

Vector

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Issue 154

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

Theme Issue

Myths & Legends:

Colin Greenland
Off with their Heads!

Garry Kilworth
A Stone from
Oberon's Castle

Gwyneth Jones
The Mind of the Maker

Joanne Raine
The Quest for a
Whiter Wash

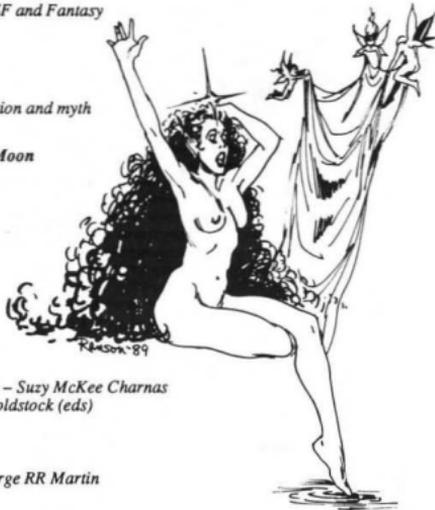


Vector

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What is *myth* that it has provided so much material for the best and the worst writers of our time? The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms states definitively:

"Myth is always concerned with creation."

This much we can understand, because we know that people always need an explanation of their world. We look back to our primitive ancestors and appreciate how mysterious their world must have seemed to them. In the last decade of the 20th century, however, we have advanced to a position where we believe that we understand and can attempt to control all but a fraction of our surroundings and we are now seeking information from farther afield (both inwards and outwards). So, what role do myths have now?

The first part of the answer lies in the idea that myths *do* go much further than creation tales, to say something about our everyday existence. Of course the surface of the myth is a world far removed from our own, and almost certainly always was, even back to its original time. Underneath however, are archetypes which are permanent, if sometimes malleable. It is these that a skilled author can use to consider aspects of contemporary life.

The other part of the answer lies with *legend*, those tales which may be truth, apocrypha or embellishment about real, or amalgamated historical figures, and which have less to do with the make-up of the universe but still give us a means of studying people. In many cases, most notably Arthur, these figures have become merged with archetypes, and the legends and myths are entwined and indistinguishable.

Within the genre myths and legends are common material, most obviously in the Fantasy mode, but also in SF, such as Delany's *Nova*, Gibson's *Count Zero*, and novels by Tim Powers, CJ Cherryh, Ian McDonald, Roger Zelazny and others.

In Fantasy, despite numerous exciting, thoughtful and moving retellings, there is a reputation for unoriginality and insipidity that would seem to be justified. Every culture has its own variations on these myths and legends, some similar, others unique. Contemporary Fantasy, since Tolkien, seems to be trapped within a narrow area of British and Celtic myths. Arthurian legend is widespread on the shelves, with some excellent examples to choose from, but many more which take half-researched ideas and use them in pale imitation of successful works. Even authors who are normally reliable have fallen into this trap; KW Jeter begins *Morlock Night* skillfully, but the "arrival" of Arthur sees a rapid drift into banality.

A select few writers have endeavoured to use other myth cycles - Neil Gaiman makes passing use of the Aboriginal Dreamtime in *Sandman*; Robert Silverberg and Geoff Ryman have both examined the epic of Gilgamesh; Storm Constantine took elements of Cabalism for her *Wræththu* books; Lewis Shiner made Mayan myth a central part of *Deserted Cities of the Heart*... And I am in-

EDITORIAL

The Use and Misuse of Myth and Religion in SF and Fantasy

By Kev McVeigh



formed that an interesting American newcomer, Elizabeth Hand, has worked with Babylonian myth to great effect. Why, then, are these so unusual? Is the simple fact that the authors have taken the trouble to research other cultures enough to explain the quality of these books? No - and one might cite Susan Schwartz as an example of bad Fantasy outside the more normal myth sequences - but that care is very relevant. Many of the common myths are so familiar to use, that authorial research may occasionally become complacent perhaps? It would be understandable - after all, six months research can be costly if it delays the final book - but is it excusable?

I'm not denying the popularity of these books, (though I remain unconvinced that that is relevant) or the quality of those, like Fay Sampson, who have considered new aspects of Arthur whilst maintaining an accurate reflection of the original myths. It should also be pointed out that Marian Zimmer Bradley is no less accurate about Arthur

than Sir Thomas Malory was, but one of them used all their available writing skills to tell the story in a memorable fashion. What I would like to see is a few more writers taking a lot more thought before embarking on well-worn paths. Perhaps there is a better path just off the track a little? Perhaps the journey will be more profitable if made in a completely different direction?

A great deal of the blame lies with the publishers, of course, for staying too close to the proven path. I know through discussing this with authors and editors, that editors *do* edit, and can turn a competent novel into a work of higher quality. When it comes to some of the more contrived and formulaic books it has been my misfortune to buy over the past few years, I have to wonder if they have been edited at all, because if they have, then how much worse were they before?

Publishing seems to be full of strange practices. ■

LETTERS



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Right of Reply

Last issue David Wingrove criticised Paul Kincaid for the way he is running the Reviews section of Vector...

It is not the place here to discuss the quality of *Chung Kuo*, and whether or not it deserved praise in its reviews – that is a matter for the individual reviewer to decide. However, in defence of Ken Lake I will say this: it is not uncommon for review copies of books to be sent out with publicity material, usually in the form of one sheet of paper printed on one side. In the case of *Chung Kuo*, the book was accompanied by a pile of A4 pages nearly as thick as an average issue of *Interzone*. This is several times more than the publicity material for any other book I have seen in more than ten years of reviewing, and even books by authors such as Clive Barker and Tad Williams (where the size of the advance would suggest a major promotional push) did not receive this amount of hype. Furthermore, such publicity material, and review copies, would normally be sent to reviews editors and magazines; in this case everyone I know who reviews SF on any regular basis received the book and the hype. One can only assume that the publicity budget must have been huge, since many more review copies seem to have been sent out than for any other book. In addition, there is a strong feeling among those who have seen this material that most if not all of it appears to have been written by Wingrove himself – even the interview with the author included among the material seems to have been conducted by Wingrove. All of this is unprecedented, and is a legitimate subject for comment. Lake's theme was to compare the claims made for the book in this publicity material with the achievements of the book itself. I believe this a fair and legitimate comment, and I believe that it provided a reflection upon the work in question that made it entirely proper entry in the review column. Were the situation to repeat itself I would, without hesitation, use such a review in the way I did, and I would continue to defend Lake's right to make such comment.

As to Wingrove's wider attack upon myself and the Vector review column, there are simple factual errors in what he says. For a start, the average length of reviews in Vector is over 400 words, not 300 words as he claims. I will, on occasion, run a review of 300 words or less for a book that both the reviewer and I feel deserves a mention but

no greater consideration. However, the word length I set my reviewers in the vast majority of cases is 400 words, or occasionally 500. In effect, most of the reviews come in at around 400-450 words. That is a longer review than the vast majority of science fiction and Fantasy books will receive in the pages of *Interzone*, *Locus*, *SF Chronicle*, *Critical Wave*, or the national press. Only a journal such as *Foundation* is liable to give lengthier consideration to a genre title, and they review far fewer books each year. The length I set my reviewers is actually not that much shorter than the length I have been set for reviews in such publications as the *Times Literary Supplement*, and I have on occasion reprinted one of my reviews verbatim from the TLS without editing and without it appearing any longer than the over reviews in that issue of Vector. I also, when possible, run two reviews of the same book to provide a broader perspective – as I did with *Chung Kuo*, for instance, so that book received about 900 words of review in that issue. Naturally, in an ideal world it would be nice to run reviews of 1,000 or 1,500 words for each book, but if I were to do that at the moment only half a dozen books would be featured per issue, not the 20-30 as at the moment. Quite frankly, faced with a decision of what to leave out in such a circumstance, I'm not sure that I would have printed any review of *Chung Kuo*. As someone who has reviewed for Vector under my editorship, David Wingrove knows this. If he is to claim that Vector is not providing adequate coverage of SF, he could at least get his facts right in the first place.

He also claims that I am featuring too much Fantasy and Horror, and not enough SF, and suggests that this policy might be losing us members. At random I checked the reviews I had reviews of 15 SF books plus one critical work on SF, there were 7 Fantasies (including one, for instance, by Isaac Asimov) and 5 Horror (including one collection containing work by George RR Martin). Though the question is: where do you draw the line? Should I have excluded the Asimov because it is Fantasy, though it is liable to be far more popular with Vector readers than some of the straight SF titles reviewed?

Nobody is going to be interested in every book reviewed in any issue of Vector, my job is to provide as comprehensive a survey as possible of the books that are liable to be of interest to BSFA members. And since there is considerable overlap between SF and Fantasy, Horror and the mainstream, I must

provide coverage of that overlap. (If you were to go into a specialist SF bookshop you would be astounded if the only books on its shelves were SF. They stock Fantasy, Horror, mainstream, children's books, critical works and the like because their customers are interested in them also. The membership of the BSFA is similarly broad.) Though to go back to Wingrove's earlier point, Horror and Fantasy titles are more likely to receive shorter notices than SF, but not exclusively so.

Given that the only major schism in the history of the BSFA occurred when the British Fantasy Society was created out of former BSFA members who felt the BSFA wasn't giving sufficient attention to Fantasy and Horror, it seems difficult to continue advocating such a narrow outlook. There's a very broad nation of literature out there. We're part of it. Let us have the freedom to go where we please within that nation rather than be restricted by someone else's narrow definitions.

To conclude: I know that *Chung Kuo* has not, in the main, been kindly reviewed. Most authors remain silent in the face of criticism, but I also know that Wingrove has responded angrily to others who have criticised his work. One must assume that Wingrove lacks confidence in his own writing, and feels he must respond to every attack because he's not certain that the work will stand on its own. In this instance I feel his response has been ill thought out.

Paul Kincaid
Reviews Editor

And from Ken Lake

I feel it was unfair to print David Wingrove's plaintive whinge without giving Paul Kincaid the chance to comment editorially, but I really must set aside his praise of me as being "hugely erudite" for reasons that will emerge later in this letter.

There seems little point in taking up his complaints. I am sure other readers will do so; suffice it for me to explain that the press plug, the lengthy paean of self-praise and justification written by Wingrove himself, and indeed the yuppieback version of his book, all came to me direct for review; I was so shocked at the blubs that I asked Paul for permission to review them in their own right as works of fiction, and Paul agreed to give consideration to whatever I wrote without, of course, committing himself in advance. I

did not, therefore, as Wingrove claims, "judge the work by its associated material" – I judged the associated material in its own right, the more so since part of it was written by Wingrove himself.

However, the real purpose of this letter is to make a point which, as it happens, does impinge on Wingrove's work, insofar as it claims to be based on "research" carried out years ago into a country whose whole philosophy was challenged in 1989 and will be so challenged – and defeated, I am sure – again. Let's take ourselves back to December 1988.

At that time, I submit to *Interzone* an SF story in which – purely as background to the plot – Eastern Europe has risen up against its Communist bosses. I had a Solidarity-controlled government in Poland in August 1989, Hungary transformed into a democracy after declaring its Communist Party obsolete, East Germany overthrowing its rulers, knocking down the Wall and preparing for reunification in November, along with Czechoslovakia's revolution. Christmas 1989 brought a bloody revolution in Romania with the murder of tens of thousands on the streets and the overthrow of the Ceausescu, and meanwhile there have been popular uprisings in Georgia and Armenia, Moslem inspired trouble in Azerbaijan... I think that's enough to persuade you that the editors of *IZ* had a hearty laugh and rejected the manuscript out of hand.

Apart, of course, from the ones who took my piece as a fascistic attack on all they hold dear, and who blackballed me for all time and set out to drive me from fandom. No, it didn't happen – nobody would be so foolish as to base an SF piece on such an impossible sequence of nonsensical concepts. SF writers are noted for their ability to extrapolate likely trends into fantastic but believable futureworlds: my imaginative view of 1989 was just too unlikely to be acceptable – a year ago, they would have been more likely to accept SM Stirling's fascist *Marching through Georgia*, recommended to me by that respected US author and SF researcher Tom Clareson, as worthy of publication!

The least I can do is to wish all BSFA members a very happy decade and a quiet approach to the Millennium: meanwhile, if you want to read real SF, try the newspapers!

Ken Lake

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Editorial – 153

From Charles Stross and Simon Ings

We must protest at the cavalier attitude you displayed towards Charles Stross's humorously conceived "Technogoth" movement. Placing a promising writer's running joke in your catalogue of current movements is to damn him with faint praise, and confuse new members with ephemera. We draw attention to our serious work in the field of literary criticism, vis a vis the *Bowel Movement*.

This has been in existence, and studiously ignored by British critics, for several years now. This is a quite unacceptable state of

affairs – and particularly absurd given its slogan "Oh shit here comes Charles Stross/Simon Ings" has been heard far and wide at conventions since 1988.

When will the arbiters of critical taste come to accept the formative influence of Ian Watson's Toilet Thing (*The Power*, Headline, 1987) upon new British imaginative writing? When will the British critical establishment recognise radical developments in diagnostic toilet seats by Toto and Nippon Telegraph and Telephone (*Zygot*, Computer Shopper, December 22 1989), and their undisputable influence upon new writing in no less a magazine than *Interzone* ("The Braining of Mother Lamprey" – Simon Ings [awaiting publication])?

We demand a fair hearing from the British science fiction press.

At very least, we demand a full and sincere apology by Mr McVeigh for attenuating the credibility of a fine new writer by stressing ephemera at the expense of real innovative contributions to the genre.

Simon Ings & Charles Stross
Laxitivist Press, Bradford

I was under the impression that Mr Stross was serious about "Technogoth"; however, I apologise for any offence.

Aside from also mentioning Paul Ward's "Timothy and the Toilet Demon" which appeared in Matrix, I'd like to inform readers about some works of this movement previously suggested by David Langford: The Throne of Saturn; The Reproductive Cistern; and Masters of the Vortex.

Or, perhaps, Diarrhoea of a Madman? This one would run and run!

KM

From Deborah Beale...

The *Dragonbone Chair* makes full use of the conventions of the Fantasy novel but does not really extend its boundaries. Nevertheless, it works superbly. *War and Peace* it ain't, but the book is beautifully written. It is without doubt one of the best Fantasy Novels I have read and I eagerly await the next volume.

John Newsinger, V152

I have spent much time and paper over the past few months condemning the Fantasy trilogy and now find myself turning the pages out of enthusiasm rather than duty... Williams has first-rate storytelling gifts and I was gripped by his characters and setting... It is masterfully carried out... This is a traditional "damn good yam" – and welcome.

Andy Sawyer
Paperback Purgatory, PI 81

Obviously the BSFA's reviewers do not agree with your assessment of this book as "crap".

The whys and wherefores of the prices demanded for books in the current marketplace are the topic of an extended essay, and unfortunately not something I can go into in the space of a letter. Suffice to say, in my seven years in publishing I have never pub-

lished a book that has worked as well as this one. I have received more letters from readers than for any other title, and every one says the same thing: I loved it; how long do I have to wait for volume two? Additionally, it is selling extremely well, with not one return to date, and continual repeat orders. It will shortly be out of print.

The controversy generated by the advance – £260,000 for the trilogy, being £86,666 per title – has been the next best thing to being condemned by Mary Whitehouse. Please do continue insulting this book in your editorials.

Deborah Beale

Fiction Editor

Legend Paperbacks

Century Hutchinson Publishing Group Ltd

For £260,000 (as you paid) or £8 per paperback (as I would have to pay) one is entitled to ask for something beyond a "damn good yarn" which remains within conventional areas.

I would never attempt to tell reviewers that they were "wrong" in their judgement; but I do reserve the right to express my own opinion.

KM

It seems odd to counteract Kev's criticisms with a statement of how well the book is selling and the amount of feedback from readers, as if to suggest that this makes it a "good" book (whatever one of them is). It would be just as practical to suggest that Jason Donovan has Talent because he sells lots of records.

BP

From Keith Brooke

Kev's right that there's a lot to look forward to in the '90s – DiFilippo, Shiner, McDonald, Ryan, Brown, McAuley and so on – but as ever there's still going to be a lot of dross about. Sharecropping hasn't really hit Britain yet but it's lurking in the background, ready to be seized upon (it's the Kylie and Jason syndrome: "they've bought this – let's give them some more!"); the market exists, but catering down for the majority isn't what books should be #for). There's the rise of militaristic SF looming, too: the anthologies and novels of Drake, Niven and Pournelle – *There Will Be War*, *The Man-Kin Wars*, *The Fleet*, *War World*, etc. As Gardner Dozois says in *Best New SF 3*, lets "hope that SF's famed predictive capacity is not working all that well these days". That was written several months before US troops started running Panama with the support (according to one poll) of 90% of the US population. I suppose the "fighting mercenary" SF gives us something to react against – as witnessed by new anthologies edited by Harry Harrison and Lewis Shiner – but I don't like it; we need to be stirred out of our collective apathy, but it's so much better when it's a positive/collective apathy, but it's so much better when it's a positive stimulus and not just a reaction to something negative.

To take issue with Kev's criticisms of *Interzone* over the last couple of years: I've also noted an increase in the quantity of tame, uninspired stuff, not only in *IZ*, but in the late '80s crop of anthologies as well, but that's only to be expected. To start with *IZ* published maybe 20 stories a year and that was it; this year they used 38 and there were another 50 in *Zenith*, *Other Edens III*, *The Gate and Arrows of Eros*, not to mention the likes of *Fantasy Tales* (to stretch genre boundaries), *Dark Fantasies* and an ever-improving small press. There's more good stuff being published, it's just more thinly spread. To come back to *IZ*, what about JG Ballard's "The Enormous Space" or Eric Brown's "Star-Crystals and Karmel"? The magazine's evolving and maybe not taking the risks that it should but it's still Britain's best short story outlet.

Keith Brooke

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In Reply to Ken Lake...

From LJ Hurst

On Chung Kuo, Ken Lake is right and David Wingrove is wrong: there is a body of literature about Chinese domination of America/the world. The most important is John Hersey's *White Lotus*, which does not get a mention in *Trillion Year Spree*, but is praised by Neil Barron in *Anatomy of Wonder*. This is no little known work, either: my 1976 Bantam paperback is a 10th printing since the novel was first published in 1966. Hersey had an advantage (like Ballard) of a Chinese childhood to shape his novel. I feel that Wingrove is not helping himself in handling *Chung Kuo*; surely its merits should speak for themselves, he should not have to point them out?

Lake's discussion of my review of Octavia Butler's *Imago: Xenogenesis III* - I have now reviewed two of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy and Butler's earlier *Kindred*. She is an extremely odd writer.

As a black woman one would have thought that she would have a lot of original ideas. She has not. *Kindred* was melodramatic, and not much more of a contribution to a view of the ante bellum south than *Gone With The Wind*. Then the trilogy seemed to accept the idea of racism/speciesism, and justified the near extermination of humanity as if their ecological niche in the universe had been made obsolete. Perhaps *Xenogenesis* is meant to be an allegory with humans standing for whites and the alien Oankali representing blacks. There must be many blacks, though, who would resent being represented as complete bastards on being given technical superiority. Given our current society many blacks (like many whites) are alienated, but they are not aliens, and we should (in answer to Ken Lake's final question) reject any reading that implies one part of humanity is not really a part. I don't know what Butler thinks about race, but I can read what she has written, and what she has written makes

little contribution to the problems which face the world.

LJ Hurst

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Why should one expect a greater degree of originality from a writer just because she is black - unless there really is something alien about her. Perhaps Butler could have made some relevant points about racism, but there is no inherent reason why she ought to have.

KM

And from Edward Ashpole - long overdue - a criticism of a review by Ken Lake published in V150.

May I respond to Ken Lake's strange attack on my book *The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence* - one can hardly call it a book review, more a destructive rampage. No professional science correspondent and author, which I happen to be, could have produced the kind of book he describes.

Lake accuses me of providing an "unhelpful text" addressed to my old Mother and Aunt who thought that "extraterrestrial is something to do with your stomach". They did - but that was the *dedication*, Mr Lake! Those two ladies, both into their 90s at the time, never read a science book in their lives.

In one paragraph Lake complains about the frequent use of "if", "could" and "may" in topics where extreme caution must reign. In the next paragraph he accuses me of being "dogmatic".

He complains of my use of Arthur C Clarke's *principle of technical perfectability* - "dragged in for no good reason at all", he says. A careful read of the book will show this principle to be an important concept in several areas of SETI.

Lake complains about the view, which I covered in some detail, that "life as we know it may be the only life there is". (That is, life everywhere in the universe may be based on carbon and water dependent). He is entitled to the view that life evolving on other planets may be based on different chemistries. He may be right, but there is no evidence to support this view. Whereas, there is plenty of biological information available which indicates that life as we know it may be a universal phenomenon. Though molecular structures and processes are bound to be different on different planets, because of the nature of evolution, the same basic chemistry may be used. Trouble is, we can't confirm this - unless some bacteria are discovered on Mars, which seems unlikely.

However, the "life as we do not know it" argument is irrelevant to the case for research in SETI. There is already enough scientific justification, as the current observational programs by Harvard University, Ohio State University, NASA and other groups demonstrate.

Lake's prize paragraph begins: "Basically, Ashpole sell his whole book down the river..." I do so, apparently, because of two charts (on pages 11 and 13). Lake confuses one chart with the other and gets his measurement wrong, but we'll let that pass. He is

correct in saying that the lines indicating the arrival of the bipedal apes, the Australopithecines, and our present civilization do meet at the same point on one of the scales. Three million years separate these two stages in Earth history. On a millimetre I used, 3 million years is 0.109 of a millimetre, far less than the thickness of a line. Hardly surprising, therefore, that the two lines meet at the same point on the scale.

Ken Lake sums up his approach to book reviewing when he says: "I am at present just as much an expert on the subject as the author, and a darn sight less dogmatic to boot." How does one reply to such a statement? I can only tell him that one doesn't write books on science (or book reviews) to flout one's ego or opinions. One does so to explore and review subjects constructively, many of which in SETI are very complex. I was able to do this with my book because of some 25 years professional involvement in writing on the various scientific disciplines that today form the background and rationale of SETI.

Edward Ashpole

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Narberth, Pembrokeshire

Bear/Shiner Interview

I enjoyed the interview with Greg Bear and Lewis Shiner in V153, although I do wish that Charles Stross had allowed them to speak for themselves rather than trying to force their comments through his own perceptual grid. Cyberpunk was a particular movement; movements come and go; and if both writers say that they've not only gone on to other things but never felt themselves part of the movement's core in the first place then it seems a bit silly of Stross to keep dragging them back to confront his own obsession with it. Perhaps one wouldn't mind so much if Stross showed more interest in and grasp of the ideology behind Chairman Bruce's manifestos (has he actually read *Cheap Truth?*), but on the evidence of what published work of his I've read he seems far more concerned with the surfaces of the thing. Indeed, his story "The Boys" in *Interzone 22* struck me as very much an appropriation of part of the scenario of Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*, but without demonstrating much if any awareness of the metaphorical weight borne by the decaying L5 habitats therein.

Joseph Nicholas

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Mr Stross is a developing writer with an excess of enthusiasm rather than a deficiency of talent. Your criticism of his first published story is valid, but also adds to my point about the failure of Interzone to develop the radical fiction they aspire to.

Joseph also criticised the standard of proofreading: we do try to check everything as thoroughly as possible. Unfortunately, some mistakes do slip through, usually the most obvious ones.

KM

There can be few people who have not been brought up on the mythologies of earlier ages. They form the basis of most fairy or folktales, and many nursery rhymes. A sizeable proportion of children's literature is still devoted to their retelling or re-enactment in a modern setting (Alan Garner or Susan Cooper's works are good examples of this) and they also make their mark on much adult fiction – mainstream as well as genre.

What is mythology? It is the recollection of a "Golden Age" when mankind and a pantheon of gods were much more closely involved with each other; when every man or woman operated under a fate or gear, when every action had a peculiar significance. Tales of times long gone, and races that predate man's dominion.

More seriously, it is concentrated history, the evidence of the invasion and reinvasion of a people by a succession of foreign influences, bringing new weaponry, new ways of thinking, including a new theology, imposed on the old, driving it underground into folktales and fireside story.

Myth also answers basic yet awkward questions such as "How did we come to be here?", "Where will we go when we die?" and seeks to justify the here and now, the existing social system, the reason for traditional rites and customs. Some of the basic elements of the myth are at least 5,000 years old and every race or culture has its own collection – some more fully documented than others. Or, as Robert Graves put it:

Mythology is the study of whatever religious or heroic legends are so foreign to a student's experience that he cannot believe them to be true. ¹

Mythological characters can also be literary creation – men or women who have caught the public imagination and taken on a life of their own, far more detailed than anything their original creator had designed for them. Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan and Arthur all fall into this category. In SF the distinction between literary and religious mythology is lost; they are regarded as feeding the same human needs, and are plundered equally to add resonances to stories.

How are myths created? When an historical event is written about, or the last person who can give an eyewitness account of it dies, and the recollection continues, it is on the first stage of becoming a myth. In modern times this process has speeded up considerably, through feature films that part-fictionalise real events, simplifying them into their essential components. The Vietnam War, although less than 20 years old, is well on its way to becoming a myth through such films as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*.

Why do we feel the need to have these mythic stereotypes to look up to? Why do they continue to play such an integral part in our everyday world?

We need mythic stereotypes, particularly heroic ones, to do and say those things which we are completely incapable, for whatever reason, of doing for ourselves. It is a sometimes unfortunate tendency for humans to deify heroes or larger than life characters, to make gods of men. Of course,

The Quest for a Whiter Wash

Joanne Raine takes a genre trip from traditional heroic myth to contemporary kitchen sink myths and sees some interesting sights along the way

when they show themselves to be merely human after all, our retribution is swift. Men such as Ian Botham and Ollie North know this to their cost.

Many mythical heroes have a number of incidents in common in their stories because universally, people feel the need to believe in the capacity to achieve certain fundamental goals. He or she (usually he) is the answer to prayers, delivers us from enemies, brings gifts of new processes, techniques, objects or ways of thinking. He can change the rules. John Brunner's "Traveller in Black", a man of many names, but one nature, walks through a world where chaos once ruled, and still has the upper hand. A typical hero in this sense he is:

...subject to certain laws not binding upon ordinary persons. In a compensatory fashion, he was also free from certain other laws, more commonly in force. ²

We both love and fear the hero – his presence and his gifts may have ambivalent results. "Dr Who" is a universal culture hero, appearing at a time of need, defeating the enemy or bringing the technological know-how to solve a situation, then once the circumstances that brought about his appearance have changed, disappears again, leaving others to cope with the effects of his interference.

Many SF stories contain mythic components, seen with a modern, usually ironic or satirical viewpoint, stressing not only a continuity with the past, but a modernist attitude to it. Iain Banks, for example, in *The Bridge* gives us a barbarian warrior, charged with bringing Charon one of Cerberus's heads in payment for his passage to the land of the dead. This is no ordinary barbarian however, coming across as a mixture of Conan and Billy Connolly:

Fukin thing had three heads! Snarlit and droolin it was. Saw what the big fella ment about it no missin a head. Lopped one off nae problem, wonderin how many licences ye'd need for this thing: wan or three? Then duz the bastardin bound no go an grow back the head and just cut off? Aw, fuk this ah thought. ³

Michael Moorcock in *Behold the Man* has a time-traveller playing an uncomfortably central role in the crucifixion: an event that proves more distasteful than transcendental.

Not everyone does this as successfully, however; witness the truly awful *Legacy of Heorot*, a blighted retelling of "Beowulf in Space" by Niven, Barnes and Pournelle, doing to SF what Stock, Aitken and Waterman have done to music. Read Tom Holt's

Who's Afraid of Beowulf instead.

Another popular strategy is to tell the myths from the viewpoint of an observer or protagonist from the time in which they happened, and sometimes rationalising them in the process. The Arthurian myths in particular have frequently been reinterpreted in this manner, increasingly from the point of view of the female elements of the legend, badly served by the more traditional versions. *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Bradley is one of the best examples of this.

A major mythological motif is the quest or journey. Much space opera can be seen in this light, as can Star Trek's much extended mission "to explore new worlds and boldly go where no man has gone before."

Some writers have highlighted the intellectual need for mythic survival, whilst retelling elements to serve their own needs. In *The Last Unicorn*, Peter Beagle has Schmendrick the Magician call up the spirit of Robin Hood in order to impress Captain Cully, the self-styled outlaw, intent on elevating himself to legendary status:

Effortlessly proud... the bowmen moved across the clearing. Last, hand in hand, came a man and a woman. Their faces were as beautiful as though they had never known fear. The woman's heavy hair shone with a secret, like a cloud that hides the moon.

"Oh," said Molly Grue. "Marian."

"Robin Hood is a myth," Captain Cully said nervously, "a classic example of the heroic folk-figures synthesised out of need..."

Men have to have heroes, but no man can ever be as big as the need, and so a legend grows around a grain of truth, like a pearl. Not that it isn't a remarkable trick of course. ⁴

Myths have also been seized on as being distorted memories of visits to Earth by aliens (Eric von Daniken, *Quatermass and the Pit*) or as a form of racial pre-cognition of what is to come (*Childhood's End*).

At its most basic, mythology is about the ongoing confrontation between the forces of Law and Chaos. Michael Moorcock's *Eternal Champion* sequences have this as their basis, and the entire *Sword and Sorcery* sub-genre exploits it to some extent.

The use of mythology in SF reflects a familiar paradox – that in undergoing social and technological change we cannot escape the old altogether but carry it deep within us, as a genetic memory perhaps, if such a thing exists. Even in technologically "hard" SF,

mythological resonances can be found. In *Count Zero*, William Gibson has Baron Samedi and the voodoo pantheon inhabiting cyberspace for their own designs.

Science fiction and mythology help mankind to face their fears and offer some solution. They attempt to allay the conflict between what is and what is not; rationalise or make sane that which forever changes. Science fiction has in some respects taken over from theology as a means of speculation beyond the known world. Yet, even when the truth is known, the myth still lingers, like Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* set in a Mars of the Mind.

Many writers create their own mythologies as a basis for alien cultures, plundering Earth's mythologies for inspiration. Joy Chant in *Red Moon and Black Mountain* takes us into a world of Star Magic, where In'serrina, Daughter of the Stars, battles Fendall, the fallen one, their conflict heralded by a battle of eagles:

The red moon cast its dim light over all, giving the crag and the black eagles a sheen of sullen crimson, and flushing the others with a soft rose, quite out of place in this scene of strife. ⁵

Many other writers have covered similar ground, notably Tolkien and Donaldson.

Donaldson's and Chant's books are examples of our world breaking into the mythic age of another, the participants becoming part of that myth. Another example is *Mythago Wood* and its sequel *Lavondyss*. In the latter, Tallis becomes her own myth in a breathtaking transformation scene. However, in *Sleeping in Flame*, Jonathan Carroll does the reverse:

The bell rang. I answered it. The instant after I knew who she was, I realised again that nothing is done without regret.

She was wearing a long red cape that covered her head as well as her body. She had blonde hair, honey coloured skin, lips as red as the cape itself. ⁶

Not all created myths are human. *Watership Down* has bred many successors – moles, badgers, foxes, cats and eagles. William

Horwood, with two books about eagles and a trilogy about moles, is the current leader on what Moorcock calls the "Epic Pooh" school of Fantasy.

Harlan Ellison in *Deathbird Stories* placed modern icons such as the tower block into ancient mythological settings. JG Ballard has done similar work, particularly with a modernised zodiac. Rachel Pollack in *Unquenchable Fire* created her own mythologies of a future Earth after an unspecified disaster, where myths and miracles play a vibrant part in everyday life. Again, they are the direct descendants of the ancient myths, but retold in rich and compelling language. The following is part of the myth of Dust Father and Mothersnake, but it could equally have been Isis and Osiris:

But when she ran to the child, she discovered its mouth closed, its throat still, its eyes a bright yellow and coated with images from Dust Father's song. It wasn't the baby singing, but something black and shriveled that hung round its neck. Mothersnake looked closer, she saw a severed finger, all curled and shrunken... "He's alive," she whispered, and the sound boomed through the streets like an avalanche. "He's alive!" ⁷

Has anything new come out of this exploration of mythic archetypes? Most Fantasy is still in direct line of descent from the fabulous epics of Gilgamesh, Ulysses, and the Icelandic sagas. Even the increased role of women – negligible in traditional mythologies – has seen them step into previously male enclaves of mythic stereotype. There are female warriors for example (though few go as far as Geoff Ryman's hero/heroine in *The Warrior Who Carried Life* in actually adopting the male form), direct descendents of the Amazons, though in very few cases does any femininity survive. The character Starhawk in Barbara Hambly's *Ladies of Mandrigyn* and its sequel *The Witches of Wenshar* is one of few where you don't get the feeling that the writer just decided to substitute "she" for "he" in a couple of places.

In the collection *Red as Blood* (or *Tales from the Sisters Grimm*) Tanih Lee takes well-known fairy tales and stands them on their heads, allowing women to be villain and hero, and yet always intensely female, not eternal tombstones, running out to play in their brother's borrowed clothing.

Despite the plethora of anti-heroes who provide their own antagonist in the shattered facets of their psyche, and the creation of modern mythic figures such as Marilyn Monroe and John F Kennedy, science fiction has not created anything new, merely reused and re-explained the old in a variety of ways. Sadly, it is outside genre fiction that a new mythic stereotype has been created, one for women that men cannot or will not attain. In the land of the Oxo advert, in a place forever kitchen, the minor career woman, housewife and mother juggles the pieces of her life, the trick being to keep them all moving forward at the same time. Her magic lies in the objects around her, created by men for the use of women; her quest is for the perfect dinner, the cleanest house, the whitest wash. ■

1 New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology

Hamlyn, 1972 p.V

2 The Compleat Traveller in Black

by John Brunner
Methuen, 1967 p.3

3 The Bridge by Iain Banks
Pan, 1987 p.160

4 The Last Unicorn by Peter S Beagle
Unwin, 1982 p.58

5 Red Moon and Black Mountain
by Joy Chant
Unwin, 1985 p.30

6 Sleeping in Flame
by Jonathan Carroll
Legend, 1988 p.244

7 Unquenchable Fire
by Rachel Pollack
Gollancz, 1988 p.212

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Low Tide on a Full Moon

S.W. RAINSFORD

Federico Garcia Lorca said that he was for a Spanish balladry that was "anti-picturesque, anti-folkloric, anti-flamenco". I'm for an English-language fantasy that's anti-mythic, anti-folkloric, anti-archetypal. Fantasy with teeth and without reverence, fantasy that provokes rather than consoling, that confronts rather than celebrating. If we have to be under the influence of an Oxford don, let's make it Lewis Carroll instead of JRR Tolkien.

Alice was a proto-feminist heroine, an everyday young woman caught up in a mad world where mandarins both ludicrous and cruel bully her backwards and forwards with ruthless illogic. Alice tries hard to make sense of these dreams that are not hers, in fact, but her society's. In the end, only violent defiance is possible. The women in my books are the same, unintentional heroines, struggling with all the grotesqueries the world provides – or as many of them as I can enlist.

Jillian Curran, in *The Hour of the Thin Ox*, inherits her mother's business and considerable power, and makes a mess of it. The impending war with the Escalan Empire brings opportunity and profit to her competitors, but it ruins her. She joins the army and endures months of manoeuvres and sexual harassment without seeing a single enemy. Her enemies are her superiors. When the Escalans move into Belanisi, she deserts and leads a guerrilla band into the jungle to strike back against the invader. There she finds a purpose, an alien species, quarrelsome allies and a foreign lover for none of which any source in her life has prepared her, neither the lore of her former servants nor the official myths of her indoctrination.

Serin Guille, in *Other Voices*, meets a myth. He is walking around, and he has no business to be. He has been brought to life and abandoned by the people who made him. Myths can kill. (Read CJ Cherryh's *The Dreamstone*.)

Serin Guille is the daughter of a taxidermist and a gypsy. She is introverted, sulky, unpopular and unloved, the victim of her parents' mutual misery. The Escalan Empire rules her people, the little mountain state of Lusancy. Serin doesn't particularly mind, though she doesn't particularly like them. Others are more hostile, and Serin is suddenly caught up in a chain of violent events that force her to grow up pretty fast.

So is Nette, puppet Princess of Lusancy. Surrounded by foreign monsters who tell her what to do and when to smile, she eventually loses her temper. After that only violent defiance is possible.

Folklore, in *Other Voices*, amounts to the body of traditions and assumptions that keep a people identified with itself and doing as far as possible the same things it has always done. Serin, more or less unintentionally, shows Princess Nette that the time has come for something else, a conscious shove at a torpid culture.

And the myth has his part to play too.

Take Back Plenty, which I'm writing

Off With Their Heads!

Author and critic Colin Greenland looks at the roots of his own fiction in a piece originally published in the 1989 World Fantasy Con Programme Book...

now, is a space opera. Tabitha Jute drives a space barge around the developed bits of the solar system. She's only doing her job, until she's beset by a bizarre troupe of strolling players, posthumans, weird aliens and misfits. Space opera is a mythic form, a treasured subgenre in the subcultural folklore of SF that could well do with being dragged out into the light and given a good shake.

Like the Red Queen.

Where are the roots of my fantasy? In the imagination. In the popular imagination, as I

Space opera is a mythic form, a treasured subgenre in the subcultural folklore of SF that could well do with being dragged out into the light and given a good shake... Like the Red Queen.

see it landscaped, populated and furnished by genres of arts both popular and canonical: writers like Angela Carter and M John Harrison and Raymond Chandler; SF, Fantasy, Horror, the Victorian novel; contemporary indie pop music; painters like Rousseau and Giorgione and Ernst; films like *Brazil* and *Dune* and *Paperhouse*. Twining around those are the roots in experience, in growing up as a beneficiary of the establishments of a derelict empire and a declining welfare state. Being a half-member of all manner of social and cultural groups and institutions: Europe; the middle class; a "public" school; Oxford University; hippies; SF fandom; SF professionals; English literati; Colorado yuppies. The archetypes of my life have all been things to beware: fetishes of control, myths of disinformation, gibbering figures of authority in absurd uniforms containing power by ritual and the

exaltation of nonsense.

All the successors of Humpty Dumpty and the Queen of Hearts.

I don't see the recovery of ancient beliefs, the quest for lost talismans, the unearthing of buried menhirs, as liberation, only as compensation, and a terrible incitement to nostalgia, which is rife everywhere over here in the Merrie Englands Theme Park. Nostalgia bleeds energy like nothing else I know. As the facts get grimmer and less negotiable, as social stratification and inequality become more rigid, nostalgia and sentimentality thrive, oozing out of every crack in the structure. It's at the time when it's most glaringly obvious that Arthur doesn't live, that no slumbering archetype is going to rise up out of the mound and save us, that the market for Arthurian Fantasy and beer mugs and tea towels is guaranteed to peak. That's one bandwagon whose tyres I'd dearly love to slash.

I don't mean there's anything wicked or wrong with writing Arthurian Fantasy, or Wagnerian Fantasy, or role-playing Fantasy. I'm with Michael Moorcock, when he says there is no virtue in form itself. A form is only as good or bad as the writer using it. These days people seem to be writing these things absolutely blithely, as if the form itself had virtue, *moral* virtue, a sort of restorative innocence. "The world is all right, I guess, but I'd like to find some buried treasure." Thomas Disch said that, but when he said it, there was irony in it. Whatever happened to irony?

Lewis Carroll believed in innocence too; but his Alice isn't innocent, even if he thought she was; and it isn't innocence that saves her. ■

*Colin Greenland is the author of **Daybreak on a Different Mountain**, **The Hour of the Thin Ox** and **Other Voices** (all published by Unwin), as well as reviewing regularly for the **Sunday Times** and **Foundation**. His latest novel, **Take Back Plenty**, which he has already mentioned above, is now with his publisher and is expected to be published in the summer. He also informs us that he will also have another story in **Zenith II**.*

Once upon a time, I was talking to a writer and he started to tell me about an idea that he had. It was something about the feedback system of history. Unscrupulous governments airbrush inconvenient events from the history books, as if they could take control of the past that way; maybe there's a mysterious truth buried in that deception. Something about the way we become, or perhaps we always were, responsible for all the events that have made us what we are... The writer bumbled on a bit, having the usual difficulty one has in conveying the abhorrent naked singularity of an idea without its clothing of fiction (it's always the story that's clear). At last light dawned: oh, I think I know what you're getting at, I said. I've even read the story. It's called "Let's Go To Golgotha!" Argh! exclaimed Mr Kilworth (for it was he). You're right. I've written it already. Phew! What a lucky escape... But having embarked upon this dangerous train of thought we found it hard to put on the brakes. Is "originality" really such a virtue? The truth of experience is that a big part of feeling that you've got hold of a good story, is the way that it won't leave you until you've written it seven times; and its contradiction too... The truth is that however degraded the process may have become there is artistic validity in the heart of the endless sequels and prequels of our particular genre. Suppose I write a story 30 years from now, set in the same world and with the same characters as a novel I brought out in 1984. Rich and famous as I will no doubt be - (ha!) - I will be able to withstand bravely the sneers and slurs on my character that follow, the muttering about burned-out hacks and cynical exploitation of one's own younger self... but how will I answer the gentler puzzlement of readers who wonder how on earth anyone can do that? The same rabbit out of the same hat, 30 years on - surely that contravenes the most basic laws of nature... All I'll be able to say is that it doesn't seem that way to me. Within the artist's mind time doesn't pass in the same way as it does out in the big world. It's the Kilworth time in here. The present, future and the past of my fiction are contiguous. There is no space between the 30 year old story and the one I'm thinking of today... though whether that 30 year old story is "the same" as it was when I first wrote it is another question. Maybe it never was "the same" to begin with...

Every artist keeps on working out the same theme, their own personal obsession, over and over again. Subjectively, it may seem like a loosely related sequence. You write that good story, the one about the nature of time, at times, and then move on to a new theme... But an acute observer (if you're lucky enough to find one) will say of all the themes that seem so separate *Ah yes, there she goes again: it's probably something to do with her toilet training...* Writer **A** industriously changes the scenery for each episode; writer **B** is too lazy, and re-uses backdrops and characters until they fall apart; writer **C** has allowed herself to become alienated from her means of production and uses the mass-produced scenery provided by

The Mind of the Maker

An Artist's Impression

Gwyneth Jones looks at the "use and misuse of myth in Fantasy" and considers whether myth is any different from "ordinary" fiction, or not. And if it really matters, anyway.

her employer. But if you take away the tinsel shared-universe, you only find the real shared-universe underneath. Each story, however distant it may seem on the surface, is capable of being unpacked and traced out until its connections with all the others are revealed. Each expression is a holographic fragment of the artist's notional theory of everything: always the same whole, always revealing some new aspect as it turns around and around in the light of experience. If an artist, a writer's work, *does* happen to decay into contradiction and repetition, it isn't a fault that can be corrected by "escape" into something completely different. The essence of art (of fiction) is replication with variation, an endless clambering over the same landscape, definitely contained but impossible to exhaust by any means of mapping. The only way to get out of that (whole, is to stop writing altogether.

What's all this got to do with the "use and misuse" of myth in contemporary Fantasy? (I'm not planning to tackle religion and SF by the way, because I think for my present purposes those terms are contained in the other two). A great deal, I believe: because myth-making and writing fiction are not two activities, they are one (I could here insert academic references: cf Levi-Strauss, cf Derrida, cf Barthes, "proving" this statement, but why bother? I don't believe it because those chaps said so, I believe it because I believe it. You make up your own mind). When considered as "myth" fiction is taken to be a complex but single social entity, a consensual "story of everything" that a society tells itself. The perceived consensual nature of these anonymous collections "the myths of the Greeks and Romans", "the myths and legends of Ireland" conceals a fairly obvious truth: there were always storytellers. Some of the names survive, some of them don't. But the consensual notion enshrines another truth that applies just as much, dear readers, to the fiction that you and I are collectively producing today. Fiction regarded as myth is the individual artist's experience turned inside-out. The world that a body of myth "explains" is a single whole too. It is the one we live in - defined somehow or other, according to current fashion, in "space and time": but inexhaustible, and necessarily containing every variation of itself up and including direct contradiction.

Because I am sure that this is true: that myth is the same as fiction, and that consens-

ually or individually it is produced in the same way that I produce my own stories, I now know something about myth that I didn't when I was first introduced to Ovid and Anon and the rest of the gang. (Okay, let's be pedantic, I feel as if I know this.) Myths, we are told in primary school, are the way ancient peoples explain for themselves the way the world works. They are functionally indistinguishable, that is, from natural science, and eventually people came to realise that Saturn didn't eat his children, in just the same way that people eventually came to realise that there is no crystal sphere separating us from the fixed stars.



Phlogiston is one with the God of Thunder and the promise of the rainbow – et patii et patia. Now here we could diverge into the Big Bang theory of human knowledge: everything was once packed into one tight little ball, it was along time ago and it's all flung far apart but that's how come absolutely different disciplines like physics and fiction seem to have access to information about each other that they can't have got hold of by any means available in the present state of things... But let's put Science aside, along with Religion, and get back to the story. What I know is this. It is patently obvious that Ovid, say, didn't believe that a chap with furry legs chased a lady into a swamp, whereupon she turned into a reed and he turned her into a particularly fine brand of pick-up arm. But that was because, says received wisdom, he was a sophisticated decadent mythologist, (like Mr Kilworth, Mr Holdstock etc in our own sophisticated decadent day) and he was consciously *imitating*, or maybe cannibalising, Anon, who did believe things of that sort. Not so. There never was such a person. The mind of the maker doesn't work like that.

The rule of scientific method, which has directed the course of our jew-greek intellectual history for so long, has a dominant basic assumption that the most important part of any exploration of the world is the conclusion it comes to: the *end product*. Under this rule, fiction itself is only respectable in so far as it delivers the rational goods: an explanation of the observed phenomena that stands up to test and produces some kind of psychological or sociological result that's either right or wrong. "Myth" with a capital comes to mean a large-scale operatic production possessed of the mysterious quality of "Beauty" or "Profound Truth" (...quite different from the ordinary kind), useful for its healthy cathartic effect; "myth" lower case, is dismissed as a kind of cod-physics and chemistry that wouldn't fool a (modern) child. But coming back to the surviving oral fiction of vanished societies as a working storyteller in my own right, it is clear to me that something very different from this is going on. The casual code "so that's how the milk got into the coconut"... meant no more to Anon than to Ovid himself. The *mistake*, the "bad science" of the myth: "this story explains how death came into the world" I recognise as the thing I use called a "plot", which I use in the full knowledge (because I'm a genre writer, and we're more aware of these things) that it is neither original nor, on its own, particularly interesting. Myth does not intend to explain. It intends to express. The whole story *expresses*, through all its bizarre details, something particular that is only story so I can't write it here... something (for instance) about death. How it feels to find out, whether sooner or later, that you're not going to live forever. And maybe something about what the perception of ends and cut off points in general does to the mind. Fiction/myth, like writing itself, is an activity of encoding, of expressing one set of states-of-affairs in terms of another – experience into signs. The benefits of this activity are not reducible to

practical terms (either emotional or intellectual), or indeed capable – finally – of being disentangled from the state of consciousness itself. The explanation tacked on to the edge of the story, aka the plot (or even the "idea" eg. Mr Kilworth's notion about Klein bottle history) is a kind of necessary deception, a putting of limits on something indeterminate as a temporary convenience; as such it's the only fictional (in the sense of "not true") part of the enterprise.

The defeat of reason leads us back to myth, in what maybe a never-ending oscillation, from fiction to physics and back again. The defeat of 19th century realism in fiction currently leads the mainstream literary world back to magic, which is very satisfying for those of us who never left. And the whole enterprise of fiction begins once again to express the whole strange landscape of the

...set out in search of
the Real Original
story: the real Arthur,
the real Gilgamesh,
the Ultimate Myth
that lies at the heart
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search for the
ultimate is a
cul-de-sac itself...

mind's world, its confections of time and space, its concrete metaphors, its experiments, its packed, allusive imagery. So much for the use of myth in contemporary Fantasy: business as usual. What about the misuse? Patience, I'm getting there.

I believe it is a mistake (though I do it all the time) to think of SF/Fantasy as the one true church of fiction, the unswerving spring, and "19th century realism" as a narrow, puritanical breakaway movement (that has failed hahaha). Modern Fantasy, SF, and "the modern novel" are all products of the same historical background, and therefore it is not surprising that the heavy-industry operatic version of "Myth" has become the dominant form in contemporary Fantasy. And in SF too, wherever "Myth" is used consciously. After you've discovered that most of the myths of the ancients are no more than so many layers of obsolete scientific theory: neither more nor less respectable than phlogiston or monads, two divisions of mythology remain – "folklore", which is crude and doesn't matter, and the real stuff, which is pure and deep and beautiful and resonant with meaning beyond reason. Thus goes the analysis of the 19th century; and of all the Great

British modern tradition of MacDonald, Tolkien, Lewis et al. *Baldur the beautiful is dead, is dead...* Osiris is scattered in fragments, and Isis searches for him to renew the world; Orpheus's severed head floats singing down the river. And from this tradition has sprung an amazing proliferation of the classic story of the hero-saviour who comes to renew the world: The Downfall of the Lord of the Rings and The Return of the King. There's a sense there's nothing else for the fiction-maker to do besides retelling the great old tales, but "myth used consciously" tends to set up a negative interference pattern. What we are getting at here is a confusion between the plot and the story: endless reiteration of just one of those useful explanatory punchlines, "and that's how the prince won his kingdom", and a pitiful dearth of expressive exploration of this world. The real strength of mythic writing – the freedom from the constraints of time/space and all the rest of those either/or traps – is in danger of vanishing completely from the genre that kept the true faith.

You might think things would get better in the work of thoughtful fantasists who really care about what they write. But the other trap that people fall into lies in wait particularly for those who really care. Those who, despising all modern imitations, set out in search of the Real Original story: the real Arthur, the real Gilgamesh, the Ultimate Myth that lies at the heart of things. But this search for the ultimate is a cul-de-sac itself, in so far as it leads a writer back into the depths of historical time or into any other nonlocal simplification of the landscape. The cult of Osiris is not ancient. It seems to have sprung up, fully formed, about two thousand years ago. And why not? That's probably when the brilliant storyteller who invented the whole thing lived and worked. Like all the operatic myths that we so admire, this is the purity of a sophisticated distillation process: if you try to dig down further, to uncover the *real story*, all you get is a handful of mud. Searching for the real Isis and Osiris in the fertile murk of pre-dynastic Egypt is something akin to searching for the genuine, original *Warhammer* novel, having found one of the late-period stories that actually seems pretty good! It would be the same if the myth was not the glorious operatic tale of the Wounded Saviour, but something rich and bizarre and "contradictory" about the raw and the cooked. The more I learn of myth the more certain I'm that there was never any story looking for someone to tell it, it was always the other way around.

The final subject of all our mythologising is nothing more or less than the human mind: apparently fantasists can't live with this knowledge, and can't live without it (it wasn't me, guv. I never had anything against my dad. It was this other chap; it was Gilgamesh...). There's no reason to suppose that the myth-makers of the past were any more forthright. It was always someone else what done it: brought death into the world, or stole fire from heaven. But to look for that someone in the flood-plains of Mesopot-

amia, or under a glacier, is a clear case of repression (or rather, a better translation) of a putting aside of something that's in the way at present, but must be preserved. Maybe the various attempts, conscious and unconscious, to test the hero-myth to destruction that are going on at the moment signal an acceptance that the theme is played out for the moment.

Robert Holdstock, in *Lavondyss/Mythago Wood*, goes delving in the bones and the snow of the last European glaciation for the original nuclear tragedy... finds it, and finds something so bare, bedraggled and thin (the skeleton of story) that he seems to have accidentally dug through the treasure and out the other side. The passage is either curiously naive or a carefully calculated statement – I've not been able to decide which. But whichever, I certainly hope he has finally knocked this particular metaphor of depth and origin on the head. The central, hidden places are by no means necessarily the places where we live and grow. Any tree-lover should know that.

The mythopoetic "theory of everything", of some ultimate (human) story at the heart of things, has a great, almost irresistible appeal – and for good reason. Of course there is such a story: or rather *that* is the story, in the end. There can be no other. I would go further: I would say that consciousness itself, in its initial conditions, contains the simple codes that start up and define all of our myth and religion. Whether you find that tautology mystical, or just obvious, is a matter of opinion. But harking

back to origins is still a canard. There's nothing new or interesting to be discovered under the roots of those mountains (to quote one whose literary executors have proved the same exhaustively...). Indeed, I'd say the one single important "mistake" contemporary fantasists make (not me, of course!) is to look backwards and mistake that for looking inwards: to write (in any sense) about the "past" of inner, or the outer world, rather than the world as it is/maybe.

The territory is given. What fantasists really ought to be doing – as mythologisers – is trying to find ways to express *why* things are the way they are in that realm. What about this "Metaphor of Light" for instance? Why is it that we call Light the good, and swear that it prevails against Darkness, when everybody knows that the opposite is the case? When in fact it is clear as daylight that nothing turns to corruption faster than a good cause; when we *know very well* that virtue only thrives in obscurity, in opposition, out-of-office: that murky intuition makes the discoveries, not number-crunching. "Brilliant" intellect fudges its experiments and dreams its truths. Columbus was completely in the dark about his destination. When the King returns he starves the peasants and beats his wife. The glorious revolution inevitably ends in a bloodbath. Religions founded in modest obscurity get their Saviour's name in lights and speedily become as corrupt as hell... the worst wars of all are the just ones. And whenever I say to you "it's perfectly clear", what I really mean to say is "don't ask me to explain..." I ask this question not

without personal interest, because I recently found myself trying to pick out a name (one of those meaningful, resonant type of names, you know what I mean) for an extremely plausible and attractive devastator of lives and worlds; and I kept coming up with things that sounded an awful lot like Lucifer, Star of the Morning. Who is unfortunately, my greek-jew subconscious (a printer's error, I know, but I always leave in the good ones myself) tells me, the prince and ruler of this world until the end of time. Better try to keep on his bright side, eh? Better *pretend* we think he's the goodie...

Only an example. But that's the sort of curiosity I know I like in a story. The kind of – *why?* – that myths should not try to answer (can't be done!); but to enjoy.

Programmes for improvement are always absurd. As is any attempt to disentangle genesis from structure. The users of myth can't help it. The misusers probably have excellent and extremely intelligent reasons for doing what they do. I just wish they'd do less of it, quantitatively. Less words per book, less books per month. But that's a problem of encroaching industrialisation, a different kind of psychological phenomenon altogether. And frankly much more scary than any monsters of the mind. ■

Gwyneth Jones is the author of the much-acclaimed Divine Endurance and Kairos, both of which are published by Unwin.

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A Stone from Oberon's Castle

English is a dynamic language and because of this our use of the word "myth" has broadened to cover meanings other than a story concerning belief in supernatural beings involved in the origins of peoples. One of the newer definitions is that the word *myth* is a euphemism for a *lie*. To me this is a strange evolution, because I believe that at the bottom of every classical myth is a fundamental truth. When Kev McVeigh wrote to me about this subject, he said, "I understand you 'invented' a set of Creation Myths for the foxes in *Hunter's Moon*..." and he suggested I write about how this was effected. His understanding is unwittingly incorrect. I did not invent these myths, at least, not from dust. I used an established myth or legend as a keystone and built the canid myths around it.

It's because I believe that there is an intrinsic truth somewhere in every established myth, that I feel it would be unhelpful to a novel to completely "invent" such a tale that must at the same time be supernaturally complex and acceptable to the subconscious. A mythology must be believable in the way that an uplifting novel must be satisfying. It must have a shape and content that feels satisfying, and above all it must feel whole. An individual author cannot invent a myth from scratch and make it sound convincing. It takes a *race* of people to form a mythology, out of their beliefs, for if they were not at some time believed to be true accounts of supernatural happenings they cannot be myths. One can take a myth and use it in a work of fiction, but one cannot produce a myth out of a work of fiction. Mary Shelley's monster is a mythical creature because she did not invent him. He is a revived corpse and is a myth in several cultures, going under various names, one of these being "zombie". Certain peoples believed in vampires long before Bram Stoker's *Dracula* found himself on the printed page. Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* uses many established myths as foundation stones, the most central of which is the *wodwo*, the man of the woods and from the woods.

At the heart of any good Fantasy is an established myth, taken and reshaped or used as a basis for expansion into a fabulous tale that has an underlying ring of truth to it, because the supernatural core of the story was at some time believed to be real by the members of some culture or another. The original cornerstones of my *Hunter's Moon* canid myths will be revealed later in this article, though I run a dangerous risk in allowing these revelations. Explaining the creation of a mythology is a bit like explaining the meaning of a joke: exposition reduces any mystique to the banal. When being given a description of Oberon's castle, one would not expect to be told how the mortar was mixed and applied, nor how and where the granite was mined to provide the stones.

I believe that any fiction featuring a society

Garry Kilworth explains the need for applying a religion to any fictional society and shows how he worked this into his novel, Hunter's Moon

of some kind needs to put across at least a *sense* of supernatural beliefs held by the members of that society. In other words, the people in the book must have a religion of some kind, interspersed with other aspects of their culture, though this religion need not come to the forefront. It doesn't necessarily have to appear on the page, but there must be circumstantial evidence to suggest a belief, however faint. Why do I think this? I'll answer that with another question: do you know of any race on earth which has no religious beliefs whatsoever? I think not. Not one tribe or people, whether it had contact with others or remained isolated, has come out of the stone age without a religion of some kind.

It is because, in the beginning, all peoples were primitive? Primitive peoples are supposed to be superstitious, fear the spirit world. Now that we have become civilized, sophisticated modern societies we may have outgrown the need for myth and religion? Well, for a start, "primitive" doesn't mean "simple". A primitive culture can have an extremely complex structure, in which the spirit world is fitted together so tightly with the real world they are impossible to separate. These cultural mosaics often survive civilization. Certainly the Islamic faith is so tightly interlocked with a Moslem's everyday life there are few practical tasks from managing a business to fetching water from a well that do not involve religion. Christianity too, though we do not often recognise it, is strongly connected with British work and play days.

What of those civilizations which first came out of primitive societies? What is it that captivates us *most* about, say, the Ancient Egyptians? Their inventions and discoveries in engineering? These were astounding enough. Their medical achievements? These were amazing, I doubt either of these, or other of these aspects of their society are as intriguing to the majority of us as their religious beliefs. The engineering behind the pyramids, the method of preserving the corpses are of interest to certain people, but most of us are more fascinated by Horus and Isis and Bubastis and all the other gods and goddesses, along with the world they inhabit. What about the Ancient Greeks? Was religion something they held onto, simply as a mark of respect towards the beliefs of their primitive tribal ancestors? Did they merely pay lip service to those beliefs? Homer wrote his works sometime

before 700 BC at a time when the classical myths were the religion. Three hundred years later there were a lot of highly intelligent Greeks around, mostly Athenians: inventors, mathematicians, philosophers, engineers, cartographers of both the earth and the night sky. Did these men, some of them geniuses whose work is still important today, cast off their beliefs once they became independent thinkers with strong powers of reasoning? The answer lies in a little story.

In 415 BC the Athenians had an empire which they wished to extend to encompass Sicily. Their best general at the time was a brilliant young man called Alcibiades who was chosen to lead the huge, expensive expedition against the Sicilians. Unfortunately, Alcibiades was accused with a number of comrades of mutilating some statues of Hermes that stood in the doorways of Athenian houses and temples. He was recalled from the expedition to Athens (a journey of many weeks) and stood trial. He managed to save his own life, but lost all status and faded into relative obscurity. Several others accused with him were put to death.

Religion, even to such a clever race as the Ancient Ionians, was taken very seriously.

Of course, you might set out to write a novel about an alien lifeform which has no religion, but if you do be sure to make it a dull rocklike being with no imagination, no vision and no sense of purpose.

One doesn't have to read very much of my fiction to realise that I am a religious man. That is, I believe in a supernatural being, superior in spiritual enlightenment to myself. Because I was raised a Christian I am today a Christian. The culture of my home country was founded on strange pagan religions about which I know little, but which have been smothered and absorbed by Christianity. This Christianity (strongly connected with both Judaism and Islam) permeates British lives of believer and atheist alike, whether they want it to or not, from holidays to court appearances, from art to craft, from birth to death. It enriches our culture with magnificent architecture, paintings and poetry. There are Christian symbols everywhere, decorating town and country.

I do not altogether believe in the trappings of Christianity: there are many aspects of the established church and its bible that I consider contradictory and foolish, but I need

some sort of a temporal path to the supreme being I think is either within or without us, and so I use that which has been provided for me by my ancestors. I have no arguments for those who do not believe, which is why I do not evangelise. In this I am probably more agnostic than Christian. You cannot rationalise a belief in a supreme being; you have to accept it, emotionally, and dispense with logic. Once you start saying "show me" or "where's the proof" religion becomes something else, faith becomes unnecessary. My story "White Noise" in David Garnett's first *Zenith* anthology had exactly this theme. I was not surprised and was quite happy to learn that the Turin Shroud was a fake. The five senses do not lead to the supernatural, the emotions do. The body of religion is ninety-percent mystery. I love that mystery. It holds my life together. One of my all-time favourite tales is "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and if you took away the mystery of religion from that story you would be left with grey ash.

There are those who would not wish to promote religion in their fiction because they say it is responsible for much of the violence and war on the planet. This is of course complete nonsense. Idealists, extremists, megalomaniacs, politicians, fanatics, etc: these are they who promote violence and destruction. They may use religion as an excuse, but it is people who cause wars.

We need beliefs of some kind. Homo Sapiens are not the most ancient of creatures on the earth, but they have been around for quite a time now. Recently the race has come to depend more on (equally unreliable) science and technology than on mysticism and magic, but still those beliefs persist, even dominate certain sections of the globe. Surely we would have evolved out of such a state by now, if it were not necessary to us?

Hunter's Moon has at its heart a set of creation myths which the protagonists, the foxes, believe or disbelieve. (They have their atheists, their agnostics, too!) In the beginning there was the *Firstdark*, when A-O a supernatural hermaphroditic giant fox walked the earth, swallowing rocks and spewing the molten lava to make mountains and valleys. The rocks were still living creatures at that time, moving sluggishly over the worlds steaming crust. (It was when Man came, out of the sea-of-chaos, that rocks and stones were frightened into immobility.) A-O gave birth to the lesser foxes, who spread and came into contact with wolves and dogs. Foxes remained solitary, while dogs and wolves formed packs, and were therefore not drawn into the conflict between the two larger canids.

There were territorial wars fought between the dogs and wolves, the most famous of these being the Battle of Steep Slope, where the dogs descended upon a superior army of wolves. The momentum of the hounds, mistakenly set running down a steep slope by the yowl of a dog which trod on a thorn, carried them like a wedge into the wolves, many of whom drowned or sank in the swa-

mps into which they were driven. However the Kinghound, Skellion Broadjaw, insisted on single combat with a she-wolf, to confirm the dogs' victory. His arrogance and pride were responsible for the eventual defeat of the dog nation, a loose confederation of argumentative tribes in the first place.

Skellion Broadjaw was ripped from tail to throat by Shesta-the-she and the dogs were subsequently routed by a lesser number of wolves, who took the Kinghound's heart and buried it at the roots of a tree. To this day the dogs still hold the name of Skellion Broadjaw in contempt and since they have no knowledge of the exact burial place of his heart they piss at the base of all trees, just in case it happens to be the right spot.

It was not long after this battle that the dogs, their hate for the wolves bubbling over, had a secret meeting with the giant *Groff*, a being fashioned entirely from the belief of men. *Groff* had already reached

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together.*

down into the molten core of the earth and taken a handful of fire, throwing it up into the sky to make the sun. (It was said that he threw the molten stone so hard its soul became detached from its body and this is now known as the moon). Canids had noses to guide them and form olfactory pictures of the landscape, but men relied on vision. They needed light to hunt by and *Groff*, their agent, had provided this for them.

The dogs turned traitor and agreed with *Groff* to lead men from the sea-of-chaos and into the real world. There men and dogs would be brothers, helping each other to eradicate the wolves and foxes.

Men came, but enslaved the dogs and once they had no more use for him, gave *Groff* a palace of ice (which cost them nothing) in the snowy regions of the earth. In time they were able to forget their former agent and being made of nothing but belief he turned to mist which was blown away on the wind.

Then Men, with their slaves the dogs, hunted down wolves and foxes ruthlessly, driving the former up into the ice country, and the latter underground.

These, basically are the initial myths of

the foxes in *Hunter's Moon*, but have been added to and embellished by the wolves of *Midnight's Sun*, the next novel in the same vein. As I said at the beginning of this article, they are not *totally* original. They have some basis in established myths. The *Firstdark* is loosely taken from the Australian Aboriginal *Dreamtime*. The Battle of Steep Slope is a shadow of the Battle of Marathon, not a true myth, but with some legendary aspects to it. A-O and offspring was suggested by the Greek myth of Cronos. *Groff* is a kind of god, an expedient belief. The confederation of the Dog Tribes was based (not a myth of course) on the desert Arabs. And so on.

The contemporary religion of the foxes, involving omniscient fox-spirits who are the "angels" of these creatures, guiding the living to dead loved ones, and the dead souls to their rest, was suggested by a Japanese myth that witches can change themselves into foxes in order to escape their pursuers. The way to recognise a Japanese fox-spirit is to look above its head for a small white flame. In order to change the fox back into its human form, a witch-hunter must burn a piece of wood exactly the same age of the witch. (Presumably you have to know your witches, to guess the right number of years!)

In this case, I merely took the image of the fox-spirit, discarded the witch part, and used it for my own purposes.

I have laid myself on the line here, because in turning over the carpet and showing the weave, I have probably robbed any future readers of *Hunter's Moon* of a little of the mystery behind the myths. However, I believe that what I do is take one or two stones from old castles - from many different cultures - and use them as the keystones to new keeps. This is not a reworking of myth (for an example of that you need to read an old English narrative poem called "Sir Orfeo" which is a reworking of the Orpheus myth, Hades having been changed directly into Fairyland) this is producing new tales from ancient beliefs. There is much that was "invented", such as *Groff* throwing the ball of lava into the sky to form the sun, though I'm sure someone will write and tell me this is "a belief amongst the Aka tribes of northern Borneo" or something similar. I do not trust my subconscious to be entirely original. Maybe I've seen something somewhere, some obscure fragment of mythical verse scratched on a shard of pottery, which was flicked out from behind my brain like the playing card in the Louis McNiece poem. ■

Garry Kilworth is the author of The Night of Kadar, Abandonati and, of course, Hunter's Moon, among other novels. He is, however, probably most appreciated for his short fiction.

Book Reviews

Edited by Paul Kincaid

The Archivist

Gill Alderman
Unwin, 1989, 380pp, £12.95

The best works are not about one thing. They may try to tell one story, but, either through chance or cunning, other things find their way in. I am not sure that after only one and a half readings I can do justice to *The Archivist*. It is a book of huge variety: set in a distant future, in a post-industrial society, on a planet which has given up space travel, in a new feudalism, exotic and drug-laden, this is also a world which is matriarchal and brutal.

In this world, though, Gill Alderman follows the events of street arab Cal, as he is taken up by Magon Nonpareil, the archivist of the title, and the struggle of Nonpareil to re-introduce a religion which recognises male supplicants, and consequently undermines the control of the existing gynarchy.

In some ways Cal has it easy – he has managed to teach himself to speak and read most of the exotic languages of the Guna's three continents, he is also a non-person, for he has escaped the compulsory caste marking that the gynarchy impose. He is able to move between the red light district of the city and the courtyards of high society, yet he is troubled and cannot come to terms with the elevation which helps him escape a death sentence for murder. And in turn he is led to investigate the creation of history even while he participates in the making of it.

In the later parts of the book, events seem to fly past, and Cal becomes more of a cypher, but no interest is lost, there are so many strands to follow.

This is a book that is bound to be discussed because it is one of the most elaborate that I know in its treatment of feminism and feminist worlds. It is a far more imaginative interplay of the fabulous than Joanna Russ or Suzette Elgin have achieved. However, multifaceted as it is, there will be some who argue that this is not a feminist work but, perhaps simply one which exploits it, or perhaps one which uses it as an idea, like John Irving's *The World According To Garp*, or perhaps uses it as just another decoration of a well-wrought and jewelled fiction.

Jewelled this certainly is.

LJ Hurst

A Romance of the Equator

Brian W Aldiss
Gollancz, 1989, 345pp, £13.95

My only real complaint about Aldiss's Best SF Stories (1988), which I reviewed in *VECTOR 147*, was that the volume gave no clue as

to whose particular "best" it was. The mystery appears resolved: at least Brian Aldiss himself selected these 26 stories, ranging in time from "Old Hundredth" (written for the splendid 100th edition of *New Worlds* in 1960) through to "Bill Carter Takes Over" (1989). He also provides an introduction, explaining the impossibility of drawing a neat division between SF and Fantasy. Indeed, a good proportion of the stories would, by my definition, be science fiction (like "Old Hundredth" itself). And Fantasy, for Brian Aldiss, is a far more individual and intense thing than we find labelled as Fantasy by the shelf-full down in WH Smith's. "I try in my fiction to keep the nutty element within bounds. Dragons, vampires, elves, singing swords, etc., do not enter here. For all my aspirations towards madness, an old rationalist taint remains" (p.3). The settings and themes range incredibly widely – from a ghost by the Norfolk Broads or a lit. critic. academic getting his supernatural commencement at Barnstaple, through the Balkans, to India, Malacia, and Helliconia, and from the indefinable past to "the days beyond the future" (p.263). (You'd find the full list of stories in *Matrix 84*, p.12) There's an equal range of tones and moods, from the comic of "Bill Carter Takes Over" or "The Ascent of Humblestein" to the horrific fairy-tales of "You Never Asked My Name" or "Lies!" (the latter like Cinderella rewritten by Pauline Réage). But certain perennial Aldissian themes crop up in different guises throughout the thirty years covered by this collection: notably obsessive love, and the romantic contemplation of past glories.

In many ways this is a greater reminder of Aldiss' tremendous talents than *Best SF Stories*. If these two volumes are anything to go by, even the third one which he claims to be on its way – *Best Nondescript Stories* – ought to end up on all our shelves!

Edward James

Robot Adept

Piers Anthony
NEL, 1989, 286pp, £11.95 hb, £6.95 pb

Total Recall

Piers Anthony
Morrow, 1989, 246pp, \$16.95

Do you like cake? Enough to read a five-page description of a brownie-baking contest? Then *Robot Adept* is for you. The rest of us will probably find it as indigestible as the fictional results. Add in two chapters mainly devoted to stroke-by-stroke descriptions of several table-tennis matches, together with a detailed discussion of the

difficulties experienced by an alien shape-changer in a human female's body when attempting to relieve herself, and you have a recipe for first-order mental constipation. *Out of Phase*, the first book in this trilogy, showed some promise, but unfortunately *Robot Adept* fails to realise it. The parallel-worlds plot is now complicated by allowing the two protagonists' girlfriends to switch back and forth, as well as the heroes themselves. This allows Anthony to describe scenes twice (good for the word count if not for the reader), and to discuss sex a lot. (No, I didn't quite see the connection either. Why do middle-aged SF writers drone on so remorselessly about sex? Look at Asimov.) The last third of the book is ruthlessly shoved to a close, as the characters decide to resolve the plot conflict with a game. I expect they'd go as bored as I had by then.

Moving swiftly on, we come to *Total Recall*, a novel based on a short story by Philip Dick and soon to be a film starring Schwarzenegger. Dick's typically clever and understated idea was that, instead of actually going for a holiday, you could simply have memories of the holiday implanted. Anthony has grotesquely inflated this short story into a novel by adding several chapters of pointless chase action à la *Star Wars*, in which only the hero has a loaded gun. Well, it should suit Armie. Dick's ending has also been undermined by a standard save-the-world finish, where Mars is given an atmosphere in a matter of minutes, just in time to save her and heroine from suffocation. Great visuals, dreadful science. To be serious, this sort of raking-over of old ideas is going to kill the field. Shared-universe, AN Other presents, set in the world of... for Heaven's sake, go out and buy something original instead of this stuff. SF is meant to be the literature of ideas; that doesn't mean ideas recycled more often than English tap water, because the result, in both cases, is muck.

Gareth Davies

The State of the Art

Iain M. Banks
Ziesing, 1989, \$16.00

A Dozen Tough Jobs

Howard Waldrop
Ziesing, 1989, \$16.00

Them Bones

Howard Waldrop
Legend, 1989, £12.95

Them Bones, Howard Waldrop's first solo novel, is one of the stranger entries in the alternate history/time travel sub-genre with Madison Leake Yazoo being sent back in time from the start of the 21st century after nuclear holocaust to the early 20th century. The inhabitants of the 21st century reckon they can change history without any of the strange paradoxes that are always predicted in such scenarios, but Yazoo ends up much further back in time in a Mississippi delta where a strange band of Amer-Indians battle with Aztecs, whilst woolly mammoth roam

around and Arabs make the trek across the Atlantic Ocean for trade purposes.

Yazoo is the advance rider for a larger group and this band are wiped out by another band of Indians again after inadvertently giving them all the 'flu, which, of course, wipes a hell of a lot of them out.

I'm deliberately leaving the storyline here as sketchy as possible because the joy of Waldrop is discovering all the little touches. Waldrop has a marvellously bent sense of humour, and his research is faultless (how can one warp something properly without knowing all the actualities?).

A Dozen Tough Jobs, unfortunately, does not live up to the standards of **Them Bones**. It's a re-telling of the Greco-Roman legend of The Twelve Labours of Hercules set in Mississippi in 1926, and reads very much like something that Waldrop has been unable to complete properly but wants to see in print anyway. It's perfect small press curio material and contains many of the typical Waldrop touches, but they don't come naturally to this story and appear ham-fisted. Waldrop is at work on a new novel at the moment, but needs to be careful lest his prolific short story output makes him visible only to small presses such as Keith Roberts in the UK and Lafferty in the US have already become. **A Dozen Tough Jobs** should be read by anyone who likes Waldrop and his ability to re-work established material in very peculiar ways, but will never count as anything more than a sketchy curio in his portfolio.

Iain Banks has become one of Britain's most respected writers both inside and out of the SF genre and **The State of the Art** is thematically a follow-up to **Consider Phlebas** and **The Player of Games**. Unfortunately, **The State of the Art** rambles along and lacks the cutting edge of his other work. He admits that the book was a learning experience, his first not to be critiqued by an editor. All writers need editors (though most wouldn't admit it) to make sure they don't cross the hair-fine line between inspiration and obsession. The problem with this book is less to do with Banks and more about the standards of small press publishing; most small presses have very little editorial stance and are just happy to publish name writers. Ziesing does it better than most, but is still a bookseller who publishes a few books rather than a publisher per se.

Again, Banks fans should read the book, but not expect the full force of the writer at work. The characters of Diziet Sma and the Ship are well set-up, there are some good in-jokes, and, generally, there is a sense of fun about the book.

The only other quibble here is the appalling typeface and typesetting. Be prepared to get a headache reading this volume.

Dave Hodson

Tides of Light

Gregory Benford
Gollancz, 1989, 362pp, £13.95

I was quite unkind to **Great Sky River**, of which this is the sequel; I came to this

instalment with little enthusiasm, and found it reflected many of its predecessor's shortcomings, among which I must mention the use of three virtually identically sounding words – yeasay, naysay and heysay – where it is obvious that any group under stress will need to be able to identify each term immediately and without any confusion.

This time, Benford even manages to insert – into the speech of a race many tens of thousands of years in our future – a pun on "real pain" and "champagne"; anyone who imagines this could still be meaningful is really confused about language.

The blurb informs us that "Benford's canvas in these novels is immense" and this is true: he is, after all, taking us to the Hub of the Galaxy, where suns are gathered like lightbulbs at Blackpool. Unfortunately, his canvas bears a picture that is no more than the scratchings of a tiny mind, depicting the activities of a tiny group of humans who have no idea how the spaceship they live in works, and who make a habit of ignoring the freely offered knowledge of the "aspects" of their more knowledgeable and intelligent forebears which have been integrated into their brains.

In other words, we're back to that weak, corny cop-out of SF writing where, by making everyone stupid, the author no longer needs to think up anything intelligent or clever for them to fight against. It makes no difference whether the threat is an armed killer spaceship shadowing them, falling into a river because fast-moving water is unknown to them, or having to close off several decks of the ship because nobody can mend a sewerage connection – all these may be disastrous.

And, of course, it's always useful to have part of your ship awash with sewage, so that at a crucial point you can release the airlocks, flood space with the decayed organic material, and thus enable your protagonist to cry "let 'em eat shit!" (ho ho).

Meanwhile we encounter the Cybers and the Illuminates – such originality beggars belief – and the ignorant captain ponders on the "Byzantine" aspects of ship's lore, policy issues, and other problems to which this strange attitude is applied willy-nilly. If you manage to struggle through this excess of the picaresque, you will find a brief synopsis of "what went before" rather pointlessly printed at the very end of this volume. There's plenty more to come – don't bother to waken me when it arrives.

Ken Lake

Unicorn Mountain

Michael Bishop
Grafton, 1989, 348pp, £12.95, £7.95 pbk

This is one of those books whose individual bits are all good. You can say "yes, that's a genuine bit of characterisation" or "good idea" or "well written", but somehow when you put all the bits together they don't add up to a whole which is as satisfying as it ought to be. Like the spurious repetitiveness of a large Chinese meal, you wonder how you can possibly be hungry an hour or so later as

you're putting the bread in the toaster.

The central characters are Libby, who makes a borderline living from her ranch; Sam Coldpony, her Ute Indian hand; Bo, a cousin of Libby's ex husband dying of Aids, whom she takes to live and die on her ranch; and Sam's estranged daughter Paisley who still lives on the Ute reservation. All seems normal and everyday until we learn that there are unicorns on Libby's ranch, and that the unicorns are sick. From then on the mysteries abound. There is a link to a parallel world on Libby's ranch through which the unicorns come and through which Libby's old tv receives signals from the other world. There are ghosts and the strange portent of a two headed calf, the sense of crisis grows convincingly through the novel, so that these events are linked – somehow – as perhaps there is some link between the sickness of the unicorns and the Aids which is killing Bo.

It was at this point that Bishop let me down. The links may be clear to him, but I found the last quarter of the book confusing, and unfortunately I was not sufficiently gripped by the events and characters to *need to know* more about the Sundance and go to the effort to look it up. The book does resolve many of the problems it poses but not in ways I found convincing or even, I'm sad to say, particularly interesting.

There is a lot there, the man can write, the characters are good – but they don't involve me, I don't care enough about them or their situation to put the book above average, a decision I made with regret and some puzzlement.

Helen McNabb

The Abyss

Orson Scott Card
Legend, 1989, 363pp, £12.95, £3.99 pb

"I don't do novelisations," says Orson Scott Card in his postscript to this, the book of the film directed by James Cameron. Well, as one of Card's spiritual science fiction forebears said, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck..."

Card has, I imagine, done some fleshing-out of the film, developing the earlier lives of his characters and so on, but this is still largely a blow-by-blow account of the film. Cameron already has a good reputation in science fiction circles for *Aliens* and the awesome *The Terminator*, but the film, which I have religiously not seen before reviewing the book, has had only lukewarm reviews.

It remains a truism that good books tend to make bad films – Dune et al – while the best films so far, in science fiction at least, tend to be based more on Hollywood mega-production values than on the printed word. I except, however, the best science fiction so far, *Brazil*, which probably significantly was never intended to be anything such.

Conversely, good films make bad books, or more particularly cheap knock-off by established SF authors out to make a quick, and assured, buck. Card has, to be fair, set his sights a little higher than *Star Trek 7 – The Search for Spock's Pension Book*, but there

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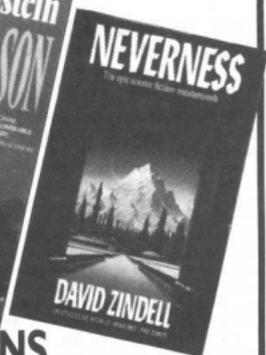
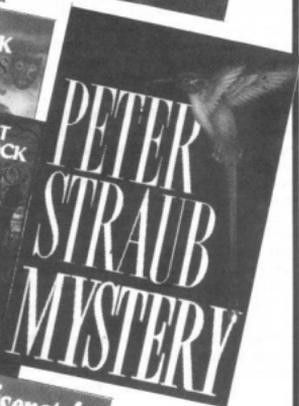
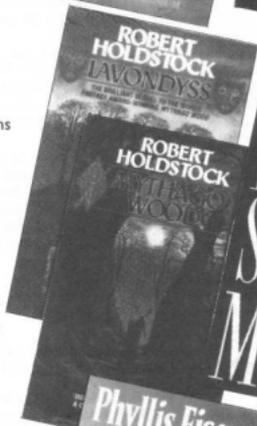
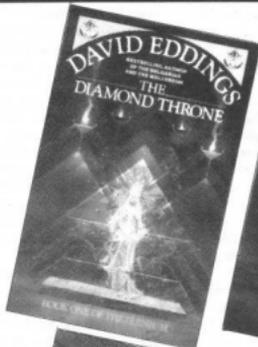
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WIDENING YOUR HORIZONS

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are large chunks of undersea action that can only work better on the screen.

The plot is simple. A US nuclear sub is sunk by a UFO returning to its undersea base – like Wyndham's Bathies, these aliens have evolved on a gas giant or whatever and are only happy in the abyssal trenches of the oceans. Unlike the aforementioned, they are friendly, or at least largely indifferent, to mankind, until we show signs of blowing up their adopted planet.

Herein lies Card's first problem. His rampant, red-blooded patriotism – "He didn't work for glory. He worked for America," he says of the leader of the Navy hit team sent to rescue the sub – sits oddly with the film's green theme, of aliens bringing us to our senses before we wreck the planet.

Likewise his folksy, down-home style, although ideal for his Alvin Maker cycle, is hardly ideal for a hard-nosed, high-tech thriller.

Inevitably, the Navy team leader decides to blow up the aliens – who must, after all, be godless Commies – and is foiled by the crew of an undersea oil prospecting vehicle press-ganged into going after the sub. Humanity is taught a well-deserved lesson, in the shape of a giant worldwide tidal wave which must have been a whizz for the special effects team but does not work on paper.

To analyse such a novel too deeply, tied as it is to a purely visual medium, is to break a butterfly on a wheel. But Card sets himself up for this, in his self-serving Afterword in which he attempts to justify writing the book, rather than pocketing the money and running as soon as he decently could.

But he is still working in Hollywood clichés – the undersea vehicle captain is estranged from his wife, his brainy but difficult designer, and they are only reunited after not one but both are brought back from the dead.

"But don't forget... you still have to see it to believe it," says Cameron in his own postscript. Paradoxically, reading the book makes me less tempted to see the film – or at least until it comes round on video.

Martin Waller

Walk To The End Of The World and Motherlines

Suzy McKee Charnas

Wuzy's Press, 1989, 436pp, £6.95

These two books, published in the seventies, belong to a trilogy; apparently the final part is being worked on. This is their first publication in a single volume.

The setting for both books is a famine-ridden, post-holocaust world, where white men blame everything else for the Wasting. In *The Holdfast*, the "unmen" – animals and non-whites – have been totally wiped out, and women – seen as the prime culprits and now called "fems" – barely survive as slaves. In the plains or grasslands, unknown to the men, women live very different lives.

Walk To The End Of The World is set in *The Holdfast* and is the story of one man's quest for his father. Calling themselves Seniors and Juniors rather than Fathers and Sons, men's blood-ties are usually unknown.

Eykar Bek is the exception. His search involves Rover Captain Kelmz and Eykar's friend and boyhood lover, the DarkDreamer, Servan D Layo. Also on the journey, as a servant, is the "fem" Alldera.

The story is told by each of the protagonists in turn. Sometimes Alldera is barely mentioned by the men yet she is constantly present. Women are property, not people, fit only for breeding and slavery – they are even considered as a source of food.

The book ends with the unexpected result of Eykar's quest and with Alldera's escape.

Motherlines is set in the plains and is Alldera's story. It shows of two different societies, the escaped "fems", recreating their old lifestyle and forever dreaming of *The Holdfast*; and the tribes of "women", whose lives revolve around their horses. Yes folks, this is the one where the women mate with their horses!

The story concerns the conflict between the two societies and Alldera's personal growth from "fem" to "woman". She must look after herself and her child, the result of rape, and decide whether to return to help *The Holdfast* "fems".

Both books hold the interest and are written in a lucid style. The characters are complex and fully rounded. There are many themes: the conflict between men and women, youth and age, passive and active, and nomad and settler.

The initial premise is rather strong, the men are such irredeemable bastards, nevertheless, the plot is well worked out and enough loose ends are left for the third book.

Although I preferred the second more optimistic book, both are well worth reading.

Barbara Davies

Other Edens III

Christopher Evans

and Robert Holdstock (Eds)

Unwin, 1989, 237pp, £4.50

This is a collection of 16 British SF, Fantasy and Horror stories by writers both old and new, and with plots both old and new.

The first, "The Grey Wethers", has Keith Roberts trying too hard, as usual, to paint a rather dull, detailed scene. Amidst lengthy descriptions of the commonplace, he fits a tale of psychometry – in its pseudoscientific sense. There follow two stories of undistinguished and whimsical Fantasy. The fourth and fifth, "The Way to His Heart" by Sherry Goldsmith, and "Rainmaker Cometh" by Ian McDonald, are also Fantasy but literary ability sparkles in them both impressively – especially in the case of the latter, which starts off: "Seven dry years lie like seven white scars scrawled across the shoulders of the dying town." The sixth and seventh – Simon Ings' first published story and Gill Alderman's "Country Matters", succeed in baffling this reader as to what exactly they were about. The eighth, "The Droplet" by SM Baxter, is a welcome example of "hard" SF about exotic physics and a Stanford Linear Collider. "Cry" by Louise Cooper is her second published short story, and emotive Fantasy. "The Wailing

Woman" by Christopher Evans has an introduction explaining that it is "the fourth of five stories about an artist... (and) invisible spirit creatures called chimeras." "When the Music Stopped", by G Kilworth and C Lehmann is a collaborative effort about jazz and nostalgia. "Winterime Beauty" by Christina Lake is about unteachable children. "Passion play" by Keith Brooke is another tale I didn't understand. "Losing Control" by Chris Morgan and "Heart's Desire" by Lisa Tuttle are both slight but easily understandable stories of the kind in which something strange appears out of nowhere, other strange things happen, and the appearance of the thing in the first place is not explained.

The last story is also the longest, "A Tupolev Too Far" by Brian Aldiss: an easy and enjoyable tale about an alternate world, with some nice touches, but basically a shaggy dog story written with tongue in cheek.

In conclusion, I would judge the collection well worth reading for the sake of the jewels in it. Some of the remainder is tricky stuff by writers determined to be obscure. Perhaps readers will write to ask what the stuff was all about. (Or perhaps no?) Some are rather prissy English. In a few places I detected what seems to be a bad choice of words. For instance, by a writer who shall be nameless: "the interruption was unassailable". ("unassailable"?) It's all a matter of taste, I suppose.

Jim England

The Bureau of Lost Souls

Christopher Fowler

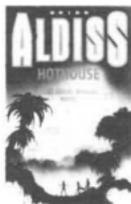
Century, 1989, 244pp, £11.95, £5.95 pb

This collection of short stories is easily the best of the year so far. The dust-jacket might proclaim that Fowler has pitched camp somewhere between JG Ballard and Stephen King, but on the evidence here I have no hesitation in stating that he has staked his own claim firmly in the territory of originality.

Each story is of a high quality, written in a very assured fashion and set in an apparently familiar urban landscape. But as the reader becomes drawn into the drama, reality shifts to one side and the sting in the tail hits home. Very few telegraph their intentions, and consequently, you just want to keep on reading. The title story is a case in point. Wisely saved for the last piece in the book, it tells of Daniel Harper's first days at work with the Civil Service, deep in the heart of office-block London. The writing is economical and telling, and although short stories rarely lend themselves to decent characterisation, Fowler manages to make the office staff seem plausible. Daniel soon learns of the sad demise of his predecessor and quickly discovers that there's a whole lot more to his job than simply sorting and deleting peoples' files from his computer terminal.

Occasionally there are echoes of other writers, Robert Aickman for one, and this lends the collection an air of integrity which might otherwise have been lacking. In "The Art Nouveau Fireplace", a young couple move into a Victorian Terrace and set to with the

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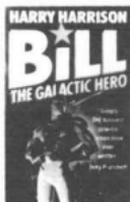


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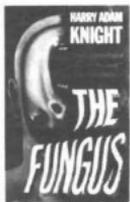
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refurbishment; the modern-day process of gentrification suddenly becomes a lot more menacing as they begin to hear scratching sounds from behind the bricked up fire-place.

Renovation rears its head in "The Master Builder" where a young New York girl buys a down-at-heel apartment. She accepts the privations brought about by the air of decay in the building simply because the view across the river is so breath-taking. A friend recommends a Master Builder to design and refurbish the apartment, but although he does an expert job, he begins to exert a strange sexual hold over her. This is a very well constructed story and really shows writing skills and imagination coming together at their best.

I have rarely found a volume as satisfying as this; I had my doubts after the comparison with Ballard and King, but this collection is undoubtedly worth your most urgent attention.

Alan Dorey

Father To The Man

John Gribbin
Gollancz, 1989, 221pp, £12.95

This is a thriller written using SF trappings – the whole story leads up to the revelation of what Dr Richard Lee has been doing for nine years with a strange child growing up in his secret laboratory. The denouement comes as something of a shock – in other words, as a thriller this is a good one. I read it in one sitting and wanted to know what happened next.

However, a lot of the detail is extraneous and redundant – a lot of what we are told and shown is eventually revealed to make almost no contribution to the plot – these scenes are not red herrings but padding. Scenes from different parts of the world are intercut: two pages of a baby dying in Africa are succeeded by the baby Adam learning to read; the London Underground is flooded to drown the rat problem in a page and a half. But Africa is not referred to again, the sanitary breakdown of English civilisation never gets another mention. The most serious problem this causes is that the religious revival which drives Lee into withdrawal, because Fundamentalists reject his work on genetics, doesn't get any sort of explanation.

In a similar way, many characters are mentioned but not developed. Even the main character remains something of an enigma. This is partly explained as the shock of Lee's lover and co-worker dying during an attack. But his intelligence – he wins the Nobel prize and becomes a rich man in the middle of the book – is almost never seen. On the other hand, this restriction works very well in hiding the true nature of the growing Adam and why he accepts imprisonment for years.

Finally, perhaps oddly, most of the scientific background to this work is irrelevant to the plot and development.

It is not odd, though, if you think that extra detail is a feature of thriller writers like

Ian Fleming and Frederick Forsyth. This is a book that uses contemporary scientific developments just like Fleming used 50's rocketry in *Moonraker* – as a background. Then it adds the other scientific trimmings – references to the Gaia hypothesis, the greenhouse effect, gene mapping – for verisimilitude.

Putting all this together, Gribbin has written a good entertainment, but I couldn't take it seriously.

LJ Hurst

Act of Love

Joe R Lansdale
Kinnell, 1989, 301pp, £10.95

Dark Visions

Stephen King, Dan Simmons & George RR Martin
Gollancz, 1989, 264pp, £11.95

Joe Lansdale has written a lot of stuff crossing a lot of genres, but this is the first UK publication of his first novel. *Act of Love* is a detective story, set in Houston, telling the story of how a sadistic murderer was tracked down by a police detective obsessed with the crimes. It is a very mediocre detective story, it is easy to guess the identity of the killer – he's the only suspect who doesn't get killed and yet I could forgive that in a novel. What I couldn't stomach (literally) was the central premise that we are all necrophiliacs if we would only admit it. The book dwells lovingly on the carving up of bodies and exults in rivers of blood. In the hands of an accomplished writer this could have been a gripping psychological thriller. As it is, avoid the book like a plague unless the height of your erotic fantasy is the thought of eating a freshly removed breast.

Dark Visions is nominally another horror anthology. The introduction, by Douglas E Winter, says:

Stephen King, Dan Simmons and George RR Martin are writers first; they write a kind of fiction only because the publishers and booksellers tell us so.

And this shows in the context of this book. Stephen King gives us three stories. "The Reploids" is an SF story, "Sneakers" features a haunted toilet and "Dedication" looks at voodoo. All three are written with King's usual aplomb, and are a good read. Dan Simmons' stories are "Metastasis", a horrifying view of cancer; "Yanni Fucci is Alive and Well and Living in Hell" reveals God's latest torment for the souls in Hell, and their reaction to it; and "Iverson's Pits" is a story of the Civil War and awful revenge from beyond the grave. George RR Martin has one novella, "The Skin Game" a werewolf story with a difference.

King and Martin have been writing for a long time, and their work has all the polish that you would expect. Simmons' first novel *The Song of Kall* won the 1987 World Fantasy Award, and his writing has a rawer edge than the other two but it also has a freshness that gives his work the extra something that it needs to be set alongside the others.

In these stories, horror has finally pro-

gressed from the old, dark houses into the light places of our modern world.

Jon Wallace

Songs of a Dead Dreamer

Thomas Ligotti
Robinson, 1989, 275pp, £5.99

This book appeared in a limited edition published by Silver Scarab Press in 1986. All the stories have been revised, several omitted and some new ones added to this edition. Ligotti has been popular, particularly in small press magazines, for some years, though more in America than in Britain. This edition should bring him to a wider audience, deservedly so.

These 20 stories have appeared in slightly different form in publications such as *Fantasy Tales*, *Dark Horizons*, *Prime Evil*, *Eldritch Tales*, *Cthulu and Dagon*, among others. They are sectioned off into "Dreams for Sleepwalkers", "Dreams for Insomniacs", and "Dreams for the Dead". A two-page introduction by Ramsey Campbell says of Ligotti: "He belongs to the most honourable tradition in the field, that of subtlety and awesomeness rather than the relentlessly graphic." He has a knack of suggesting terrors, most convincingly in "The Frolic", a tale that takes place in the house of a prison psychiatrist: you may guess at the ending, but even as it hits you, you are reeling at the sheer suspense and audacity of the writing.

For Ligotti is a stylist, an original voice. Even the story titles resonate with originality: "Dream of a Mannikin", "Drink to me only with Labyrinthine Eyes", "The Lost Art of Twilight", and "Masquerade of a Dead Sword". His tales involve madness, insanity of a subtle kind, narrators in the first person talk to you convincingly, and then surprise you: the magician and hypnotist who can raise the dead... almost; a horror story in the form of notes on the writing of the genre itself; and each tale written in metaphor and with dark and light humour, playing with words as well as emotions. An experience that stretches the bounds of imagination and should increase Ligotti's reputation.

Nik Morton

Wolf's Brother

Megan Lindholm
Unwin, 1989, 223pp, £6.99

This is the second and apparently concluding volume of a story begun in *The Reindeer People*, set in an unspecified and "ancient world" which could be in the Arctic circle if it was Earth. This uncertainty about the setting and the spare physical description make it hard to imagine, and neither is there much to engage our intellects or emotions.

Occasionally awkward, the story, which concerns Kerlew's entry into manhood by becoming his tribe's new shaman, gradually improves as it progresses, but there is little sense of danger to any of the characters and they are so sketchily drawn anyway, that when several of them die, it is as if they never existed.

In this kind of story it is important that we care or hate the characters enough to feel, at the least, sad or relieved at their demise, and that we are reduced to nail-biting at the tension of the various situation, but we're not. It is immediately clear that the out-and-out rotter, Joboam, along with Carp, Kerlew's shaman instructor, are behind all the tribe's misfortunes, and will get their come-uppance. Carp's death is unusual, but Lindholm's failure to provide the story with a sharp and fully-realised focus makes it anti-climactic.

The use of magic, refreshingly subtle, ambiguous and sparingly deployed, could be explained away as superstition if it were not for Carp's dying words, but this treatment is to Lindholm's credit. Kerlew's two mystical experiences, with a wolf-pack, and with the spirit of dead shaman, are the most intriguing sections of the novel.

Lindholm has a long way to go to write a meritorious book, but she shows more promise than most.

Terry Broome

History of the Future

Peter Lorie & Sidd Murray-Clark
Pyramid, 1989, 224pp, £10.95

This is the biggest load of metaphorical dingo-droppings to be dumped on my desk in a very long time. The idea is great – to provide an overview of the next millennium. But the execution is abysmal – unimaginative, poorly illustrated, and stuffed with inaccurate science erroneously extrapolated.

You can get a feel for the level of scientific (in)competence from the fact that the author gives the name of "the single particle" needed "to tie together all the theories and experimental work" of modern physics as "the magnetic monopole". The correct name is the magnetic monopole; and in any case it is *not* the single particle needed to make unified physics work.

Although much hippy-style lip service is paid to the work of David Bohm, Lorie fails to understand what quantum mechanics is all about. He quotes Einstein's "God doesn't play dice" remark, without seeming to realise that the consensus today is that Einstein was wrong. He tells us, on the subject of the Deity, that Stephen Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time* "seems to be more a search for the meaning of God than a scientific proposal", which is strange, since Hawking, an avowed atheist, explicitly says that his view of the Universe leaves no room for a creator. And Lorie thinks that "sub-atomic particles can travel any distance, through any substance at the speed of light". Try telling that to a proton at the heart of the Sun.

Lorie's worst sin is that he doesn't understand what he is talking about, and has not done his homework. SF fans may already be familiar with the idea of boring a tunnel in a straight line from New York to Bombay (or between any other two points on the surface of the Earth), a subway system through which trains could run direct, with a journey time of 52 minutes. Lorie worries that the colossal accelerations involved might squash the passengers, and proposes a form of anti-

gravity to nullify this. Apart from the fact that if we had antigravity we wouldn't need such super-subways, the whole point of the idea is that anything falling through such a tunnel, between any two points on the surface of the Earth, would take the *same* time on its journey, in *free* fall under the influence of the Earth's gravity. Like an astronaut orbiting the Earth at high speed, both the train and passengers would effectively be in zero-G, regardless of the speeds they reached.

The illustrations are an ideal complement to this text. They are crap, too. About what you would expect from an artist who spells his name "Sidd". Of course, aesthetic appreciation is highly subjective, and some people (Sidd's mum, perhaps) may like the pictures. But you can get an idea of how accurate and relevant they are from the fact that a section on colonisation of Mars is illustrated by a picture of Jupiter. Don't waste time or money on either the pictures or the words.

John Gribbin

A Talent for War

Jack McDevitt
Kinnell, 1989, 310pp, £11.95

The prologue, a stilted conversation between an overambitious bishop and his old friend, an able but unambitious abbot, in the cemetery of an out of the way religious community, provides a most unpromising start to this novel. Be patient, it gets better almost immediately.

Amateur archaeologist Gabriel Benedict is one of 2,600 passengers on an interstellar ship that fails to emerge from hyperspace. His heir, Alex, is told that his uncle was on the brink of his greatest discovery: a relic that will rewrite the history of the war fought against the aliens 200 years earlier, and re-appraise the standing of that war's greatest hero. However Gabriel's house is ransacked and the files stolen before Alex can take possession. Being stubborn, he embarks upon a quest that takes him to all the shrines of that war to try and identify the artifact that no one, not even the aliens, wants him to find.

A reader familiar with the thriller formula may identify the object sooner than I did, as the most important clues are introduced early in the story and repeated at appropriate intervals. I indulged my imagination and came up with wildly exotic guesses, but was not too surprised by the revelation in the final chapter.

The complex political situation of the immediate pre-war period together with the reactions of various factions to the outbreak of hostilities are especially well done: disparate colonies desperately clinging to their autonomy, the mass hysteria of a mob baying for alien blood, a government taking advantage of another's weakness to claim disputed territory. Characters although functional are never merely puppets but are well drawn, complex flesh and blood. Contemporary journals of the war make both that time and the people writing the accounts come alive. Also very effective were the "quotes" at the beginning of each chapter.

This is a well paced, highly intelligent thriller with lots of good ideas. While the main questions are finally resolved in the narrative, McDevitt leaves it up to the reader to tie up some of the subsidiary loose ends. The tension never flags, and the climax lives up to expectations. Although not earth-shatteringly great literature, this is still good entertainment.

Valerie Housden

Alligator Alley

Mink Mole & Dr Adder
Morrigan, 1989, 300pp, £13.95 trade edition, £45.00 special edition

Take a trip down Alligator Alley and you enter a world which is not quite our own, a landscape that is dark and bleak, filled with violence and treachery and bloody murder. Inspired by the worst acid-nightmare of the book's psychopathic narrator, each lunatic incident runs into the next with rarely a pause for breath, encountering on the way trails of dying geriatrics, revenge-crazed Black Assassins, endless reptile-infested swamps of madness. And every now and then you encounter an illustration by Ferret, depicting scenes of the trauma and chaos in which our anti-hero constantly finds himself.

The narrator is, of course, Mink Mole himself: one of the "High Grade" genetically engineered "manimals" fathered by the possibly-long-dead Dr Incubus. Part man, part mink, part mole... and who's to say which part is the most violent, the most needlessly destructive, the most feral? But that's only part of the story, because he is all these things and more: as he moves through the novel, as the plot thickens and becomes more and more bewildering (as you think you're getting the hang of it, then something *else* happens), he begins to question his own motives, whether or not he reacts through wild instinct or perhaps through some sort of insidious mind-control, the ubiquitous "hum-&-eye". Perhaps it is Dr Incubus, still alive even after all this time, playing puppeteer with his favourite offspring? Or perhaps the Operative, killing off the population of Florida to meet his own dire ends? Or perhaps the mysterious Dr Adder, Incubus' infamous rival? Or perhaps Mr Bathub, who literally lives in his own little world?

But maybe Mink Mole is just insane, maybe he's just a figment of his own imagination, a character in his own novel? Or, worse still, maybe he's somebody else's figment, in somebody else's novel?

Sometimes I was never quite sure, but I persevered to the end, where everything makes some kind of sense, eventually. It would be wrong to say that I actually "enjoyed" Alligator Alley. This is not light reading for one of those long train journeys that makes for a pleasurable read. Nevertheless I did like this book; it has a dark and grim sense of humour, is populated by unsympathetic though well-drawn characters, and it drifts from one bizarre surreality to the next, rarely pausing long enough for the reader to catch up, creating a sense of something much bigger than we might alre-

ady be able to perceive. In this respect I would recommend it, and my best advice would be to follow John Shirley's advice in his introduction:

Don't try to follow it all too logically, too exactly... Just let it carry you. Buckle yourself into Mole's creaking, smoking old Buick, feel free to cover your eyes when he takes the curves at high speeds, and we'll see where you end up. And if you get there intact.

Boyd Parkinson

The Night Mayor

Kim Newman

Simon & Schuster, 1989, 185pp, £11.95

Like many SF writers, Newman has rooted his first novel firmly in a future environment he's already explored in a number of short stories. Unlike the majority, however, he sidesteps it neatly, setting most of the narrative in a computer-generated Dream landscape created by imprisoned master criminal Truro Daine, into which his consciousness has fled. Unable to tolerate even a mental escape, the authorities send hack Dreamer Tom Tunney after him; unfortunately Tunney shares Daine's obsession with the *film noir* archetypes from which the imaginary city has been created, and fits right in to the scenario. It's time for an alternative approach, in the shape of

Susan Bishopric, Dreamer of Bondoid suspense epics and closet Godzilla fan.

Which makes it obvious, even for those unacquainted with Newman's track record as a film critic, that this is primarily a movie buff's book. Daine's city, a monochrome fantasy world in which it's always two-thirty in the morning and raining, is peopled by the shadows of actors and their roles, endlessly playing out their own plots, cropping up as bit parts in other people's stories. Hardly a page goes by without a passing reference to a well known scene, or the artificiality of the narrative conventions of the genre. While this added a lot to the charm of the book for me, I couldn't help wondering how much of it would be completely over the head of the average SF reader, who's knowledge of the pre-Star Wars cinema begins and ends with *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

My only serious reservation is over the lack of internal life the main characters seem to have. Half the book is Tunney's first person narration, initially submerged in the created persona of Richie Quick, Private Dick, while alternate chapters follow Bishopric's story in the conventional third person. The trouble is, both strands are equally dispassionate; Tunney/Quick thinks and reacts like a B movie character, as he's been created to do, while Bishopric is so used to manipulating the artificial realities around her that she remains resolutely unaffected by anything that happens, up to and including a synapse-blasting shape-

changing duel with Daine. It may be significant that the aspects of this book that I found dissatisfying were exactly the same as the ones that didn't work for me in *Neuromancer*; perhaps it's something endemic to first novels set in a computer generated environments.

Nevertheless, this is strongly recommended. It's a lot of fun, has a couple of ingenious plot twists, and bodes very well indeed for Newman's future career.

Alex Stewart

Dragon Prince

Melanie Rawn

*Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989, 574pp
£12.95, £6.99 pb*

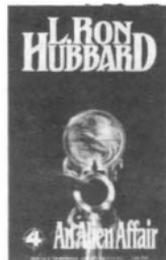
Ragnarok

Anne Thackeray

Bantam, 1989, 492pp, £4.99

Dragon Prince describes how huge dragons soar above Desert; beautiful at a distance, terrible at close quarters, and destructive to crops and livestock. So they have to be destroyed, either in ritual manhood-proving single combat, or in ceremonial mass slaughter of the hatchlings; and the two activities reflecting the bull-fights and lesser blood sports of our own planet. Rohan, new Prince of Desert, determines to save the last remaining dragons. He is helped by Sioned, his destined bride, a Sunrunner who can

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conjure up Fire either as a scrying aid or as a real fiery weapon. They are opposed by traditionalists, and there is war with a rival state.

The politics lost me. Instead I found myself noting details: the Women Archers of Stronghold; the fact that in crisis people exclaim, not "Oh God!", but "Oh Goddess!" Most of all, the carefully thought out natural history of dragons: how they live, mate, and hatch... and for a brief period after hatching, breathe fire which turns their eggshells into gold.

Perhaps the moral of *Dragon Prince* is not so much that conservation even of unpopular species is important; but that conservation can only succeed if there's money to be made out of it.

Dragon Prince is definitely Fantasy; *Ravn* has created sufficient natural history for it even to count as science fiction. But *Ragnarok* is neither Fantasy nor science fiction; it is an historical novel.

Admittedly the heroine, Rhianneth, knows about potions, lethal and benevolent – but so do pharmacists. She sees the future in a scrying-stone – but we all have visions of the future, although we can't wait around for several centuries to realise their fulfilment. She bewitches men with her good looks and personality – but such has been the charm and curse of many women in fact and fiction from Anne Boleyn to Jane Eyre.

No, *Ragnarok* (the Saxon name for the Twilight of the Gods) is an historical novel set in the Dark Ages, in northern England. Rhianneth (a Romano-Celtic princess, bearer of the traditions of the Fellowship of Caer Meloi) is the arranged bride to English Aethelric. Anne Thackery relates Rhianneth's experience until the heroine becomes a grandmother. It may not be fantasy under the meaning of the act, but it is a good read nonetheless, and paints a vivid and human picture of the period.

"But there are no dragons!" Eanfrith protested, disappointed. "And no magic-working at all!" Rhianneth drew him close, laying the book aside. "You don't need magic to be a hero," she said. "And when you're grown, you'll find dragons real enough living in the hearts of men."

Martin Price

Winterwood and Other Hauntings

Keith Roberts
Morrigan, 1989, 182pp, £13.95, Special Edition £40

The latest offering from Keith Roberts, author of the classic *Pavane* and the more recent BSFA award winning *Grainne*, is a book of 7 short ghost stories. Not all are traditional – to quote the author: "the ghosts

of the living are far more potent than the dead". Most of the stories were published in a slightly different form in the 1960s and 1970s; one is new.

The book is illustrated, and each story prefaced, by the author. It is introduced by Robert Holdstock.

"Susan" is the story of a schoolgirl with strange powers, and her effect on people – an aging teacher fearing a lonely retirement, a mad killer, her own mother. It echoes the unanswered question "Who are you?".

"The Scarlet Lady", narrated by a garage owner, is the story of a car with a bad temper and a taste for blood. It predates Stephen King's *Christine*.

"The Eastern Windows" shows us Hell as a party where strangers are doomed forever to eat, drink and repeat banal conversations – with the gradual realization that something is wrong.

"Winterwood" illustrates the moral that what you do to others can rebound. This story of one man's fear of a house and its contents is supposedly based on a real building.

"Mrs Cibber" is again supposedly inspired by real life. Set in 1950s Covent Garden, with echoes of the 18th century, it uses a traditional device – the narrator telling his story to a friend, with hints that it may not be totally true.

"Come on. You're making it all up as you go along."

"Naturally ... What else did you expect? You've got to give me credit though; the detail's pretty convincing."

"The Snake Princess" is a touching tale of the bond between a lonely boy and a fairground woman. She sees what the boy's destiny could be and tries to help him achieve it.

Finally, "Everything In The Garden" uses yet another device, the diary. Is it all in the mind or is the giant oak tree really out to get the heroine?

Roberts is a formidable writer. It is hard to fault either his style or characterization. Atmosphere abounds, ranging from hysterical panic to a delicate sureness of touch to suit each tale. All have pace and hold the interest in a firm grip. My favourite was "The Snake Princess".

Recommended reading, even if you don't normally like ghost stories.

Barbara Davies

The news of a new book by Keith Roberts brings great anticipation to those of us who have read his most resonant and enduring work such as *Pavane*, *The Chalk Giants* and *Kiteworld* and who look forward to similar excellent works.

Winterwood and Other Hauntings isn't of the same quality as those, unfortunately, so what do we have? Well, basically, a mixed bag. Two stories, "Susan" and "The Scarlet Lady", are from the mid-sixties *Science Fantasy* magazine; "Winterwood" and "The Snake Princess" are from *Cornhill Magazine* (I consider myself a Roberts completist and I never even knew these existed); "The Eastern Windows" and

"Everything in the Garden" are from an anthology and *Argosy* respectively; "Mrs Cibber" is new. The tone of the collection is set by the title in that all of the stories are from the darker side of the fantasy spectrum, bar "The Snake Princess" which is a mainstream piece.

True to Roberts' work as a whole the longer stories are the best, the shorter the weakest. The writing is always of a high standard but as stories "Everything in the Garden", "Susan" and "The Snake Princess" don't quite click. "The Eastern Windows" is a standard "Hell is like this..." story you'll have read before in *F&SF* and "Winterwood", whilst being quite good in its evocation of the "psychic filth", does have rather a stock ending.

The highlights are the two novelets. "The Scarlet Lady" tells of a car that has a history of killing things and is a good straightforward tale. "Mrs Cibber" has all the same narrative strengths and also evokes a marvellous atmosphere of fifties London redeemed by the picture/ghost of a nineteenth century woman.

The book has an introduction by Robert Holdstock and eight illustrations by the author. Worth a look. Oh yes, the special edition has an extra story "The Event" which is also available separately.

Paul Fraser

The Child Garden

Geoff Ryman
Unwin, 1989, 388pp, £12.95

A version of Part I serialised in *Interzone* as "Love Sickness" was a brilliant novella, though its conclusion was startlingly enigmatic. Small wonder: it was actually the prelude to a much longer, richer and more complex Part II. Plot is difficult to abstract from this kaleidoscopic narrative, roaming the borderlands of high fantasy, low comedy, surrealism and science fiction. Crudely, in Part I, girl (Milena) meets girl (Rolfia): loves girl: loses girl: inherits a task. Milena is a Czech orphan become actress: Rolfia a genetically engineered eight foot tall polar-bear woman. The task is to direct *The Divine Comedy* as opera. The locale is the Zoo (the National Theatre) and other areas of the Pit, a neo-mediaeval, technocratic, dystopian "Future Times" London. Framing action involves rehearsals of *Love's Labour's Lost*, a comedy in which a death interrupts romance; a purgatory is imposed; paradise is postponed. Part II is the story of the Dante production, integrated with that of resistances to the "viruses" of knowledge and indoctrination in the conditioning "child garden" and a sacrificial restoration of the human life-span, curtailed when cancer was abolished (mortal swings and roundabouts).

Epigraphs are keys to meaning. The prefatory epigraph is from "The Dry Salvages"; Part I's opens the *Inferno*; Part II's the *Purgatorio*. *Love's* lines have to do with time and memory; Dante's, first with aberration and confusion, then with catharsis and the coming ascent. Geoff Ryman's narrative makes concrete an Eliotian theme

Correction

On page 14 of issue 153 the author mentioned was Mary Patchett, not "Mary Pratchett" as was printed. Apologies for any confusion this may have caused.

"in my beginning is my end". In doing so it draws repeatedly on words and images from **The Four Quartets**: the children in the apple tree, the rose, the "go, go, go" song of the bird, "the still point of the turning world". Many passages reflective of the **Quartets** point towards Edenic moments (obverses of the aridity of the Pit's "child garden") focused in a Czech infancy: in an orbiting spaceship; in the pseudo-pastoral of **Winnie the Pooh**. All this underlies an emerging Dantean premiss imaged in the sky-scaped production of the **Inferno** and the **Purgatorio**, and moving towards that "Third Book" conclusion in which all time-bound memories are transcended. Then the united "patterns" (Beatrice and Dante) of Rolfa and Milena, washed by the erasing waters of Eunoe, are, in the quoted closing words of the **Purgatorio**, "made whole as are the trees made new with leaves/ pure and ready to rise to the stars".

Mood and style are theme-related. One style pursues phantasmagoric Boschian transitions; with empathic clarity the traumas and affections of childhood are realised; the variegated splendour of the planet is watched from orbit; scenes of life and labour in the Pit and Slump (the Thames Estuary) are enacted by busy Brueghel-like figures; the visionary aspects are apocalyptic. Yet these experiential and stylistic strands are not divergent. Motifs from opera, lieder, and popular song interlace them; historical and semiotic scaffolding substructure them; the **Commedia** itself sustains and unites them. In all a work of (literally) monstrous inventiveness and virtuosity.

KV Bailey

Lift Off

J Hall Stephens
Rodmell Press, 1989, 148pp, £5.99

Some books defy dispassionate reviewing. I have tried to find an inoffensive way to begin – but I have failed. If **Lift-Off** were spelled "c-r-a-p", then at least it would have an honest title.

I don't normally do plot synopses, but no-one in their right mind is going to read this book, so here goes. The ancient notion that the moon once fitted into the Earth's Pacific Basin is invoked, but with the added scientific explanation that a build-up of tectonic pressure generated gravity reversal and so caused this catastrophe. This is about to happen again. Perhaps. So much for the "science" part of the story: now the fiction.

Fiction is about people. OK, let's have a socially unskilled but brilliant American geologist called Wendell Fink, a firm of English civil engineers building dams for the fuzzy-wuzzies, a girl (the boss's daughter, of course) for the man to fall in love with, and various annoying characters to make things happen. Let's set it in the African Rift Valley so the local politicians can be shown profiteering from the world effort to stop the lift-off. To counteract these unpleasant racist overtones, let's make another engineer a black man, and a rival for the affections of the girl. Of course, he doesn't get her; he

has a wife at home, but Fink doesn't know this.

Our hero comes up with a novel solution. If it's going to fly away, weigh it down. As his firm is in the area building a dam, he resites the dam to put millions of tons of water on top of the problem. Excuse my overtrained literary and not very technical mind, but didn't it say *gravity reversal*? Millions of tons of water on top would surely *add* energy to the disruptive event, not resist or dissipate it.

Oh, look, I'm getting as tedious as the book. In the 1950s, an awful lot of bad SF with bad science and cardboard characters was published. In the intervening thirty-odd years that situation has changed. J Hall Stephens takes us back to the fifties and then tries to add characterisation – with about as much grasp of human motivation as he has of scientific rigour.

I cannot believe any publisher would pay for this claptrap. So perhaps Rodmell Press is a vanity publisher. It says on the back of this book "You won't be able to put this book down". I hope I have. In my own sloppy version of the book's strange and illogical reversals, it is "un-pick-up-able".

Paul Brazier

The Treason of Isengard

JRR Tolkien
Unwin, 1989, 504pp, £17.95

JRR Tolkien died in 1973, but his memory is kept evergreen, if nothing else, by the annual appearance of yet another volume of his notes and rough drafts, copiously annotated by his son Christopher, and always conveniently just in time for Christmas. As a long-standing admirer of Tolkien's work, and not just his fiction, I can't deny that I have bought each book as it appears, but with the seventh volume of the *History of Middle Earth* in my hand, dealing with Saruman's treason at Isengard, the mines of Moria and Llothlorien, and noting that an eighth is already in preparation, I must finally ask myself why on earth I buy them, and why on earth do Unwin Hyman keep on churning them out. Do they really have any value to the Tolkien aficionado? Cynically, there's money in it, it doesn't take a genius to work that out, but artistically, is there really anything to be gained from reading five versions of the same thing, with odd alterations here and there, all lovingly prefaced with a description of the appearance of the manuscript.

I think the pleasure to be derived from this book is a scholarly one, comparing variations in text, examining changes in structure, and generally arriving at a deep understanding of the genesis of the magnum opus. It is not a book for casual reading, not a book for flicking through during an hour of boredom. After seven volumes, I presume most people will realise that, but one can only assume that sales continue to justify Unwin Hyman presenting what, to my eyes at least, looks more like an academic tome, in a popular hardback format, at a popular hardback price. I acquire them because I've promised myself

that one day I will reread the entire canon, making those comparisons and noting the structural development. Sometimes I wonder if that's what Unwin Hyman relies on, wishful thinking. In the meantime, one can only envy Christopher Tolkien for having found a lifetime's academic work so conveniently close to home, rehashing his father's working plans. And it is rehashing. One can quite adequately read the novels and stories without benefit of these books and frankly, unless one is deeply caught up in the whole business of manufacturing Middle Earth, there really is no need to obtain them. Now if only I could listen to my own advice...

Maureen Porter

Drachenfels

Jack Yeovil
GW Books, 1989, 247pp, £4.99

If there is one thing more irksome than the shelves of interminable trilogies, full of orcs, elves and wraiths, it is the Shared Universe/RPG novel. I don't like gaming, and games spin-offs leave me cold. If people are going to trot out the usual Fantasy-world theme and variations, why can't they at least use their own imaginations?

So. This is the first Warhammer novel. The scenario is a magically-reinvented medieval Europe which would have been familiar to both Bram Stoker and JRR Tolkien. The title, **Drachenfels**, names the arch-villain of the tale, another one of those undying Princes of Evil. Cue Mordor, where the shadows lie. We're in for some Gothic Fantasy here, and no mistake. Wolves howl in the forest and bats flap across the moon.

The story concerns the defeat of **Drachenfels** by an aristocratic swordsman who, twenty-five years later, stands a chance of becoming Elector of his Principality. So he springs the culture's greatest playwright from a debtors' prison in order to put on a play of the heroic events with the would-be ruler as hero. The band of adventurers that put an end to **Drachenfels** are assembled in the now-ruined castle where the final battle took place. As you might expect, the Prince of Evil is not as dead as our heroes had imagined, and there is much death before Good finally triumphs.

Now comes the surprising bit. I quite liked this story. It isn't literature, but it is readable. Despite the familiar trappings-out of dwarves, vampires (of several forms), and the near-immortal Genevieve Dieudonné (is the most engaging character in the story), demons and ghostly monks, it actually hangs together and holds the attention. The bad guys are bad and so, by and large, are the good guys. There are also illustrations and a map. Actually I didn't see the map until I'd finished reading, but this was no hindrance. It almost makes a change to have characters without Celtic names; and at least the dialogue isn't that blend of quasi-Shakespearean archaism and "We are warlocks; we do not quite speak English" that so often infests Fantasy.

Not bad at all if you like this sort of thing.

Christopher Amies