters - a Greek tragedy, perhaps, the raw self exposed on a naked stage? Not exactly, for while Nancy Kress brings us a cast of strong-willed people who have plenty to disagree about, little conflict emerges owing to the manner in which she handles them:-

> She did not know what to say, but realized that she was not much shocked, nor even surprised. Mostly she sorrowed for the wounds her daughter would seek, and cause. It was not like this that she had envisioned Amaura's future. Or had she envisioned it at all?

There is nothing particularly wrong with this very typical passage other than that the cumulative effect of many pages of such writing is to completely emasculate the characters as independent creatures. Scarcely has something happened or somebody spoken, and Nancy Kress pounces in eager analysis. While she worthily has attempted to write a novel of character, her characters exist only in her imposed interpretation of them and thereby she deprives the reader of one of his greatest pleasures.

If the novel is better than the above would suggest, it is because it does succeed on the level of device. In a book one of the recurrent images of which is that of spinning and weaving, the author herself spins around her characters a complex web of images and symbols, water and land, court and country, grove and field, weaving and rending; the decay, death and rebirth of the Grove itself is a most effective symbol of the delusions and subsequent coming to self-awareness of several of the characters.

While it is elegantly and intelligently resolved, the final impression left by The Golden Grove is of an absence of life and passion. Occasionally - just very occasionally - I could have sworn I was reading Marion Zimmer Bradley. On the present evidence, Nancy Kress may well become a similar wordmonger, saying lots and conveying little, or she may well become something very much better.

Second Class Returned

Ken Lake

[ALIEN DEBT by F.M. BUSBY. Bantam Books Inc 1984. 226pp] [$2.75. ISBN 0-553-24176-1]

Busby has invented one useful phrase - the Long View, found in the first three chapters with and without quotation marks and with and without italics. The concept is simple: time dilation gives space travellers both a biological and a chronological age, and apparently this can provide a social and even an intellectual cachet to the possessor of two "ages"; with the first chapter being purportedly written by a spoilt 8.5-year-old (bio) child, the daughter of our earlier heroine Rissa Kerguelen, it can be seen that her claim to a "chrono" age of 18 is intended to imply something - though what it is, I fail to grasp, and certainly the brat's subsequent behaviour fails to indicate that she has in any way benefited from the dual age.

It's true that in composing her purported "introduction to a short study", as a means of providing us with the sort of synopsis that used to be printed in italics at the beginning of partworks in Astounding, Busby has made her sound quite unlike any 8.5-year-old I have had the misfortune to encounter, but then, since every one of your old favourites - Rissa, Bran, Ivan, Ilse and the rest - is a cardboard cutout at best, such an intro is par for the course. I only wish I had realised he was going to write it, for it would have saved me from wading through Star Rebel, Zelde M'Tana and the three subsequent volumes of this interminable space opera.

An intriguing writer is Busby: his Demu Trilogy (1973/80) started off in the brutal, torturing style of so much of today's adventure fiction, but at least it had the virtue of its speed, strength and conviction to see

you through the first two parts; by the time he reached the third, however, Busby had obviously lost interest and it all peters out in waffle and piffle. All these Earths (1978), however, is vastly more interesting, with an unusual development of the "alternate worlds" idea whereby spacemen can never return to the world they left, but with each journey veer further and further from their homeworld continuum. All comes out right in the end, of course, but both the mechanics and the characterisation were fairly acceptable and, as usual, the suspense was well crafted.

Now, unfortunately, we are back to the great American multivolume family saga, Dallas of the Spaceways - transparent and excessively juvenile motivations, regularly injected snippets of sexuality (including Busby's hangup on breast feeding) and quite arbitrary disasters - acts of valour - domestic spats - simplistic solutions. So ineffectual are the humans that even the friendly aliens have to be described as "clown-marked" and "toe-dancing" so that the most clapped-out Earthman can feel superior to them.

Busby also suffers from a basic confusion over language. The friendly aliens speak "a rather Germanic syntax" ("she still piles all her verbs in one place a lot" as Our Hero explains it); this is fair enough as indicating an obviously somewhat unintelligent alien coping with the English language - after all, none of the humans even attempts to learn the alien language - and saves Busby having to provide any more realistic characterisation.

But the "bad aliens" also garble the English language to a point where understanding really is hard - yet this occurs in parts of the story where Busby is reporting their internal monologues, where (as with a translation from Cantonese into English) any competent interpreter would automatically put the sense into our syntax. Again, I suppose the aim is to stress the aliens' alienness, but it all seems both unnecessary and downright annoying for the reader.

Jerry Pournelle is cited by the publisher as saying that "Busby writes fine adventure stories, the kind that made us love science fiction in the first place." For me, that "first place" must be all of forty years ago, and perhaps I should have asked my neighbour's teenage son to review this adventure story for me. Unfortunately he can't cope, at age 15 (bio), with anything not in pictures, leaving me puzzled to learn just where Busby's market for juvenilia can actually be found today.

Still, one must not be too unkind. There's a lot of colourful action, things come out right in the end, the cover portraits of Bran and Rissa match anything in True Confessions, there is of course scope for an infinite number of further novels starring the same cast, and as throughout this saga Thud and Blunder rules O.K.

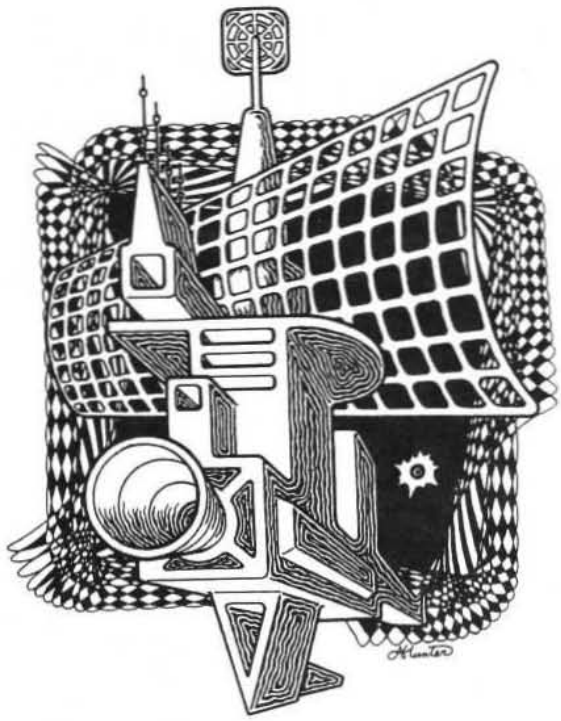
Lemon & Onion

Edward James

[THE LUNATICS OF TERRA by JOHN SLADEK. Gollancz 1984.]
[192pp., £7.95. ISBN 0-575-034464-5]

The Steam-Driven Boy, Keep the Giraffe Burning, Alien Accounts and now his fourth short-story collection (unless I've missed one), the one with the most suitable title yet. All, or nearly all, John Sladek's work has been about the lunatics who inhabit Terra, and certainly some of these particular lunatics we've met before, in his SF or in his non-fiction (The New Apocrypha) or even in his detective fiction (Black Aura). (Some of them are even having the same conversations: if you want to be unfair compare the bottom of p.60, in the story 'After Flaubert' with the conversation on p.28 on Black Aura (panther ed., 1975).

The pattern is to some extent the same as before, to no-one's regret: the standard is as high as ever. We have more delicious parodies of the lunatic fringe. 'Great Mysteries Explained' is there, although sadly only with the four great mysteries originally in Isaac Asimov's rather than the 'Seven Great Unexplained Mysteries' he published in Jakubowski and Edwards'



Complete Book of SF and Fantasy Lists (1983). There is 'An explanation for the disappearance of the Moon', from Extro, which brings together pseudo-science, pseudo-linguistics, Celtic mysticism and numerology into a convincingly loony thesis. A third parody features a twentieth-century Renaissance man who makes astonishing discoveries in all fields of human endeavour: he proves that the sun isn't really hot, works out a new and simpler value for pi, discovers a thirteenth sign of the zodiac, and heads an expedition to the East Pole. (He had been put off traditional science by his grandmother, who had heard that scientists could still not make a living in a test tube. "'Or was it life they couldn't make? Whatever it is they all admit it.' I never forgot her words. Out of gratitude, I told her how to make a second small hole in the other end of the egg, to make the sucking easier.")

The humour is, of course, still there, in almost every story. Sladek is the greatest humourist in SF, as has often been said, and it is worth pondering why. He has that delight in the weirdnesses of the English language which characterises all the best Anglo-American comic writers, and, which comes to much the same thing, a great feeling for the English language, which enables him to produce marvellous parodies of SF writers such as those in The Steam-Driven Boy. He has an imagination which can see the ludicrous potential of any situation. He can turn out one-liners as fine as any in the New Yorker school of humour (which has been influential in so much so-called SF humour) (some of the best come in the afterwords which follow each story). But what gives his humour intensity and staying power is his vision of the world and of human nature, which is just as black as that of Swift or Voltaire (as we have seen from Sladek's own robot Candide, Roderick).

The world inhabited by The Lunatics of Terra is one which we can recognise all too easily; it is, thank God, still one or two steps removed from Earth. Terrans elect a puppet (Punch) as President ('The Last of the Whaleburgers'). Their media resort to on-stage murder to keep up the viewing figures ('The Last of the Whaleburgers' and 'Red Noise'). When aliens visit Terra they are so overwhelmed by the pervasive media-culture that they abandon their own alienness and succomb to its lures, either passively ('Guesting" and "The Next Dwarf'), or acting out its fantasies with men as their victims ('White Hat'). Terrans have an uncritical fascination for the irrational and the received fact ('After Flaubert' and 'Breakfast with the Murgatroyds') and a yearning to be incorporated into the machines they

admire ('The Last of the Whaleburgers', 'Answers' and "The White Dwarf'). Adult Terrans may become so taken over by their irrational view of the world that they abandon reality ('The Kindly Ones') or so involved in play (which they call leisure activities) that they regress into juvenility, leaving machines and children to run the world ('Calling all Gumdrops!). The stories are not related to each other in any way, but all of them (except perhaps the not very successful horror story about a Teddy bear, 'Ursa Minor') share the same bitter despair at the apparently innate stupidity and pettiness of mankind. Comic, yes; work of great artistry and even genius, no doubt; and if you want to cheer yourself up afterwards, read some P.G. Wodehouse.

A Slice Of Heresy

Martyn Taylor

[THE GOSPEL FROM OUTER SPACE by ROBERT SHORT. Fount] [Paperback 1984, 93pp., £1.50]

This pamphlet is a printed edition of an illustrated lecture Short has given many times in America - he says - in which he seeks to convince the young that films such as '2001 A Space Odyssey' and 'Superman' are the work of godless materialists while 'CE3K', 'Star Wars' and 'ET' are modern reworkings of the bible story. The book looks impressive, with lots of serious seeming quotations, although there are more quotations from such heavy sources as 'Peanuts' and 'Hagar the Horrible' than from actual writers, whether dramatists or theologians. The reason for this becomes obvious when the book is actually read. Mr. Short evidently believes he knows far better what any writer really means than the writer did when he actually put pen to paper. A brave man indeed who puts words into the mouths of such as Shakespeare and Nietzche, whom most would have considered more than capable of expressing their true thoughts. In one place Short 'quotes' Stanley Kubrik. At least, the words appear in parentheses even though Short suggests they are a paraphrase. In fact the words are not a paraphrase of what Kubrik actually said - printed immediately beforehand in large friendly black letters for everyone to see - but of what Short thinks he said. The difference is illuminating - on Mr.Short. Similarly, he seems not to have noticed that he quotes Carl Sagan with approbation and then, sixteen pages later, dismisses him as an aetheist materialist so typical of modern scientists. I suspect Mr. Short believes he has assembled a work of scholarship. His scholarship is specious bordering on fraudulent.

His theology isn't too hot either. He has a notion of original sin which is not so much novel as founds an entirely new school of theology! He isn't too strong on free will or the power of prayer, either. But these pale into nothingness beside his crass incomprehension of the nature of Christ. Whether or not one accepts the truth of the Christian doctrine it must surely be accepted that the Christian churches do not hold Christ to have been a good man, a shining example to us all, the most perfect human being ever, but to have been the Messiah whose crucifixion redeemed all of us, if we choose. According to Mr. Short, Obiwan ben Kenobi (Star Wars) and ET are 'Christ symbols', so in his world Christ wields a mean light sabre and all that Prince of Peace, turn the other cheek, love your enemy jazz was so much hot air, and a cute little alien with a heart of gold and a nice line in stage drunk acts is the full, perfect and complete sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. Oh really?

Two facts give the flavour of this book. Mr. Short is a casual antisemite, as revealed in his attitude towards Speilberg, and in an avowedly religious work there are more quotations from William Kotzwinkle's novelisation of 'ET' than there are from the gospels. The uncommitted will laugh like drains at this book. Me, I shall pray for Mr. Short. With friends like him, who believe they can lead young people to the truth with a meretricious farrago of lies and distortions like this book, our Lord has no need of enemies.

Trampled SF

David Barrett

[FIRE PATTERN by BOB SHAW Gollancz 1984. 190pp., £7.95] [ISBN 0-575-03452-1]

'Oh, I wish you would burn to death,' snaps an exasperated Maeve Starzynski to her aging, pipe-smoking father, who is brushing flecks of glowing tobacco from his cardigan. Ten minutes later she returns to find a room full of smoke, a hole in the floor - and a mound of fine grey ash and one hand where her father had been.

Rayner Jerome, a local journalist, is given the job of writing up the story. He is a pronounced sceptic, stubborn, proud, and something of an intellectual snob who often rubs people up the wrong way - it was easy to identify with him. He begins to research the documented cases of Spontaneous Human Combustion, and very quickly becomes convinced that the phenomenon is genuine. Within a couple of days he himself witnesses another case of SHC, which is graphically described, and shortly after that he learns how and why it occurs. Until then this is an interesting mystery novel set in 1996; now it suddenly becomes science fiction, as Shaw brings in... But to reveal his brilliant, quite fantastical but thoroughly logical explanation for SHC would spoil the story; indeed, this is one of those books where surprise follows revelation follows sub-climax, and there is no safe way to outline the story beyond about p65. What fascinated me, though, was how, through one outrageous premise, Shaw could then use a handful of well-trodden SF ideas without letting them appear too old hat. Within the framework he has set up they work, so he uses them - and why not?

In passing, I admire his taste in beer:

> '... sat there in The Globe in Ulverston, downing a pint of Hartley's best... I sometimes think they could keep all their free love if I could just have a few pints of Hartley's best every now and then.' (pp101-102)

Recalling the more than a few pints of Hartley's Mild I knocked back in my student years, I echo the sentiment. Shaw's characterisation throughout is as good as ever; but this particular gentleman has to be drawn from real life.

Another character, who appears briefly in a telephone conversation, might also perhaps have some claim to reality: a certain John Sladek 'who in 1994 had published a no-nonsense study of the paranormal in a book called Psychic Superstars.' Sladek's first words are, 'You're not a bill collector, are you?' When told that Jerome was impressed by his book he replies, 'Thankyou. It's nice to hear from one of my readers... Wonder who the other one is?' (Just how many copies of The New Apocrypha did Sladek sell?) Jerome enquires about Spontaneous Combustion. "Oh, I don't know,' Sladek said. 'Maybe people do burst and make ashes of themselves... Well, it's a whole new category of event that the insurance companies can refuse to pay off for.' (pp39-40)

There is very little overt humour apart from this passage; the atmosphere is fairly tense throughout the book; Jerome and others are often in danger, or are physically, mentally or morally uncomfortable. The tensions and uncertainties continue right up to the inevitable but ambiguous conclusion.

I am usually the first to complain about the current tendency of SF writers to produce 500p over-extended epics. Fire Pattern, I feel, would have benefitted from being maybe 50 pages longer; some scenes were too telescoped, and there were a few ideas which could have been extended further - particularly the whole subject of Spontaneous Human Combustion which, having been explained so ingeniously, is then almost forgotten. This book certainly won't win any awards but, like most of Bob Shaw's work, it's a good, enjoyable read.

DANGEROUS DIVISIONS

TERRY BROOME,
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With reference to Jim England's review of Asimov on Science Fiction. If what Mr. England has said is true, then poor old doddering Asimov isn't as bright as he thinks he is. I haven't read the book, myself, but when it comes out in paperback, I'll buy it to check the facts, because it strikes me that Mr. Asimov can't (surely?) be as shallow as he seems from the review.

If the review is true to the book (I'm not saying Jim's a liar - just that I find a veteran such as Asimov could make so many mistakes hard to believe): Then where does that leave our Master of SF?

If we're to meet the bright future he (Asimov) paints then technological advance MUST go hand-in-hand with sociological advance - ie, we must grow at the same rate our technical and scientific knowledge expands.

Already, we have atomic science and are too immature to handle it properly - thus, we use it or keep on using it to build weapons we don't need or want - and that's putting it mildly.

So how can he criticise Orwell's Animal Farm or 1984 as 'didactic' or 'very bad science fiction'? After all, the social sciences DO exist, and Orwell has based or partly-based the systems of both books on existing governments or rulerships of the past. Animal Farm is an allegory - the events really did happen, but he has replaced the people with animals and the country with a farm. It is 'didactic', but the SF genre sprung about, partially, as a need amongst its writers, to put forward a message or warning in order that perhaps, common sense and sanity will prevail eventually. STAR WARS isn't utterly brainless - the film does hold certain moral standpoints, which is more than can be said for any of Asimov's works.

In reply to Martyn Taylor's letter (Vector 121); I agree with all three points he raises - I meant to say 'form', not 'philosophy', but my wires got crossed somewhere along the way unfortunately (for me!); I've since seen BLADERUNNER again on video, and though I also saw some emu's (?) I've come to the conclusion that Mr Taylor was right on this count too (that being the concrete jungle and simulacra is NOT held as an ideal); about his last point - as a fan of Bladerunner, I found the dub-overs spoiled the film somewhat, but if it helped others to understand what was going on, then Scott obviously made the right decision in including it.

I thought the two pieces on Lisa Tuttle in Vector 121 the most entertaining, on an author, yet, in the pages of Vector. The two 'articles', which follow, however, should have been put under the 'letters received' column: Good writing finger-flexing exercises, but as articles they're blown out of all proportion.

K.V. Bailey starts his review/'exploration' with such long-winded phrases! The first page and a bit was gobbledegook to me, but perhaps the articles is aimed at those who have already read The Drowned World? But if that is the case, and the article is aimed at those who would like a greater appreciation of the book, how many members of the BSFA is K.V. Bailey aiming for? Or am I, unknowingly, the minority?

The article made more sense as it progressed, but even reading the beginning three or four times will not unlock its meaning to me. How many BSFA members, who would like a greater appreciation of The Drowned World have read The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, or have heard of the Saturnalia? Or is it that I'm ignorant of these two works (I've heard of Gordon Pym, but this is the first time the Saturnalia has come to my attention). I gained nothing from the article, except as a reading exercise, because the references were obscure and scholarly, the writing crammed full of puffed rice: I'm sure a few members have read the writings he mentions, and will get something out of this, but I'd hazard a guess they're terribly outnumbered by the ones, like me, who, after wading through the OED's left-overs, were left to drown in the storms.

Or is the BSFA aiming for a scholarly and well educated audience (ie, the university boffins)?

What IS the level of education of most Vector readers and BSFA members?

Perhaps a survey?

[[[One of the perennial problems with Vector is to know at what level of knowledge the contents should be aimed at. (The critera being knowledge of science fiction and literature; especially literary criticism). I think most people would agree that when David Wingrove edited the Vector the type of magazine that was produced was too academic for most of the members' taste. In fact, to give you a more recent example the contents of Vector 119 and 120, (Competition Winners and Blish issue) fairly obviously did not catch the readers' interest as they killed off the letter column of the last issue! But conversely, the contents of those two issues were just as good as the other issues if not better, as most of the articles were original; they were just aimed at a different level of interest. So I would not concern yourself too much about the level of education of most Vector readers as any editor of Vector is always going to aim the contents of the magazine to elicit response from his readers. However, this does not mean that the contents of each issue has to have the consistancy of over-cooked porridge but rather a mixture of articles/interviews/reviews some of which are bound to capture the interest of each reader. In your case Terry I would suggest that I succeeded in that aim and to expect to like the whole contents of each issue is only an ideal.

On the specific point of the Ballard article I think it was necessary to have read The Drowned World but not the other books mentioned. The fact that the references existed was K.V. Bailey's point.]]]

K.V. BAILEY,
1 Val de Mer,
Alderney. C.I.

Vector 121 is good value. My only reservation is that while transcribed interviews are enlightening and stimulating in moderate dosage, they can get a bit boring if prolonged - all the same there were some very interesting things in the Lisa Tuttle transcript - particularly the light thrown on how living in Britain affects an American writer. The high spot in this number is surely the Benford-Knight dialogue. Actually I didn't read that until after completing my Zen Gun review, and of course found it retrospectively relevant. They share, in fact, plenty of common ground and I find myself with a foot in either camp, but a bigger foot, as it were, in Damon Knight's.

Incidentally, it took me a little time to puzzle out the uncaptioned photo on page 28. It's not me. It appears above a para. on C.S. Lewis, but, although there is a resemblance, it's not him. It is inset into a paragraph on Dante and it's not him. By processes of elimination and probability then, it must be Mr. Ballard! [[[10 out of 10!]]]

I liked very much your autobiographical SF cocktail - and the title design accompanying it: a

nice complementarity of text and illustration.

DAVID V. BARRETT,
31 Mayfield Grove,
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N. Yorks.

Couldn't make head nor tale of your Editorial. Obviously the move has had a serious effect on you. Liked the illo; clearly highly significant. But I preferred it when you gave some Editorial comment on the Contents. Contrary to both Chris Bailey ('pleasingly unobtrusive editorial presence' p31) and Paul Kincaid ('the reader should hardly be aware of the editor' p37), I think the Editor's hand should be seen in the content of a magazine, and his voice should be heard in the Editorial, either being deliberately controversial (or deeply thoughtful) to spark debate, or justifying his choice of content. Then in fifty years' time (five years' time?) we can all sit around a brazier for warmth and light under the ash-darkened sky while we scratch our scabs and kick the mutated fleas, and reminisce. 'Ah, yes, but when Rippington was Editor...' [[[By accepting or rejecting material and by what he/she requests an editor's hand is felt in the magazine. I see no need for justifying, in specific terms the selection of one article over any other. As for the type of editorial published; well, if you continually publish controversial editorials for the sole purpose of getting response the readers will know what you are trying to do and thus what you are saying will not reach home. However, by coincidence, make sure you read this issues editorial.]]]

Enjoyed reading Lisa Tuttle's Novacon speech and interview. When you know an author's work, interviews, etc. add an extra dimension to your appreciation of it; when you don't, they're usually boring. I don't; this isn't; I must.

The continuing debate between Damon Knight and Gregory Benford could prompt yet another mass of correspondence on 'The Definition of SF'. The discussion is vital to the development of SF, but I just hope no-one ever finds a widely acceptable definitive answer; I'm reminded of the critic who slit a nightingale's throat to try to find out how it sang so sweetly. But for me, 'hard' SF is the least interesting part of the genre; twenty years ago it fascinated me, but now I find it, almost invariably, devoid of any comment on the human condition. Leaving to one side S&S and Tolkienesque Fantasy, American SF on the whole tends to the 'hard'; Delany is the great exception. Recent British SF I measure by Cowper and Priest: philosophy, yes, and also religion, anthropology, sociology, psychology. You can keep your mechanics of the new hyperspace drive; that does nothing for me. [[[Would the majority of people describe recent Cowper and Priest as Science Fiction? I will admit that I have my doubts.]]]

CY CHAUVIN,
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It certainly is good to see the Blish pieces in print, particularly "A New Totemism?" David Ketterer has the name of the forthcoming book from Advent wrong: it's The Tale That Wags the God, not Dog! Otherwise, his introductions and commentary seem very accurate. Your comment that "Blish always seemed...to hold a peculiar position within SF" seems very accurate, too. Gregory Feeley, in a personal conversation with me, pointed out how many 'hard science' SF writers, such as Jerry Pournelle, thought Blish very liberal and new wave, while other liberal writers such as Michael Moorcock thought he was in the 'old guard' camp. (Feeley based these impressions on interviews he conducted with these writers for his biography.) I don't think he was either, but instead a careful writer and critic who tried to wind his way carefully between the propaganda and the work, and consider each individually. Really, he seems to have been a pivotal figure in SF: between old writers and new (he encouraged both Poul Anderson and Thomas Disch and Joanna Russ); between those in England and America, since he had lived in both countries; between routine commercial fiction and that which attempted to be literature (he wrote both the first Star Trek book series and After Such Knowledge); between writers and critics; and science and literature. There's not too many writers in SF, as you say, that have covered the same expanse (although I appreciate anything done well, no matter how narrow the writer's focus). Sometimes I think there's not as much discussion between the groups within SF as there was when Blish was alive, and people seem a bit more willing to relax within their own prejudices.

Gregory Feeley's article on King Log is interesting. "The City That Was the World" is a good character study, but "Darkside Crossing" is stunning: one of the best of Blish's short fictions. I actually think it is better to consider the stories separately, and not part of a series: "Binary Brothers" in particular detracts from "Darkside Crossing", since the ending suggested in the latter is far more mystical and unworldly than the prosaic "Binary Brothers". Feeley strays into murky ground when he attempts to extrapolate how Blish might have written the rest of the series: it's all speculation, and really doesn't affect our enjoyment of the pieces we are lucky enough to have.

I think Paul Kincaid should give poor Terry Carr a break -- I admire his stamina for reading all the English language short SF; other languages would be wonderful, but impossible. It's also obvious that Carr read Interzone, but didn't care for what he found. (I didn't particularly like "Kitemaster", although if I were editing such an anthology as Carr's, I'd have included Saxton's "No Coward Soul" from Interzone.) Kincaid's other comments are quite penetrating ("Swarm" is such junk), but unfortunately my page 29 is a repeat of page 21. [[[All copies were identical I'm afraid.]]]

In Vector 119, Paul Kincaid says that only Greg Benford in Timescape attempted to use SF "to explore the work and character of a scientist". What about Shevek in The Dispossessed? The science is not the whole interest in that novel, but must it be? Still, I realize that one more exception does not ruin his argument.

The current issue (121) is good, although I miss the letter column.

The interview with Lisa Tuttle was interesting: I've always tended to be against fanzines that printed fiction, but Lisa is certainly an example of a writer who emerged from those depths. I remember reading the fanzine she helped edit (Mathom, I believe it was called; Joe Pumilia might have been a co-editor) while in study hall at high school. I remember writing to her and complaining that it was typed in too many different typefaces, apparently at random (this was all before I knew the problems associated with producing a fanzine). I don't remember the contents. I wonder if I would get more from a collector after a rare bit of Tuttle juvenilia, or from Lisa Tuttle herself to suppress it?

The Knight/Benford exchange reminds me of James Blish's conclusion in his essay "The Science in Science Fiction" - Blish decided, to his own surprise, that the most important scientific content in Science Fiction were the impossibilities, because they suggested new paradigms in science. Paradigms were new methods of thinking. But I don't think anyone, Knight included, would want to see the logical consequences or development of a scientific idea and its affect on people neglected in SF. But as Benford has pointed out elsewhere, it's awfully hard to find out the consequences of multiple new ideas (longevity, pollution, contact with an alien society?) on characters and society, and then there's the conflict between this "thrill of discovery" and the story and character development. It's pretty heady stuff, and makes the problems of writing SF properly (i.e. fulfil all its potential roles) seem both awesome and daunting. I wonder how many writers work out their stories and background on a theoretical basis, and how many just write "by feel"? Hard SF seems to need that theoretical background. Lisa Tuttle's description of how the novel she wrote with George Martin evolved, Windhaven, gives me that impression too, although flying around on metal wings fabricated from a downed spaceship seems a sort of trivial possibility (or impossibility) to explore. I don't think anyone would condemn hard SF for its logic or rigor, but it's the sometimes fascination of trivial ideas for there own sake that makes me tend to avoid it. [[[My thanks Cy, for a long and interesting letter.]]]

EXTRAVAGANZA!

K V Bailey

[THE BOOK OF THE RIVER by IAN WATSON Gollancz 1984,] [208pp., £7.95]

How often in history, in literature, in mythology, in cultural groupings has the river been the divider, unifier, confiner, destroyer, saviour: Left Bank/Right Bank; Gallia/Germania; Caesar crossing the Rubicon; the Baptist in the Jordan; Xingu tribes paddling warily mid-stream in trade and warfare - thus history. In literature Ruskin's "Golden River", withdrawing, reappearing; Charles Kingsley's small sweep's river pilgrimage from Lewthwaite Crag to the Ocean; Joyce's cyclic "River-run"; Conrad's Congo journey into The Heart of Darkness. As for mythology and allegory, there is no richer symbol than a deep and winding river - unless it be an equally sinuous dragon. Bunyan's Christian had to cross the unbridged river to reach the Celestial City; in Revelation there is "the pure river of life proceeding out of the throne of God" - Blake depicted it with souls gliding on the current and water being scooped from it; in Chinese mythology dragons marked out the great water-courses, ruled and maintained them; they flowed from the fountain of immortality at the world's 3,000 foot high central mountain.

These are the kinds of associations which reading The Book of the River stir up. It doesn't of course follow narrowly any model of history, anthropology, myth or metaphysic; it creates its own, but with a weaving together of many deep-rooted components.

To particularise as to locale and plot. We have a planet, but its nature is concentrated in a river and its hinterland - a river issuing from cloud-piercing precipices and flowing northwards to an unseen sea. It has been populated at some lost point in time by human beings from somewhere defined as "Eeden". They were at that time provided with animals and plants to rear for food; there is also an indigenous, perhaps eventually cross-bred, flora and fauna - four foot high croakers, pianah-mice, fish with such names as "hoke". The river's west bank is occupied by a male-dominated, bigoted, guilt-ridden society, devil-fearing and witch-burning, a puritanical theocracy ruled by the Sons of Adam. The east bank is the domain of a hedonistic, freely-trading-upstream-downstream, woman-dominated society. The sisterly, at times Sapphic, river-boat guilds maintain its economy and cultural traditions. Men, on pain of a strange river-inflicted death, only travel by water once - to find an exogamous mate.

Passage from one bank to the other isn't possible. A black, viscous, worm-like barrier current prevents it. To west bank men it is the "Satan-channel"; to east bank women it is more a totem than a god. In guild-initiation they drink its scooped-up substance - which may then reject them. Yaleen, the first-person-protagonist heroine, chosen for the New-year ceremony, unprecedentedly passes beyond the dividing current to reach the west bank. She is, in roundabout ways, instrumental in drugging the current which, revealed as a mountain-headed Worm, retreats up-stream to the cave from which the river flows, thus permitting the men of the west bank to invade the women, whom they regard as witches and devil-worshippers. How Yaleen enters the Worm's body for a time, relives the lives of certain of the dead whose essences it has absorbed, emerges from this "harrowing of hell" type of experience with the insight to make decisions affecting the future of the river, but also in some sense conditioned and 'commandeered' to act as agent of the Worm in making entry into Eeden as a move in the war between the Worm and the God-mind of Eeden - these developments occupy Part IV ("The Worm Head") of The Book of the River. The action is obviously leading towards its sequel in preparation, The Book of the Stars. Where one so often winces at the gestation announcement of sequels or sequences, here I, at least, would be disappointed if that were not the case. So engrossing and speculation-raising a stage has been set that one feels on ending the book that the curtain should not come down.

This happy expectation may surprise you. As just summarised The Book of the River may appear an already overtoppling extravaganza. So would The Faerie Queen and Malory's Morte d'Arthur if equally compressed. Read at length, it is compelling and even logical. True, the novel does raise questions as to the viability of so multi-structured and eclectic a symbology, and there is surely some nit-picking could be done in matters of extraterrestrial nomenclature and consistency of detail (this I will get around to a little later); but these are fairly minor issues when one considers overall the imaginative range and the sheer good story telling embraced by this book. The Yaleen saga is of the 'mission' type; but the narrative avoids the tedium of a succession of disconnected or repetitious incidents and environments to which such scenarios are prone. Whether Yaleen travels upstream, downstream, by land or water, boat or Worm, swims the river or is confined by it, there is such a skilful cross-fertilisation of incident, character and community that one quickly comes to sense the plot as an organic whole rather than having to trail it as a merely picaresque narrative.

The male-female opposition of the facing banks, the war between them engineered by the black current, or Worm, in its move to become a God, absorbing and understanding more of the new creation with which its enemy the Far Intelligence has infiltrated it, are of a piece with the mountain-to-sea flow of the river; and the existence, withdrawal, stasis and partial return of the Worm-current mark the progress of Yaleen's semi-messianic mission. In cosmic terms we have something like a mirror of the Fall and of "the dragon, that old serpent which is the Devil and Satan", a being itself aspiring to knowledge and to godhead.

This is undoubtedly a complex excursion in myth-handling, and many of its motifs are not new to Watson. Some, in fact, were already there a decade ago in his first novel, The Embedding. This featured the disruption, damming-up and return of a river, and the storing of resurrectable brains in the dome-like heart of the starship of the knowledge-seeking alien S'thra - this not unlike the womb or "Ka-store" within the Worm, where Yaleen, in symbiosis with the life-experiences of the dead, reaches fresh viewpoints on her world and on her destiny. (Incidentally, in Ancient Egypt "Ka-house" was a royal mortuary' the "Ka" was the essence or soul.)

Ian Watson gives occasional hostages to criticism in his invented nomenclatures. "Ka-theodral" is a "Deothorist H.Q." Both are etymologically odd and improbable, even allowing the post-Eedenic persistence of "some old word". Money comes in "scales" and "fins", measurement in "spans"; yet time goes by in "seconds" and the Worm withdraws "at a rate of seventeen leagues per hour." Dialogue and idiom are, sensibly, quite contemporary, but this has its hazards. Yaleen talks of "crying for the moon", and then wonders what a stony body above the clouds could possibly look like; that is stretching retained figures of speech and inherited knowledge rather far, especially in a culture said to be hazy as to origins.

Such niggles will always arise when SF and fantasy meet, as they do here. The concepts of men and women "sent forth to populate strange planets", and of consequential evolutions of beliefs and technologies, are standard SF. Concepts of spaceships and river currents being flesh and blood entities verge towards fantasy. In fact living ships, tree-houses, zombies, re-living the lives of the dead, place-names like Spanglestream and Manhome, the telescopic inter-cultural observation tower etc. must be surely, and intentionally, evocative of much that inhabits imagination's metagalaxy, and of many worlds lying along the junction zones of SF and fantasy.

Catching allusions or spotting paradoxes can be an entertaining readers' game, but this book's basic themes are sufficiently major for such peripheral diversions not to mar their impact. These themes are strongly mythic and poetic, with their roots in metaphysical more than in technological imaginings. They involve matters of broken unity, of evolving consciousness, of paradise lost and its re-seeking, and ultimately of whether what Yaleen conceives to be "a war of the Gods" does or does not imply a cosmic dualism.

Finally, don't let me give the impression that this is in any way a weary or wearying fiction. The river runs deep but it also sparkles; the book is a joy to read, full of incident, humanity and humour. It lives up to its heroine's dictum, when she reflects disparagingly on the dour researches of the west bank philosophers: "The real and the true could only be seized in a laugh, a laugh that would rattle the stars." Can that, I wonder, be read as a preable to The Book of the Stars?

to portray his theme.

For a start, who would publish it? Although Ballard is well known and sells quite well, up to now he has not been in the super league and would have difficulty placing it in one of the literary publishing houses. But let's say he has a streak of luck and a publisher shows enough interest to arrange a meeting. To his horror he finds out that it is the SF editor (most probably an ex editor of Vector and therefore an SF expert!) who is making the offer. What should Ballard do? He instinctively feels that it is the best book he has ever written and with a bit of luck might be considered for the Booker shortlist. However, if it is published under the SF label with, most probably, gaudy Japanese robots on the cover, he can guarantee that it will not make the shortlist or even be reviewed extensively in the national press. In truth he has little choice. With the stigma that is attached to anything to do with science fiction it will be unlikely to be accepted by any publisher other than an SF publisher. This way at least it will be published. Although our fictional case is a striking example of the absurdity of the position science fiction has within literature, it is of course, nothing new. Over the last twenty years writers like Moorcock and Aldiss have been praised for their works outside the genre and generally ignored for those inside.

What is new, and what is exacerbating the situation is the commercial success that some writers are having in the genre and the effect that this is having upon the rest of the new science fiction writers. Why or who started it is irrelevant; be it the publishers' accountants or the SF Editors' essential laziness, but as soon as science fiction had a success the floodgates to commercialism sprang open and now seem close to taking the dam with it. Up to a point, especially with paperback houses, commercial instinct must take its place. But what I am talking about here is established hardback publishers whose very existence is not motivated by large profits from the 'fiction' section, and who have been captivated by this 'commercial game'. It is my contention that the 'safety first' policy of the SF hardback publishers is continually widening the creativity gap between the repetitive pap that we laughingly call 'mainstream' science fiction and the creative writer who 'uses the imagery of science fiction'. Commercial instinct dictates that if something is successful try it again, and again, and again as we have seen with Dune, Foundation and the like. But SF publishers have taken this one step forward, and have applied the law of 'supply and demand'. Most publishers tend to stay with writers that sell, as long as the quality of what is being produced is to standard, and the science fiction field should be no exception. But by SF publishers, signing long term contracts with their current authors detailing a certain number of work/s per year, instead of letting the material dictate the flow of work, instead of using sand, cement and water to build a dam, they ignored the creative ingredients and have ended up with a small muddy pile. This has not only hurt the quality of our 'established' science fiction writers (however much it improves their economic life - for an alternative point of view just ask some of the writers outside these protective bubbles) but has left any avenue for new writers firmly closed. The SF Editor once a protector against the forces of commercialism seems to have lost courage - a book should be a gamble for both writer and publisher - and is taking the safe option. How can we expect the new literature of tomorrow to come from a science fiction writer if we are busily reproducing yesterdays fiction? Is it no wonder that the critics scoff!

If you look at the contents again, the linkage should now be on obvious. M.J. Harrison, one of the most strident critics of the SF establishment puts the case for leaving the genre to its own end. On the reverse side of the coin, Josef Nesvadba asks us, before we disappear under a welter of Sword & Sorcery and Dragons, to go back to the roots of science fiction. Sitting neatly on the edge of the coin Dave Langford re-evaluates our view of critical standards within the SF genre. To assist you in your evaluation of Science Fiction today, the reviews cover the complete gamut of the science fiction field. From L. Ron Hubbard's Battlefield Earth to Asimov's The Robots of Dawn to Silverberg, Shaw and Sladek.....

A Reel Headache

Paul Brazier

[Reèl by LAURENCE M. JANIFER Doubleday 1983. 186pp.,]
[$11.95. H/B ISBN: 0-385-17757-7]

This is very strange. When I knew that I would be reviewing this book, I read a collection of Janifer's short stories in order to ground myself in his style. Reel arrived and I dutifully read it -- and due to one thing and another, writing the review was seriously delayed.

Now when I came to actually write this piece, I found I couldn't remember anything about the book. So I leafed through it, refreshed my memory, and wrote something which constitutes a major part of the latter half of this review. But I stalled on filling in the background. Reason? I couldn't remember any of the short stories either. I have just glanced through the collection again in order to fill in that background, and realised that, apart from one outstanding story, I could remember none of them. So I re-read one or two, and it was as though I was reading them for the first time. I didn't remember them at all. And this is, as I said above, very strange, because I have almost certainly read all the stories originally in Astounding or Analog as well as in this collection.

Now let me be quite plain. I like Janifer's stories: and I like his writing. So why should I find it so difficult to remember anything about them apart from the enjoyment? The answer lies, I think, in the nature of the short story in general and the SF short story in particular.

A short story has little time or space to spare for the development of character or plot. Bare bones are all that is possible, and there is usually a single pivotal point, be it a twist in the tail, an elaborately-led-up-to joke or pun, or the Joycean epiphany. But at least a mainstream writer can assume that a major part of his fictional world is co-extensive with the real world of the reader. This option is not open to SF writers. They have to tell us everything we need to know. Of course, the art of writing short stories is to tell the readers what they need to know without actually telling them -- subliminally, as it were. Thus it is clear that to write short SF is much more difficult than to write short mainstream fiction, simply because there is so much more information to impart. So a master of the form can delight and divert as much with the skill demonstrated in arriving at the denouement as with the denouement itself.

And of course, again, this is why Janifer's short stories are at once so good and so unmemorable. He is so adept at the absolute minimalism necessary to good short story writing that the minutiae of the worlds he describes hardly impinge on our consciousness beyond leading us to the story's end.

So we come to Reel, a novel by a master of the short story. And a novel which I enjoyed immensely -- but which I found myself hard put to remember anything of. And the reason for this? Well, before I go into the actual story or writing, here are some numbers.

At 186 pages, Reel is a short novel. But of those pages, the first twelve are blank save for titles, publishing details, and a four line dedication -- you could get the lot on a single side without crowding. The story itself is made up of twenty 'calls', each contain- ing two chapters. That's forty chapters. The thing is, the first chapter in each call is actually only the epigraph to the second. To make it clearer, the first call is laid out like this. The words FIRST CALL are printed in the centre of the page. The rest of the page is blank, as is the other side. This is followed by chapter one -- which is a twelve line quotation from Plato. The next page is solely occupied by the name of the character this call is for. On the next page, chapter two begins (half way down the page). And this pattern is repeated for each call, so that for each of the twenty calls we have four pages devoid of narrative. That's eighty pages

essentially blank! Add the opening twelve, that's ninety-two. Ninety-two pages blank out of one hundred and eighty-six is nearly half the book: that's too many.

Thus it must be obvious that the reason I could barely remember Reel is that it is little more than an extended short story.

Now I'm not complaining about this shortness on a value for money basis, although there is probably another argument there. No, what I find most frustrating is that there simply wasn't enough prose.

Among the epigraphs there are quotations from Plato, Shakespeare, Freud, and Blake, and the narrative staggers beneath their erudite weight, for it is at most a simple story. Boy meets girl, falls for girl, and wins girl, despite this being totally contrary to the established patterns of behaviour on his world -- The Reel -- where he is heir to great wealth and power. Almost incidentally, he foils an attempt to take over the planet, and in fact the whole book is a series of testimonies -- or 'Calls' -- about this attempted coup, including the final testimony of the convicted culprit.

What this adds up to is an awesome achievement. The narrative is entirely first person, but there is never any doubt about which of no less than seven different first-person narrators is speaking, once you realise that they change. But, Oh that short story syndrome! We get occasional tantalising glimpses of the vital functioning of what appears to be a well-thought- through and convincing capitalist anarchy. And that's all. Just glimpses. This could have been a seminal contribution to the dialectic on capitalism v. collectivism in SF, and that certainly appears to be the intent. After all, there must be some point to dreaming all this up other than to tell a simple love story for money, else why include all those heavy quotations. But time and again opportunities to expand on a particular political, moral, or social point are passed over in order to get on with the story. Neither is there any investigation of personal motivation inside each first person narrator, although it is quite clearly hinted that there are motivations above and beyond simple greed, lust, and megalomania. To be fair, the entirely first person narrative denies the author the opportunity to comment or explain impersonally, but surely this style allows for other methods of conveying insight and explication.

As must be clear by now, my only real criticism of this book is that it is far too short. But that must be the most damning criticism of all, for there is not enough of the writing to make any sensible comment about. On the outside chance that it does even become available in this country, I would honestly advise you not to read it unless it has been copiously extended, for after a very short read it will leave you only with a vast inchoate and frustratingly vague question mark in your mind. This I find the most unpleasant thing about this book. After all, if the author is not trying to give us answers to burning questions, the least he can do in all common decency is to try to define clearly the questions he is asking.