

# Vector 167

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The Critical Journal Of The British Science Fiction Association

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## ISAAC ASIMOV 1920-1992

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**Mike Jefferies, Sue Thomas Interviews  
Reviews • Letters • More**

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# Vector

June/July 1992 → Issue 167

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# New Roses - An Editorial by Kev McVeigh

**"The history of British Science Fiction in the 80s, is more than just the history of Interzone."** – David S Garnett, **New Worlds**.

Viewed from some directions you could be forgiven for thinking otherwise. If you were an aspiring novelist, for example. The last generation, if it can be called a generation, of British SF writers - Robert Holdstock, Christopher Evans, Stuart Gordon, Joy Chant, Garry Kilworth, Gwyneth Jones, and (possibly) Mary Gentle, Colin Greenland and Geoff Ryman (who may all be associated with that group although their main flowering came later) all pre-date **Interzone**. Since then, or at least in the late 80s, who has emerged? Ian McDonald (via the US), Iain Banks (via the literary mainstream), Storm Constantine, and that, it would appear, is it. Excepting the odd one-hit wonder.

Meanwhile in the US, authors like Pat Murphy, Lucius Shepard, Richard Grant, Steve Erickson, Paul Zindell, Karen Joy Fowler, Terry Bisson, Patricia Geary, all the second-generation cyberpunks, Katherine Dunn, Nancy Kress, Judith Moffett, Lois McMaster Bujold, Jack McDevitt and as many more were making considerable reputations. In Britain, **Interzone** and a handful of anthologies were still largely dominated by the older generation.

The first ripples of change came around **Interzone 20**, with first stories by the likes of Eric Brown, Charles Stross and Nicola Griffith. Within 18 months Paul McAuley and Kim Newman were establishing themselves as the first successes of the **Interzone** generation.

At the same time, perhaps inspired by these successes, and certainly fired by the period of apparent stagnation that **Interzone** passed through, the small press began to rise. As many of the new young authors in Britain came through **Works**, **Auguries**, **BBR** et al as via **Interzone**. So, as **Interzone** rallied from its creative lows, British SF is rising again.

This issue of **Vector** sees an interview with Sue Thomas, whose excellent first novel, **Correspondence**, was published this year. Simon Ings post-modern techno-thriller **Hot Head** is another exciting debut, and I hear that Charles Stross (**Scratch Monkey**), Nicola Griffith (**Ammonite**), Alison Sinclair (**Homecoming**) and at least three other authors have first novels due shortly.

This isn't a movement as such, some of these authors have collaborated (Ings and Stross, for example), others developed on their own (Graham Joyce, Jenny Jones). Some workshop together, others use non-writers or non-genre writers as their sounding boards. However there is a sense of breakthrough amongst those writers who are aware of the professional field, and the next wave are gaining an infectious urgency. It surely won't be long before Chris Amies, Molly Brown, Mike O'Driscoll or noe of a dozen others is signed up.

There doesn't, yet, appear to be a style to label this group with. This isn't cyberpunk. These writers are covering all the bases - Hard SF (Stephen Baxter), Fantasy (Sinclair), vibrant Punk Modernism (Sue Thomas, Nicola Griffith), space opera with an edge (Simon Ings) and, to lift Paul Di Filippo's term ribofunk (Richard Calder).

Richard Calder has already been the subject of an article in **SF Eye**, several others were subjects of Simon Ing's "Flabby Engineering" critique in **Vector** (and despite the misunderstandings I had with Simon, I stand by that as one of the best things we've published in **Vector**). Michael Cobley has neatly if occasionally too wickedly dissected Stephen Baxter in **Territories**. So the critics are taking note. These writers have faults, but they are also damn good, with the passion of youth to sustain them. There's going to be some great reading in the next year or so, and I'm looking forward to all of it.

## Editorial Comments by Catie Cary

This issue sees the start of a new column by Steve Palmer, it will be examining books on popular science subjects and associated media presentations. He kicks off with a look at the recent television programs about Stephen Hawking. The first **Insight** appears on page 17.

Some of you will know that a further new feature was planned for this issue. Provisionally titled "Read This", it will consist of a series of short articles recommending books or series of books. I already have a number of fascinating articles in hand, but ran out of time and space. The first of these articles should now appear in the next issue. If you feel that **you** would like to contribute, please write to me for guidelines.

We were all saddened by the recent death of Isaac Asimov, I'm pleased to bring you two excellent articles concerning his career. Norman Beswick, the author of the first is another new contributor to **Vector**. Please gentlemen, forgive the following quotation:

**"Asimov is the great sandworm of science fiction, tunnelling under its arid places. And the critic's job remains that of a small termite, tunnelling under Asimov"**

Brian W Aldiss with David Wingrove **Trillion Year Spree**

**letter**

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Please send all letters of comment to:

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## Measurement Policy

*From Garry Kilworth*

John Wallace's review of my young adult's novel, *The Drowners* (Vector 166) was the second to mention that, despite being set in early nineteenth century England, the units in the book are metric. In fact I was brought up with imperial measurements and naturally used them in *The Drowners*, but it is the policy of Methuen (and I believe most publishers of children's fiction) to change imperial measurements to metric. Somewhat peculiarly they allow "miles" to remain in the original, and do not change the money (half-a-crown, threepenny bit, etc.) to modern equivalents. However the publishers, probably at the request of some other body, insist that youngsters will become confused if faced with imperial measurements at a time when they are engrossed in learning metric measurements. *The Drowners* was shortlisted for both the Smarties prize and the Library Association's Carnegie Medal, so there appears to be universal acceptance of this policy amongst those who deal directly with the young.

**Garry Kilworth**  
Rochford, Essex

## April Fool

*From Ken Lake*

Vector 166 is a good mixture with plenty of mind-stretching information and ideas, but I am sorry Gillian Rooke let the side down so.

I have rarely read such a sustained, vituperative, one-sided rant in these pages. The first half of her letter is based on her unsupported decision that an October 17th 1991 article in *The Daily Telegraph* must have been based on an April Fool's Day piece in *Nature*, and she runs on with a lot of outdated and juvenile basic biology as if imparting news of great worth.

In the second half, she turns to pornography for her kicks. Dragging in one-handed reads, my lady's candle, and no end of other irrelevances, she ends by reviled at me in offering as sex-obsessed 16-year-old letting it all hang out for the first time in adult company under the hackneyed old pretence of attacking that which she is hung up on. Do us all a favour, Gillian: whatever your chronological age, grow up!

Although I found many "best books of 1991" mentioned by a scintillating range of our reviewers to be enthralling reading, I feel the feature would have benefitted greatly from one simple addition.

Can we not have a complete listing of the selected titles, ranged according to the number of votes they received? It might not prove anything, but it would make it far easier for us all to check our own reading lists and order books we feel we might have enjoyed.

The point that most times has incurred my own loathing or at best disdain is quite irrelevant: 28 reviewers must, by the law of averages, provide us with a reliable all-round guide to interesting reading.

**Ken Lake**  
London

## Nature Study

*From Andy Robertson*

Just a note, with reference to Ken Lake's letter in Vector 165, and Gillian Rooke's reply in Vector 166.

For the information of any BSFA member who is interested, the article on which Ken Lake based his original letter about terraforming can be found in the August 8 1991 issue of *Nature*. The problem which Gillian brought up is dealt with on the first page of this article.

To remind readers: Gillian pointed out that plants can't grow unless there is already some oxygen. Correct. But plants can grow with very little oxygen indeed (down to about one fiftieth of an atmosphere), and can possibly be bio-

engineered to grow with less than a tenth of this. Single-celled algae can grow in pure carbon dioxide, and could be used as a starter. Incidentally, the article was about terraforming Mars, not terraforming extrasolar planets, and Mars does not have either a reducing or an oxidising atmosphere at the moment, but one made up mostly of carbon dioxide with a little nitrogen.

I don't want to be picky, but I do think Gillian was needlessly rude to Ken, as well as careless in her research. One glance at the index for *Nature* for 1991 would have pointed her to the original article. However, on the basis of the rest of her letter, she usually takes some care to find things out before she puts pen to paper, and I'll be interested in reading her promised piece about the Burgess Shale.

**Andy Robertson**  
Lewes, Sussex

## Disquieting

*From Jim England*

If I were to write to Vector saying that it was "no great art" to be "better than the majority of blacks" and that I liked describing the stupidity and laziness of blacks... a theme which is so fabulously productive\*, no doubt editors would accept it as a ton of bricks. But substitute the word "blacks" for "blacks" in the above wording and you have exactly what some Czech feminist writer says on p14 of Vector 166. How can such women fail to see (or care) that such inflammatory and sexist remarks serve neither men nor women? There are good, bad, stupid and lazy people of both sexes and all races.

Equally disquieting was the article by Liz Counihan on p13 in which she attains the insight that, just as a picture can be worth a thousand words, a few words can sometimes be worth a thousand pictures. Liz describes as "all good fun" the "cheating bite off" an "unfortunate" male by the crazy female who "does a good job with a blunt instrument" in the film *Misery* and adds that it did not "bother" her much, as she has been a medical student "All the horror scenes were easily performed" but in another film there is "not quite enough blood for the genuine horror fan". I am aware that medical students are required to be a specially squeamish kind of people. But Liz comes across as a person who takes pride in this, above and beyond the call of duty, and I did not much want to hear about it. Perhaps it's the generation gap. Surely callousness and insensitivity aren't what *all* the young aspire to nowadays?

PS: Since when have writers been allowed to review their own books in Vector? I refer (jokingly) of course to Dan Simmons on p21. Who is the real reviewer? Catie Cary is my guess.

**Jim England**  
Stourbridge

## Hand It to Him

*From Steve Palmer*

I found many of EH James's ideas in "Shake the Invisible Hand" bizarre, to put it mildly. The first oddity was "Capitalist Organisation... appears to work." Appears to? This is either an admission that it does not, or a confession of scepticism.

Capitalism may feed us in Britain, even though most of us have never grown our own food, but at what cost? If it is destroying our land and the land of foreign countries, surely that is the most compulsive argument for a new economic system? And I find the idea of no symphonies existing except within capitalist organisation highly dubious; capitalism has existed only for a few centuries. What of the realms of music written before it arose?

As for the "fat generated (inhumanly?) by the Market", these enormous sums "being given to the less fortunate people", what of the still

larger sums that these less fortunate people have to repay to the West? No mention of that. No mention of exploitation or social inequality, except in an admission that city slums appear thanks to the Market not being perfect. All that is mentioned are cheaper VCRs and cars. No mention of the appalling conditions suffered by these hordes of workers as they turn from being self-sufficient to being utterly dependent on corporations.

Finally, ER James seems to support this amazing argument that a change from capitalism means a "return" to "a rural economy"; to "mud huts and no electricity and no sewage." Boy, am I sick of hearing people trot out this sort of stuff. It reminds me of when people thought the only alternative to capitalism was communism, and so everybody who argued that capitalism was a communist. There is an alternative, it does not need to be, but ER James. It means human organisation, unselfish organisation. It may be an undercurrent lying wholly in the Green sphere, but it is becoming sophisticated and noticed. Capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction.

The Invisible Hand may be feeding and entertaining an increasing number of people, cosy people in cosy countries like America, but elsewhere a far larger number of people expanding at a far larger rate are being exploited shamelessly. To equate Organisation with Capitalist Organisation, or with the Market, is to have tunnel vision.

**Steve Palmer  
Luton**

### Choice From Peter Tennant

It was intriguing to read Reviewers' Choice. As ever there was no clear "winner", although a few names occurred with more frequency than others (Banks, McDonald, Waldrop, Simmons, Carroll). I'm not sure what, if any conclusions can be drawn from this, other than that Vector's reviewers form a broad church, which is as it should be.

I've long enjoyed Angela Carter's work and her death was a tragic loss to literature. Sally-Anne Melia's obituary was a moving tribute and shed light on a personality I'd known only through her writing until now.

I recently read of Isaac Asimov's death, and although I no longer enjoy his books, for old times sake, I hope an obituary can be found to serve the dear Doctor well.

E R James, deprecating his own education as "Shake The Invisible Hand" sounds rather like Mark Anthony before the daggers came out. I couldn't agree with him more regarding the benefits of a mixed diet, but he seems to have missed the point of Sterling's piece. Organisation per se is not a bad thing, but any organisation can grow to the point where it's own needs come to take precedence over the needs of the people it was originally intended to serve. This is particularly true of the Invisible Hand as envisaged by Sterling, when profits are the bottom line, organisation/Efficiency in such circumstances consists of standardisation not a mixed diet. You can have any colour as long as it's black, as Henry Ford reputedly said. Everybody reading the same books, eating the same food, driving the same car. And if people don't like this, then perhaps they too will be standardised to meet the Invisible Hand's requirements. After all, in nature the most efficient organism is that of the ant hill.

Personally I think Sterling overstates the danger, but that's preferable to ignoring it completely as E R James seems to want to do. All in the garden is not coming up roses.

PS My apologies to Ken Lake. He's quite right; I did misrepresent the facts. I can only add that this was due to a misunderstanding and not a deliberate attempt to make Ken look bad. Sorry Ken

**Peter Tennant  
Thetford**

### Scratch My Back From Philip Muldowney

Is the rumour true? Are the BSFA going to issue a free magnifying glass with new subscriptions to **Vector**? It might well be a winning gimmick, because sure as hell you have got to get people to read that minute typeface somehow. There comes a point when the brain strains ENOUGH, and demands that you desist in trying to ruin your eyesight. In all honesty, though, the conflict between the amount of information one wants to impart, and making that information easily readable, is one that you have not resolved in **Vector**. Perhaps the changes that may come in relation to **Paperback Inferno** may well give you the money to put a few pages into **Vector**. At the moment it surely could do with a lot more space.

Apart from moans about typefaces though, I found **Vector** very interesting. One can just imagine that question on **Mastermind**: "Name six pornographic SF novels"; after the Farmer and the Delany, the mind struggles.... Now perhaps that would be an interesting competition for **Matrix**. SF has had an uneasy relationship when dealing with sex; it has never combined the elements very well. Then again, of course, define your terms, because the standard "d-prave and corrupt" is such a nebulous thing in today's society that the state has been very careful to avoid trials on pornography. OK, the boys in blue might well pile on in the whim of the local chief constable, but in terms of the written word it is left to a space somewhere in mid air. This is evident in the terrible typewritten in a teacup that has appeared in **Vector** over the past few issues. What is your meat is my poison.

Personally I find the whole debate somewhat curious. Many people will foam at the mouth over sex and its many pathways, but will let violence go by the by. If there is anything that has changed over the past twenty or thirty years, it is the amount of violence that there is in society now. While theories over the effect of pornography may be debatable, the fact of ever-spiralling mayhem in Western society is self-evident. Take films for instance.... The vast majority of actual bums on seats in the USA are young, so naturally the commercial film makers go where the money is. So the vast majority of films out of Hollywood are either teenage angst in all its forms, violence and bloodshed taken to the extreme. By the very nature of success, it is all overdone, and the abnormal becomes the normal, the extreme the everyday. The SF and allied genres in the film have been in the vanguard of this trend. Name your favourite SF film: *Alien*, *Aliens*, *RoboCop*, *Terminator* and *Terminator 2*, to pick a few out of the air. There was a very revealing comment by the head of the British Board of Film Censors on *Film 92*: when referring to *Terminator 2*, he quite clearly stated that he let more violence onto the screen in this particular film, because as SF it was quite clearly a fantasy world, and that it was obvious that people would realise this. Does this hold true?

The idea of a "best of the year" may have sounded good, but it came over like those endless scratch-and-back best of year supplements that plagued the papers about Christmas time. While it might be helpful for some to have a few titles pointed out, your scattering of reviewers was so wide as to become meaningless. Interesting though, how very few SF were mentioned, ie *Pacific Edge*, *Earth, Hyperion* and how the majority were in the fantasy/horror area. Does this say something about the field itself, or the reviewers quoted?

The review system within the various magazines is certainly looking a bit of a dog's dinner. When is a paperback not a paperback? Because you certainly review a fairly high proportion of paperbacks in **Vector**. What are the guidelines for a paperback review in **Vector** or **Paperback Inferno**? The case for an expanded review section is strong; your corporate efforts appear all over the place, and

the scattergun effect diminishes their impact. Like news of published books when and where, it would be invaluable to know that certain books will be available from a certain date, but I do not seem to be able to find this information anywhere. Or take the SF magazines, the odd in-depth boredom of *Interzone*. But what about *Analog*, *F&SF*, Isaac Asimov's, to name just those that I read myself. With your average paperback now running into the £4.99 area, the magazines, at somewhere around £2.00, are good value for money.

The Angela Carter and George Macbeth obituaries were invaluable. Thank you. It is curious really how a death can bring personal memories to the surface. The death of Isaac Asimov in the past month or so must have brought back those for many of your readers. Oh, the anticipation of the next Panther edition of the next *Feedback* story... I'll be up by torchlight to read it, oh that sense of Wonder, to be nine years old again. Yet in the ways of the wider world, Asimov was unique. He was far more than just an old SF hack. Because many people came across him in the adult world, the real one outside SF. The memory of that crystal clear prose style, revealing the fascination behind so much of science and elsewhere. That cool, clear image is the one that will probably stay with me longer. It is the rare SF writer that heralds news space on the front page, and full-page sized obituaries in the serious papers. But then, Asimov was unique.

The only comment that needs to be made about Stephen King's films is the exceptional mediocrity of most of the work on screen. Ain't just my opinion, either. Perhaps Stephen King has some sort of curse.

Your reviewers are very variable and often idiosyncratic. The reviewer of Dan Simmons' *Prayers to Broken Stones*, for instance (as a bye, who was it?), Now obviously Harlan Ellison gets right up his sinuses, but that is not true for everyone, so why spend nearly half the review in yammering about a couple of pages of introduction, and then skimming over the stories meant to be reviewed. In fact, some people might buy the book just for the exercise in the Ellison ego. Or take Jim England's dismissal of two books in two paragraphs. If he is going to go to this little trouble, why bother? Your review section needs more room! Anyway, thanks for **Vector**; I hope to see more.

**Philip Muldowney,  
Plymouth**

Crumbs! Well to answer just a few points at random:

- The Dan Simmons Review - the fault was mine but not the review. Apologies are herewith tendered to Paul Kincaid.

- Reviews coverage and policies will be overhauled in anticipation of the merging of the magazines in October. I hope that inconsistencies and duplications will become a thing of the past

- Maureen Speller will be joining the **Vector** team as Magazine Reviews Editor with effect from **Vector 169** (Oct/Nov). I hope to have an article from her next issue laying out her plans.

- Oh and the 7 point typeface for the letters page was an experiment (failed, clearly failed) that will not be repeated.

# Being unfair to Asimov

By  
Norman  
Beswick

Artwork by Claire Willoughby

Sometimes, for clarity, one needs to be deliberately unfair. I actually suspect that Isaac Asimov's contribution to SF will be seen to have been both formative and substantial, in quality as well as quantity. Certainly I thought so as an admiring schoolboy in the forties, reading the stories then appearing in *Astounding*.

But time showed a clear case for the prosecution. Asimov's best SF was the prisoner of its virtues: that slick, terse, knowing style; those glib stories building to a punchline; that all-too-easy optimism propped up by plotlines manipulated to avoid difficult questions.

Asimov's was the SF of scientism. He rejoiced in science because it had "answers", and his stories tend to sidestep areas of human life to which those "answers" were irrelevant. Behind his kindly, egotistic, rationalist persona was a curious failure to treat his characters as fully rounded, not always merely rational, human beings; his tales, all twisted plots and cardboard people, make him the Agatha Christie of SF. His was a fiction with often a galactic setting, but it could never admit, or cope with tragedy.

Had he been a common hack, this wouldn't have been a problem. Most pulp SF, indeed most pulp fiction of any kind, has precisely these characteristics. But he wasn't a common hack. His clear prose at its best forces the words to work for their keep, even when the tale has only moderate things to say. Asimov images echo in the memories of generations of readers: time as a sort of corridor or liftshaft with centuries leading off and Technicians popping in and out tidying them up; robots blamelessly acting out the logic of their programming; Hari Seldon's calculator pad, plotting the galactic future over millennia; the reality of the stars marvellously revealed at nightfall. (Campbell the editor was involved in the planning of some of these, but Asimov the writer brought them alive for us.)

Of course it needed to be done, shifting the genre away from banal technophilia and space westerns. Asimov made a pulp fiction that dealt neatly and competently with interesting ideas and visions. His opinions were humane (not all of his contemporaries shared them). But the limitations were real. He was good at showing how a scientist would tackle a problem, but many of his storylines arose from historical and sociological speculation rather than from new scientific ideas.

His imaginative roots were in an earlier scientific worldview, embodied in the images and concepts of science fiction as he found it and, in later years, trends within science itself were exposing many of them. One wonders how it was that the creative talent of so gifted a scientific expositor missed the excitement of what was emerging in real science, ideas that

already didn't fit the commonsense rationalism of his stories. General and special relativity theory, quantum indeterminism, Heisenberg uncertainty were all decades old when he began writing; yet he wrote about galactic empires and space traders, as if space and time had not been shown to be radically, excitingly different from how we (and he) imagined them. Decades later, chaos mathematics with all its unpredictable variety made the likelihood that "psychohistory" could forecast human behaviour across an entire galaxy for thirty thousand or even one thousand years look even less than it seemed in 1942.

And once you know that the science is dated or implausible (I ask, totally unfairly), what is left? Don't answer that most SF writers were making similar mistakes: Asimov, from the start, was moving into leadership placing.

It made sense, if you were Asimov and being edited by Campbell, to write about robots rather than people, and to begin at once by constraining them within the limits of the Three Laws. Robots as created pseudo-people can be neatly tidied up, leaving out all the inconvenient complications of personality. The term "positronic brain" has a scientific ring to it without any actual justification, and the rest is logic. The stories entertain, and sometimes comment shrewdly on human motivation; occasionally (as in "Liar!") we have gentle glimpses of raw feeling. The problem for readers after a while is that his human characters seem only slightly more complicated than their mechanical counterparts, reminding one of the husband in Christopher Fry's play whose voice:

"... made  
Balance sheets sound like Homer, and  
Homer sound  
Like balance sheets."

There is a reductionist flavour in these tales; they succeed only by limiting. Reading Asimov at length, one starts to notice the author's skill in avoiding human realities that might have complicated his plotline: like epic heroism, poetic imagination, the tangle of mixed motives and emotions that resolve into (sorry to mention it) love.

Unfair? I said so, didn't I, right at the start?

If the robot stories are of tidied up humans, you might expect Asimov characters to want to tidy up human society. Asimov (one of the many nice things about him) exhibited genuine social concern. Hari Seldon in the *Foundation* volumes doesn't attempt the impossible: for most of the series (it's nine stories, not really a trilogy) his social engineering is "only" to restore a galactic empire, reducing the period of barbaric interregnum from thirty thousand years to a mere one thousand. What he actually does, apart from



establishing two foundations at opposite "ends" of the galaxy, is never entirely clear, but we are repeatedly told of his "science of psychohistory" by which he computes probabilities (see my comment above).

Here is a secret manipulator, the spectre haunting the galaxy, a mixture of Marxism (whose habit of supposed analysis psychohistory resembles), Toynbee's *Decline of the West*, and the Illuminati as conceived by conspiracy-theorists. But Dr Seldon is presented as a goodie, a benevolent Nostradamus who not only made prophecies but rigged the conditions for their success. Galactic Empire must be restored (it seems) as the only way to stamp out war. "Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent", says Salvador Hardin, and the aphorism sets a tone throughout many of the succeeding pages - till the chance mutation of the Mule threatens to upset the entire conspiracy.

One respects Asimov for attempting an absorbing space opera without the glorified supertech violence of (say) EE "Doc" Smith and his appalling Lensmen. Even so, he faltered in his task: the Second Foundation deliberately manoeuvres the Mule into attacking Tazenda, knowing he will wipe out the entire population - not very non-violent. The Mule, of course, could by definition not have been predicted by Seldon, but the Second Foundation was his creation, and his "psychohistory" presumably anticipated its modes and its ruthless behavioural predisposition.

Hypnosis and mind-control without consent are violations of human dignity, whoever performs them. Arkady Darell believes she is acting freely, but in fact like many other she has been "controlled" all along by Second Foundation programming. It all seems very similar to the working methods of the Mule, and very different from the gentle mathematical computations of our Hari. By the end of the third volume, the programme is back on course, but Seldon's "science" is virtually replaced by the machinations of Second Foundationists, who will steer the galaxy towards a Second Coming of Empire - governed in secret by "a readymade ruling class" of gloating psychologists. Peace: but at what price to true humanity?

And that's a comment not in the least unfair. The simple pleasure Asimov communicates in the gee-whizz successes of the earlier *Foundation* stories becomes increasingly distasteful in later pages. One remembers his comment on Anacreon:

"For it is the chief characteristic of the religion of science, that it works...."

And is that all? Asimov's fiction is not one in which failure can be contemplated; thus, in *Foundation and Empire*, when Bel Riose is defeated and imprisoned, he vanishes at once from the story without even a dignified final statement, the author abruptly switching attention to subsidiary characters. The humanity of the narrative is diminished by such a preoccupation.

In *The End of Eternity*, a dedicated group called the Eternals travel upwheel and downwheel discreetly studying the centuries and "improving" them with computed reality-changes. Their activity so domesticates human aspiration that space-travel drops off the agenda. It is taken for granted that this is deplorable, and so it doubtless is, but (for Asimov and pulp SF) the reason for deplored this non-development of space travel is a question of winning: by the time humankind actually gets out to the stars, other species will already be there before us. But suppose they're there already anyhow? Life isn't only about species who win by being first arrivals; latecomers often find

their niche. And meanwhile, what about those people whose lives were actually *better* in Eternity's altered realities? How does one quantify such variables?

**The End of Eternity** is a fable about social engineering, but an unexamined fable. If we didn't try to improve human society, we would have no law, no service professions, no democracy, no politics. The sin of the Eternals, surely, was that they tried to "improve" society in [secret]; they couldn't be opposed because their very existence was unknown. The right to decide (and to participate when groups decide) is inalienable: and you can tell that to the Second Foundationists, too.

If I was being fair (but I told you I'm not), I would add a note about the marvellous images that still stay in the mind: the unmoving kettles that carry the Eternals up-and-downwheel; the lament of Computer Twissell about his paraplegic son who was "still out there in the appropriate portion of the Century". But I'd have to add that linked to it is an adolescent fantasy: a bachelor not very good with girls and defensively suppressing his interest in them has an absolute corker come from the Hidden Centuries, Just For Him. The seduction scene is only believable if you don't think into it, and the same goes for their relationship thereafter. A writers' workshop might set as an impossible assignment: "Describe their life together in 1932 after Eternity has ended".

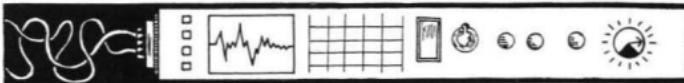
One could go on like this for many more pages. The SF detective novels *Caves of Steel* and *The Naked Sun* continue themes from the robot short stories and allow Asimov to make decent liberal points about racial tolerance and city living. But despite much cleverness the emotional range is still constricted, and Asimov continues an irritating tendency to keep the reader unnecessarily in the dark and than astonish him. Other famous stories and novels call for similar comment.

**The Gods Themselves** is something of an exception, making one wish that Asimov could have been persuaded out of the Campbell mode to experiment more often. It contains a brilliant (if still rather anthropomorphic) account of alien beings in a parallel universe (their three-person "melding" in sexual union is marvellously described), and the entire structure depends upon a scientific idea, to a degree unusual in his novels. The social concern is prominent, and well handled, and if only the three sections had hung better together this would have been a triumphant success.

Asimov became increasingly involved with the mass production of skilfully written nonfiction popular science books, many of them admirable. Sadly, the last novels continued the weaknesses of their predecessors, but at greater, often ponderous, length. The flair had gone, the style had become slack, and meanwhile the genre had moved on without him.

I said I was being unfair, and in that I think I have succeeded. Much of this, in the minds of many people, is the case not only against Asimov but against golden age SF itself. He wrote a fiction that introduced SF ideas to a huge mass audience; it was brilliant, literate, clever, often humane, always alert for the unexpected. But after a while you wanted him to probe more deeply, take more risks, widen his range, drop his routines, use more recent science, admit anger and despair and passion: and he didn't want to. How successful later writers are being in taking SF beyond his chosen limitations is another matter, and perhaps, for someone, another article.

But now I must put all those books back on the shelves again. Having said what had to be said, I wish I didn't love them all so much!



# ASIMOV

## A Man and his Work

By  
Leslie J Hurst



Artwork by Claire Willoughby

In the end Asimov went for quantity. I have not seen any final figures but it looks likely that nearly five hundred titles will have been published under his name at the time of his death on 6th April. Unfortunately for the bibliophile, many of that last hundred will be new collections of old material (or even worse in the case of material said to be edited by him, actually ghost-edited), as if Asimov wanted the credit without the effort, though all his previous efforts demanded recognition.

Brian Aldiss has compared Asimov to HG Wells - both prolific SF novelists who were also scientifically trained and major producers of popular science books; like Wells, Asimov has contributed to the atmosphere which has allowed other popularisers of science to become well known. Wells had peers like Haldane, Julian Huxley and James Jeans, and Asimov had Stephen Jay Gould, Stephen Hawking and Douglas Hofstadter, among others. Yet I doubt if the people who leave *A Brief History of Time* on their coffee tables had previously bought *The New Intelligent Man's Guide to Science*, or any other of Asimov's science guides. Asimov was a pathfinder - none of his books made a loss, but I get the impression that other writers have made the big bucks.

Asimov was born in 1920, and trained as a scientist (interrupted by war service), going through the educational mill. He received his PhD in chemistry from Columbia University in New York City in 1948, and then went to teach biochemistry at Boston University School of Medicine. In 1957, he gave up teaching, though he kept the honorary title of Professor, and wrote full time. He had published twenty-four books when he turned professional, but only six of them were non-fiction.

Of course, that is not an accurate account of Asimov's early career - he may have published only twenty-four books, but he had written the material for many more and, if his name was not on everybody's lips as it was at the time of his death, he was famous internationally. He had been writing and publishing since he was eighteen.

Asimov apparently wrote easily, though in his early days he lacked ideas for stories. He began reading science fiction early - his father (who had emigrated from Russia to avoid the anti-Jewish pogroms) ran a drug store, and would not allow Isaac to read rubbish, but allowed him to read SF pulps because his English was not good enough to realise that a science fiction magazine is not an educational science magazine. At the age of eighteen, Asimov wrote three short stories and submitted them to *Astounding*. The second and third were accepted. John W Campbell, the editor, took Asimov under his wing, as he did with many other of his contributors, feeding him with ideas and creative criticism. Asimov, while still going through college, became a writer for the

pulp, making one cent a word. You can understand why he did not immediately give up his day job.

Without Campbell, Asimov would not have been the writer he was. Campbell gave him the themes for stories - "Nightfall", for instance - while in other cases, such as the Three Laws of Robotics, these arose out of the long discussion Campbell liked to have with his authors (as both were in New York, they could meet relatively easily). Campbell also identified the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and its subject nations as a paradigm for all future history.

On the other hand, Asimov must always have felt the new-ish world of SF to be of value. No matter how well you think he succeeded in handling the subjects, he took two and made them important: the implications of automation in his robot stories, and the philosophy of history in the Foundation stories. He handled other themes as well, of course, and some things he never really touched - space journeys, alien cultures, bug-eyed monsters, supermen - yet no other author of the period managed to identify some major elements so well.

As Eisenhower replaced Truman, the economics of publishing changed. The pulps disappeared. *Astounding* became *Analog*. In 1950, Asimov published his first novel - his first book - *Pebble in the Sky*, and the first collection, *I, Robot*. He published *The Stars, Like Dust* in 1951, and *Foundation*, the first of the trilogy. In 1952, he started his series of juvenile novels about Lucky Starr, the Space Ranger, as well as putting out his first text book. From then on he never published less than two books a year, and two-book years were exceptional.

Asimov's decision to abandon academia in 1957 coincided with another major event: on 2nd October, the first artificial satellite, Sputnik 1, was launched. Asimov decided that all his efforts must be spent on educational writing. He did not publish another novel until *The Gods Themselves* in 1972.

About the economic level of his success, I am not sure. Asimov wrote that everything he produced was published, although he sometimes had problems with publishers' editors (he took the title to the editor with whom he had first discussed the idea, even if the editor had changed companies or had had periods of unemployment). On the other hand, in 1966 he engaged in the hackwork of producing the novelisation of the film *Fantastic Voyage*, which might suggest that he needed the money.

In the 1970s, he returned to writing some fiction, and some of his short stories tied up with themes from the '40s - the 1977 story 'The Bicentennial Man' is a robot story, for instance. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine began to appear as well, though Asimov had little to do with the running of the magazine.

Then in the early '80s Asimov began on another path - science fiction novels of bestseller/blockbuster size, and they did hit the bestseller lists. The first was **Foundation's Edge**, in 1982. The new mammoths followed his two themes - the Foundation story, and his cop-robot novels - and even attempted to merge the two, even though for forty years they appeared to be separate worlds. He also managed to pick up something from a new fashion in science - zeroth as an ordinal number, and gave us a Zeroth Law of Robotics.

If we ever get sentient robots or computers capable of manipulation, it would be sensible to try and build the three Laws into them. Yet Asimov never saw that it was computers that would become important long before robot-like machinery. Equally, he never saw the significance of the decline of the British Empire, which began in his teens, or of the Soviet Empire, which lived and died in his lifetime. If science fiction is such a valuable thought tool, should not one of its leading practitioners have been able to use it in some of these areas?

Sometime ago, I reviewed **Robot Dreams**, a collection of old stories with new rather inappropriate illustrations. I posed a question then that I think is still valid. I wrote:

*"A lot of Asimov's alternate presents and most of his futures are, when you think of it, pretty unpleasant. His worlds tend to be overcrowded, run by inhumane bureaucrats, controlled by large but crude computers; his frontiers are harsh and restricting, and even after the frontiers have been opened, the life on the new worlds is no better than on the old. How many people will stop and think about the implications of his work after reading this book or noticing the clash between the illustrations and the text, I don't know. But I would hope that some would. Perhaps someone could decide if Asimov is a futuromane or a futrophobe."*

At the entrance to the future, there can be one of two signs - either "Danger -Do Not Enter" or "Welcome - Please Enter". After reading Asimov, I am not sure which it should be.

## Mike Jefferies Competition

**Grafton** have kindly donated the following:

**First Prize** - A Shadows in the Watchgate T Shirt and a copy of the book  
**Runners Up** - Four runners up will win a copy of Shadows in the Watchgate

## The Questions:

- In which British City is Shadows in the Watchgate set?
- Name three other SF/Fantasy books with the word Shadow or Shadows in the title.
- Name one of Mike Jefferies previous novels

## Sue Thomas Competition

**The Women's Press** have donated 5 copies of Correspondence as prizes for the winners of this competition.

## All you need to do is:

List as many words of four or more letters as you can, made up from the letters in the word Correspondence. No foreign words, no Proper words and no plurals. In case of doubt my Chambers 20th Century is the FINAL arbiter. Please state clearly the number of words in your list.

Entries to either competition (or both) to reach Catie by July 17th

# Correspondence

**Sue Thomas  
Interviewed by  
Andy Sawyer**

Bear with me for a moment and think algebraically. There was an editor - call him Editor A - who received some books and asked a reviewer, B for short - to review them for the next issue of the magazine. Among these books was a first novel by a writer - let's call her C. B duly fulfilled his task and sent in his copy. Words like "assured debut" and "recommended" were used.

As Editor A was preparing the issue in which this review was to appear, he received a letter. It concerned a thoroughly critical comment by Reviewer B in his regular magazine column in the previous issue. It was angry at the apparent dismissal of what the writer felt was an important story. Words like "disgusted" were used. The name of the writer was identical to that of Writer C.

A quick phone call confirmed that Writer C was in fact Sue Thomas, author of *Correspondence* and one of the most glorious moments of the editor's career was the revelation of exactly who had reviewed Sue's book. Fortunately, she has a sense of humour.

*Correspondence* is a tragicomic cybernetic novel involving a "composer of fictions", and the artificial personae she creates, which become more "real" as the composer herself becomes more cybernetic, seen partly through the viewpoint of the users of the role-plays and interspersed with infobases and datablocks which all sounds very daunting, but is less so when the author's ability to use a fairly simple narrative voice to touch all bases from chilling emotional bleakness, ingamic naturalism, and wry jokiness and still assure us that we're reading the same book is taken into account. The alternate-viewpoint stances between the "composer" and her audience is one of the few cases in which telling a story in the second person moves out of the realm of the "experimental", and becomes the simplest and best way to establish this narrative voice, linking "you" the reader to "you" the Regis Tours role-player. For a book so compact (152 pages, many of which are less than a full page of text), *Correspondence* is surprisingly powerful in its emotional charge. Perhaps "surprisingly" is the wrong word: it's not unexpected that Sue Thomas cited poetic influences in this following conversation, though it's the poetry of the telling image and the unexpected viewpoint which characterizes her storytelling. I met Sue at Eastercon, where we spoke at length about her writing.

*Tell me about the Heinemann Fiction Award for which Correspondence was shortlisted.*

It was set up in 1990 in association with East Midland Arts, and the idea was to offer a prize for an unpublished novel from the East Midlands area. They had about 200 entries. They shortlisted down to six and the prize was won by Alison Anthony for a book called *Strange Malady* which is about psychiatric illness. It wasn't a science fiction competition, it was general.

*This is your first novel; can you tell me a bit about how you came to be writing SF?*

I got into writing SF because I'd always wanted to write, for years and years, and I was doing a degree as a mature student. The last year we had a creative writing course and that was when I sort of returned to it - I thought "Yeah, that's what I should have been doing all these years." And at the end of the summer various people suggested that I went on an Arvon course, so I just looked to see what course had vacancies. It just so happened that SF had a

vacancy, and I thought "I've always liked science fiction; I'll do that, then." It was taught by Iain Banks and Lisa Tuttle, and when I got there I just felt so at home, that there were seventeen other people who thought like me, and I just felt very, very comfortable. When I came back, I decided that I would write a novel, and it just came out as science fiction. So I would never say that I set out to write a science fiction novel. I think it's just the way that I think, and that was really illustrated by the fact that I felt so comfortable with SF people I'd never met in a bunch before. It just felt like home.

But I still wouldn't say that I'm a *Science Fiction* writer. I just write about things that seem to fall into that category. The second novel, which I've just finished, I don't think you'd really call SF at all. Kevin McVeigh just told me it's *slipstream*!

So that's how I came to write the novel, from going to Arvon and thinking yes, that's what I'm going to do. The fact that it turned out to be about computers was really two different strands. I started off writing about something completely different. I had a big fantasy that I wanted to move out into the countryside. We all have this pastoral-idyll idea that everything would be wonderful if we did. And I thought, well, I can't do that for various family reasons, but what I'll do is make a character and put [her] in the countryside and see what happens to her - and that way I'll find out what it is that I want. So I started writing that, and in fact the very first part of it ended up being the penultimate part of *Correspondence*, so that penultimate chapter is the original short story from which the book came. Then I was also getting heavily into computers and getting very interested in the idea of melding consciousness with a machine, and I began to realise that it was the same thing we were talking about: whether it was melding consciousness with the countryside or in some sort of cybernetic form, it was all the same thing; it was wanting to be at one with something. So I wrote a separate strand which was about computers, and the two were very, very different, but they then started interlocking. So that's how it came together.

*What do you think your influences are in SF? The back of Correspondence says Iain Banks and Gabriel García Márquez: do you see yourself as magical realist, or science fiction, or what?*

I just write what I write. I don't think there's any "category". We had a lot of problems when we were trying to market the book and do the jacket blurb as to what the hell it was. I think there are different writers who influence me, and generally they tend to be brave and interesting writers. I've liked Marquez for a very long time; I like the whole magical realism style, where you can take enormous risks with reality and the reader will still accept that. I also think he's a very poetic writer, which is important to me. And in terms of poetic style, Dylan Thomas is somebody else who from when I was very small has influenced me a lot. Iain Banks influenced me because when I was writing *Correspondence* I read *The Bridge* and, again, he was somebody who did things, who took risks in their prose style. I'd read *The Bridge* and think "Oh, are you allowed to do that? Are you allowed to stop a chapter with a few dots and then carry it on three or four pages ahead? Are you allowed to have people interrupting the story?" It's that sort of style that I'm interested in more than the content, because I put the content in but I'm interested to see what other people do stylistically. That's why I like Julian Barnes; he's another influence.

*Any other writers that you feel have influenced you or that you particularly admire?*

Particularly SF? Joanna Russ I find very interesting indeed; I like her work. And whether you'd call it SF or not, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* I like very much. Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden* I thought was superb. I tend to make a distinction between books that I read for pleasure that I really enjoy, and books that I read "professionally", that affect my own writing, and they tend to be actually quite different. Italo Calvino, an Italian intellectual, I suppose has affected my writing quite a lot.

*You're talking about SF in terms of the "literary/ideas" side of things rather than jumping into a spaceship and going off to conquer the universe.*

Yes, I quite like that. It's reading for different purposes, isn't it? In terms of a good story *The Child Garden* is the best story I've read for ages.

*Correspondence is unconventional in terms of the begin-at-the beginning-and-go-on-to-the-end school of science fiction writing, isn't it?*

It's really difficult to know how to make the bridge. The book that I'm working on at the moment... I want to make it like one of those hypertext computer books where you can enter the text at any point and then move from them to other parts. That's really difficult to do with a book that starts at Page 1 and goes through to Page 300 or whatever, but I'm very, very interested in finding a way to do that, so I think of *Correspondence* as being more of a collage of ideas than a story.

*Being published by The Women's Press has its own sort of ambience about it - do you find that people are approaching you as a "feminist" writer?*

Yes, they do...

*What do you think of that?*

Well, it gets me work and gets me exposure, but I would hesitate to call myself any sort of "feminist" writer or "science fiction" author or "woman" writer; I'm just a writer, and so if people come to me and say "We'd like a feminist perspective from you," I'd say "Well, I'll give you my perspective." But I don't know the polemic and the ideology to be able to give them what they think is a feminist perspective. I'm not skilled in that way.

*It's not as though The Women's Press were a sort of down-home, right-on, radical outfit in quite that way; they're very open.*

Yes, they are. But if you're making a TV programme about something and you want a "feminist perspective", you'll ring up *The Women's Press* because it's a good place to find people who are in touch with that. But it's difficult to be labelled - just because you're a woman writer - as a feminist writer in the same way as if you happen to be black you're labelled a black writer.

*How did The Women's Press come to publish Correspondence?*

What happened was I got an agent first - Clarissa Rushdie at AP Watt. She offered the book to Sarah Lefanu, who was running SF at The



Women's Press, and Sarah said probably the best thing an editor could ever say. At that point, the book was mainly in the first person, and Sarah said "I think it's nearly there, but I think Sue could afford to be even more courageous." So we then took the book back, but instead of rewriting it, we put it in for the Heinemann Fiction Award, to see if it would win - which it didn't, not quite. So then I took the chance of rewriting it in the second person, which is what I really wanted to do, but I didn't think anybody would be able to take it. And I inserted the "tour guide" because I think by that time people needed it as it was getting a bit complicated. I made a few other small changes. And Sarah Lefanu took it straight away, which was brilliant.

*And it's had good reviews, in Paperback Inferno as well as anywhere else. No-one will ever believe that was not a conspiracy.*

Well, that was really funny. What can I say about that to put in print? I don't know... I swear it wasn't! But I suppose I do sometimes tend to get a bit passionate about the way that women writers are treated when they deal with certain hot subjects and I feel Sharon Hall's story ('The Birth of Sons' in *Interrzone 54*) does deal with a "hot" area, and yes, I'd still defend it to my dying day.

*Perhaps we'd better leave it there... and turn to being a tutor in creative writing: how does this involve or influence your own writing?*

It's quite different. It's something that I got into because I decided that I wanted to earn my living as a writer, and I very quickly discovered that that means not so much writing - because you don't get so much money for that as reaching other people and running workshops. I think I've learned a lot about the basics of writing - structure and plot and things like that - but the actual inspiration for my own work comes from a different place in my mind, really, not quite the same.

*And you work with local writers' groups in the East Midlands?*

SUE THOMAS

About three or four years ago a friend and I who were both getting into writing decided that we wanted to meet some other writers, particularly women writers. I'm a single parent; I've got two teenage daughters, and so for me it's quite hard to get the time to write. So we thought it would be good to meet up with some other people in a similar situation. We set up a group called "Trellis", which has grown into a network for women writers, and there are about 40 or 50 of us. We have a newsletter, we meet once a month. Though we find certain people come to meetings, certain people only get the newsletter. We also have a network listing which we distribute to agencies around the East Midlands if they want to book us for workshops, have a look at us and see the range of people. What makes Trellis quite strong is that we've always had a rule that we don't workshop our work. So what happens is that you get a really wide variety of writers - romance, historical, journalism, SF - and we've never fallen into the trap of starting criticising each other's work. What we have in common is that we're writers, but we write a really vast range of stuff.

*More of a support group than a workshop?*

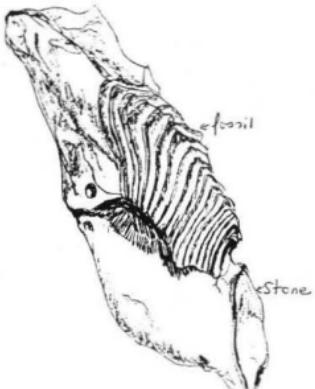
That's right, it is. We've done performances; we do readings in local festivals, for example. It's just a community of writers really, but I think if we started criticising each other's work, because we're all so different, then we'd soon start to fall out. And in Nottingham we've got a very strong network of writers' workshops: in the city alone probably about ten. I've been involved with some of them, going in to teach, running workshops, for quite a long time now. So, again, a huge range of people.

*Sue Thomas, thanks*

**COMPETITION**  
WIN A COPY OF  
**CORRESPONDENCE**  
SEE PAGE 9

# Fossils or Figments?

By  
Gillian Rooke



Ken Lake described in **Vector 163** how palaeontologists argue over the classification of specimens in the Burgess shale. I can go one step further. There is a species, or series of species in the Kentish flint that palaeontologists refuse to classify as life forms at all! I refer to the creatures known as banded or furrowed flints, or *paramesodrabs*. Are they animal, vegetable, mineral or magic? Most geologists, even those marginally interested in the origins of flint, just call them pseudofossils, dismissing them as figments of the flint's imagination.

I have the advantage of access to specimens not seen by other geologists or palaeontologists, and I can state categorically that these are very odd creatures indeed. They are, loosely, fossils, but, given that the flint is made up almost entirely of organic silica, this isn't saying much. They could be a whole animal or part of an animal. There are possible candidates, the most likely being crinoids, or unwound ammonites, possibly a missing link between ammonites and nautiloids. The creatures themselves as they appear are every bit as weird and as varied as the Burgess shale specimens.

But the same explanations do not apply. The shale is made from a silt in which bodies were deposited, and they are chemically separate from their matrix. Flint fossils are not. Fossils found in the "black" flint are made from exactly the same material as the flint itself, and there is no way of proving by chemical means that they are fossils.

But before I describe the flints I would like to take up the two points which Ken stresses at the beginning of his article:

First, the "living environment", or rather "non-living", of the Burgess fossils.

I don't think that this is odd at all, but if Gould passed over it without providing an explanation, it suggests either that he was not very thorough, or that he was deliberately trying to make the whole thing sound more mysterious.

The explanation is that in order to preserve soft-bodied specimens the deposition has to be unusually speedy, and I would assume that the shale was originally a shoal in a rapidly silting delta. In these conditions burrowers cannot operate, nor indeed any surface life. All such shoals get is a rapid accumulation of the recently deceased from other parts of the delta. Moreover currents and drift are very good at segregating everything, and it is rarely that different sized animals of the same species are deposited together, though size can vary between different species because their different shapes may give them the equivalent amount of drag in the current.

The sea is washing ancient sharks out of mud cliffs locally, and re-depositing them, all carefully sorted. Poor old Jaws may find all his big teeth clumped together on one spit and all its small teeth on another one a mile away! I wonder what future cyborgs studying the strata will make of sharks' teeth from tropical seas mixed with the fossils of temperate fauna.

I am not sure why Ken takes up the second point. Perhaps it was the words "A chemical process not yet understood" that grabbed him. Most fossils are altered; in fact they have to go through at least one chemical transformation to merit the name. If the surrounding matter is non-organic even a bloodstain could theoretically fossilize! I don't know the constituents of the Burgess shale, but it has got to be less organic, and more inert, than the fossils themselves. So, the fossils can go through chemical changes without their affecting the surrounding material, and these changes, especially

opalization often make the fossil stand out clearer, and in more visible detail, even when it was laid down! Ken asks whether the replacement of "The original carbon by silicates of alumina and calcium" is unique.

I don't think so Ken. Authigenic replacement of carbon by glauconite and calcite is also found in flint. One might expect a transition from one to the other through the profile. I think the problem here is that in this day and age it is difficult to believe that there can be any chemical process which is "not yet understood". But chemical processes in rocks have one extra ingredient, called time. This makes empirical proof of any hypothesis impossible, and all geological proofs become a painstaking process of building up evidence, and the even more painful process of logical reasoning on the basis of this evidence.

Let us move now to the taxonomy. How could so many animals so different from any later phyla have suddenly arrived at this place and point in time?

Well, other early deposits have a few anomalies. There are just more of them, or apparently more of them, here. The further back in the fossil records you go, the patchier they become, for the obvious reason that they have had more time in which to be erased by earth movements. Add to this the fact that they are not continuous anyway, being only laid down as a result of "happy" accidents, like a bog at the bottom of a cliff, a douché of muddy ash from a volcano, or rapid silting and tilting - and if you also add the popular "saltation" theory of evolution, then you are more or less there, without the necessity for divine or Terry Pratchett interference.

One very telling point that Ken made was that Gould did not appear to realise that the fossils were three-dimensional. Well, flint fossils can be found badly cracked or dislocated, but the dislocations always follow those of the stone itself. When the flint hardened it did so round perfect specimens retaining their original shape. The only things that get separated are the spines, which the flint seems to like to play "spills" with.

So, when you measure the width of a squashed fossil like the Burgess shale fossils you are measuring half a circumference. If I section a flint sponge I am measuring a diameter or chord. And the shape of the animal is plain. A squashed animal is much more difficult to reconstruct.

And there is another important corollary. When an animal is "squashed", bits of its insides get squeezed out, and it looks as if in the Burgess shale people have been interpreting viscera as continuations of the animal itself. What they think is a head could actually be a stomach. And "tentacles" could be internal tracheation ejected from spiracles. It is hard to believe though that they wouldn't have realised this!

Although perhaps not so very hard. Scientists love to suspend disbelief more I think than the rest of us (well perhaps not more than SF fans). I was recently astonished as to how far they were willing to stick their necks out over this crop circles business! It wasn't until nearly the end of the program that the present revealed that there had never been one authenticated circle! I.e. none of the teams on overnight watch could categorically state that any circle had been formed by non-human agency.

At least we don't have this problem with fossils.

Given the facts stated above I don't actually think that the shales represent that much of a mystery. Certainly not compared to my flints, but then I suppose I am biased.

Flints are a magical stone to start with, always associated with man, and revered and loved for their weird shapes and useful properties. Perhaps this is why some shapes and properties even weirder and more aesthetically useful than most, sort of got overlooked.

I suppose at this point I ought to describe these weird and wonderful creations of or in the flint. There is a baffling amount of variation, but the salient features are a large poorly defined funnel, nautilus or bicycle saddle shaped "head", a very well defined banded scooped curve closely resembling the neck of a zebra, and a "body" horizontally banded for most of its length, and tapering out, often to nothing. There is often a second unbanded area half way down and occasional appendages, but their appearance does not follow a pattern.

The illustration is of a solid 3D specimen. The front of the "animal" is all there, and only the tail is missing along with part of the stone. This magnificent "fossil" is lovingly wrapped around an ordinary homely bulbhead flint to a thickness of about 1 of an inch, enclosing half the flint completely with its "head". A sort of lithic condom.

*Paramoudras* are not always tiny animals. They can be taller than a man. So it is quite astonishing to think that such noticeable and relatively common formations should not have aroused more interest. What is especially odd is that they appear both as external sculptures and internal paintings, the latter in black flint, which has undergone the full gamut of chemical changes and has thoroughly digested all other fossil material that was in it. Tests are only preserved if there has been an "airlock" around them, which is quite common. But the black flint does not preserve the interior structure of any animal - except the little Zebras, and these it shows in amazingly sharp detail.

Those who study flints argue therefore that these are not fossils. Fine. I too would like to believe this. But what they don't seem to see, is that the alternative is far, far stranger. If they are not fossils, what the hell are they? No-one has put forward a theory for these UFOs (work it out), so I will.

Flint is made up almost entirely from an organic soup of once living things. Moreover some young flints actually formed around living things, mainly sponges. Since these sponges are made largely of silica, they could actually have been fed and partially "digested" by the flint soil while still alive. So, when the stone hardened it would have the "memory" of life in its molecules.

So what I suggest is, that the flint is extrapolating from the morphology of sponges and urchins, and is trying to build blue prints for higher animals according to some preferred vision of its own. The Zebra necks are the bits that move, and the flint has to concentrate on getting these right because it is rather difficult to achieve movement in a silica-based lifeform.

If you don't believe my theory, at least you have to believe that as pseudofossils the Zebras represent a mechanical structuring of the environment a good deal more complex than anything Lisegang had in mind, and the question is, if they can copy and shape the substance of the stone, outside the stone itself, as in the 3D Zebra, inventing more stone stuff no-one knows how, and shaping it according to their own *idee fixe*, what might they not be capable of producing? We may be looking here at a mechanical process of a structural complexity greater than any before discovered.



Artwork by Peggy Ramsden

Kev McVeigh interviewed Mike Jeffries at Fantasycon in November 1991. Kev speaks first:

*I haven't read the trilogy, *The Lawmasters of Elandium*: Elandium comes into *Glitterspike Hall* briefly, is there a link with the first three books, or is this just the same universe?*

There was a link because at that period in my work I didn't feel confident to start something completely new, so I took one character through. The link is tenuous.

*The character Krann comes into the previous books?*

No Krann didn't come into the previous books, because he was a baby. So in other words he wasn't at all conscious of that world, or where he lived. He grew up there, but he didn't have a part to play in the trilogy at all.

*So it's just a case of not feeling sure about branching out somewhere new.*

I'd written three books, and they were fairly successful - well, I suppose very successful, in worldwide sales - and it's a big step to start something new when you've spent a long time working on three books.

*You seem to have started writing relatively late.*

Yes, I was nearly forty when I started.

*You'd never actually tried any writing until...*

Nothing whatsoever.

*So the first thing you tried to write sold.*

Within a fortnight of finishing it, to Collins. No rejection slips; they bought it straight away.

*Did you realise at the time that's probably quite unusual?*

Well I've since been told there's a one in 3000 chance of that happening off the street without an agent. I had no idea it was like that when I did it. I had no contact with the literary world whatsoever.

*So, having found this out later, you're perhaps more overviewed by it than you were at the time?*

I think if I'd known that I'd never have written the first book, *Road to Underfall*, the first part of the trilogy.

*Did you plan it as a trilogy? Or did it just grow?*

No, I wrote the first book to stand on its own: Collins bought it, and they said "Can you make this into a trilogy?". I said "Can you pay me money?", and they said "Yes". And so I wrote a trilogy. I stretched it - no, I didn't stretch it, that's an exaggeration - I then wrote two more books for that particular world and that story.

*Did you read much fantasy?*

I'd read Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* books, and I had obviously read Tolkein; I think I'd read one of the Eddings books. But no, that was all. I wasn't particularly a fantasy or a sci-fi reader. I'm sure I'd read some Aldiss and one or two others at university.

*It's interesting you mention Peake. Certainly *Glitterspike Hall* is very much more *Gormenghast* than *Lord of the Rings*.*

Yes, but it was only after I'd finished *Glitterspike Hall* that I realised he had been a strong influence on me. I'd read him twenty years before I wrote it. My first wife took most of my books with her when she left, and so I hadn't realised that I'd read it until years later, when I saw other copies in a bookshop somewhere and thought "Oh yes, I've read that."

*That's often the way with the deepest influences, I think.*

That's right, they become subconscious.

*Despite the dark, dingy city, dirty streets and such like, you've got little elements of humour: I mean the hedgehog that they follow to find their way through the streets - it's silly, in one respect. These moments that make you smile occasionally, highlight the grimness of some of the rest of it.*

Well, the hedgehog wasn't really as ridiculous as it seems: I can see what you mean. But the hedgehog used as a spindle around which to wind the thread, because the spines stop the thread falling off... it's a sort of a primitive tease, really.

*But when they're all expecting the Beast to come into the Hall, and the hedgehog comes in first... you know: "that!".*

Oh yes, that's just cranking up the action a bit, I suppose, and the atmosphere and the tension. At the time of writing *Glitterspike Hall*, I was very excited about that project, and very afraid to step out of the world I'd just spent with three books. I think *Glitterspike* and its sequel *Hall of Whispers*, because that was only a duology, and will only ever stand as a duology... it was quite a frightening experience to write that. But I came out of the end of that feeling I really wanted to write something that I could actually reach out and touch; I wanted to write some fantasy in a world that was real enough for the reader to touch, and the reader could identify with. I felt that much as I'd really tried to research Gnarlsmyre and the city and Glitterspike Hall and make it something that held together as a realistic society, with its dirty streets and its medieval ecology, I wanted to write something that was modern, which I couldn't invent the fantastical for, that I had to use the very fabric and framework of the world that exists around us.

*Norwich.*

And that was a bigger challenge than I ever imagined. When I presented it to my publishers as a synopsis, they weren't initially very excited about it; they said we'd rather like another traditional fantasy, maybe a new world, maybe something to the west of Elandium, just beyond Gnarlsmyre... and I said, "No, I want to write this story about Norwich." Eventually, I did manage to convince them, and I think the end product is certainly well worth all the effort that went into it. But it was a challenge.

*And so all the places you describe in *Shadows of the Watchgate*, it's real Norwich?*

Oh yes. The Watchgate itself doesn't actually exist as a building. I'm sure there are the remnants of the watchgates of the city left. The building itself that I put in Elmhill isn't there,

# Mike Jeffries

Interviewed  
By  
Kev McVeigh

but there are old, galleried buildings that it could have been. The door comes from King's Lynn. The pillars in the illustration on the front and on my frontispiece come from Clifton House, and it's an amalgamation of the two. But then that's fantasy isn't it? The streets are not topographically correct: they are all there, and all the streets mentioned do exist, and they are all within the old part of the city, but they're not necessarily in the order that is in a streetplan. There is no museum on Elmhurst to burn down, but there could be.

*Perhaps there should be!*

Well there should be, and probably there will be now I've done it! the taxidermist came to the launch, and he wasn't too pleased. He said "I'm nothing like this person you've depicted, you know." And I said "Well, it was your shop..." because there is a taxidermist in Norwich, just off of Elmhurst - I won't give the name of the little courtyard, it wouldn't be fair, that I call Goatsheds Alley - and I did get the idea for the story standing in his shop. He has children, and I was standing there browsing through his wonderful collection of animals, and I heard this rush of footsteps across the floor above, and I thought "What if these animals come to life, what if they're up there..." and that was where the story began.

*The names, Ludo Strewth and Tuppence Trilby, they look at first glance artificial.*

Yes but what do they look like at second glance?

*Then you think, they have some significance, somehow.*

Right, well I'll start with... Tuppence: my wife's sister, when she was born, her father said, "Oh, another girl, she's not worth tuppence"; and the name stuck and she's still called Tuppence now. So I do know somebody called Tuppence.

*Oh, I'm not denying that they are genuine names. They're... uncomfortable names.*

I think it fitted the character. Because she, in a sense, had to fight to prove the worth of herself. In fact I do make that quote in the book that my father-in-law made, at one point I think, about not being worth tuppence... Americans also have wonderful names. They don't have the same strict pattern of names that we tend to use here in England, and it would have been a perfectly acceptable name there. I do know a German showjumper called Ludo something-or-other. That's where I got the name for the taxidermist. And my uncle - I was brought up in Australia - his favourite word was "strewth": everything was "Strewth, Mike, will you please leave that rattlesnake alone and come here? Strewth, will you stop picking up that spider?" and I suppose that word always stuck with me, and I was waiting for a book in which I could use it. I don't think it would have fitted the traditional fantasy stories, and somehow it fitted Ludo perfectly.

*The thing I liked about his character and his shop was... there's a definite sordidness about him and the shop, I think...*

It was a very sordid place, and he had a sordid character. He was isolated by his own madness, by his eccentricities. He was a victim of circumstances, really.



*Madness and evil, they're not often portrayed well. I was impressed.*

Well, that's nice of you to say so. The evil, I felt, for him was an accidental by-product. His isolation, his loneliness, and the desire to continue to recreate the beauty that he was beginning to lose touch with was what drove him to produce the magic, and the magic he accidentally happened to choose was very evil. He became as much a victim, as Tuppence, as Deck, as all the other characters in the story. In a sense I felt he was a great innocent. Pathetic. Like you see a bag lady on the street: you step round her, don't you? You don't go up to her and say: "Here you are darling, have a pound"; you don't put your arm round her shoulder and chat to her. She is isolated by the situation she has created for herself, or circumstances in her life have created. This, I felt, was the pattern of Ludo's life.

*There's that element of tragedy in Gnarlsmyre.*

Yes with the father, the king...

*He goes quite insane*

Yes, with the madness of possessing, of keeping what he already possesses. In Ludo, the madness develops through his passion to keep re-creating beautiful things, above everything else.

*You work for the fire brigade.*

We run a voluntary fire service.

*That's an element of your life that's crept overtly into the books - obviously elements creep in in other ways with all writers - have you ever had any thoughts about writing about some of the other things you've done, the show-jumping, the life in Australia...*

There's a lot of knowledge of horses in the trilogy, and a lot of people I've known I've written characters around in the Gnarlsmyre series. I think it's easier to put them in this sort of book. I mean Dec is a real person, who lives in our village, and he rides on the fire engine. When I'm in a tight spot in the dark, he's the guy I want to be with, because he'll look after me. I'm very inadequate on the fire engine; I only do it because I'm there full time during the day working on my stuff and able to respond to the alarm. If I come to save you, God help you! I don't say that, obviously, to my victims, but it is in a sense true: I'm not a very...

I'm sure they'd rather have you than nobody!

Well, that's right, and often I'm all they're going to get, so they have to make do with it! But I create the things in my head, and there I can be a hero, but it doesn't necessarily mean that in real life I'm capable of doing the same things. But I have drawn very heavily on Dec for the character I've written. He is shorter, he has slightly less hair, and he's slightly fatter than in the story, but he's basically...

*Heroes have to be tall and dark and handsome, don't they?*

I don't think Tuppence would have looked at him if he'd been the person that lives in my village. No matter how good his character or his personality was, she just wouldn't have wanted to be with him. But the skeleton of the person that I wrote about is in that person, the fabric is there, that created that character.

*And Tuppence, then, as you implied, isn't a perfect heroine. She has her snobberies and her...*

Is there such a thing as a perfect heroine?

*Not in real life, no, but often in fiction.*

That makes fiction fairly shallow, if you have someone perfect. I think it's more interesting if the doubts are there; it makes the person more three-dimensional. I think one of the things about Tolkien's, or Mervyn Peake's, characters is that they have more than one facet to their personality. And I've tried to give this to Tuppence, to all the characters in my book.

*The illustrations: how long have you been drawing and illustrating?*

I took an arts degree in the sixties, having worked in mortuaries and all sorts of other peripheral jobs - not because I had an interest in the macabre: because I had an interest in earning money, and it was the only job I could get at the time.

*It's the sort of thing writers traditionally do.*

Yes. It was just a job. I worked in advertising, as a graphic designer, a lecturing artist, that kind of thing. I went to Goldsmiths' at New Cross, which is London University, and did a four-year course in illustration, taking illustration and graphic design at special level; went on and did medical art, working in cancer research for some time, and a little bit of work for TWA and Shell and BP, and then I went on to teach school for fourteen years, as an art teacher, taught in prisons and whatnot, and then became a rider, professional horseman, and then when I gave all that up I wrote my first book. I've always been an artist, since I was like a kid. I did seventy illustrations for the trilogy, which Collins didn't want to buy; they then

realised when *Glitterspike Hall* was about to be published, one of their then directors in marketing happened to see the illustrations and said "Christ, we were mad not to buy these. Can you do ten for *Glitterspike*?" And that's how the illustrations began. Now I've done thirty altogether, including *Watchgate*.

*And the covers, as well?*

No, Geoff Taylor's my cover artist. But I always give him the designs. He works very closely on them with me. I'm fairly colourblind, I suppose it's crazy to go to art school if you're colour blind, but then I'm heavily dyslexic and I write books: I don't think you should ever let anything stop you, if you want to do it badly enough.

*So how do you cope? Your wife does a lot of heavy editing with you, I believe.*

Yes. She puts the words the right way round, and the sentences the right way round. She doesn't alter the story: we work together and we talk about it; I write it down, hand it to her, and if she says "What does this bit mean?" I'll go over to her desk and look. I think a book is a tortuously slow process, getting from my desk to hers, out of the word processor, to my editor, Jane Johnson, and then back to me for rewriting, and then out to the public in the form of a book.

*Do you have a good relationship with your editor?*

Excellent. She is the best editor I have ever had to deal with; she's wonderful. No, she's 300%, not 100%; she's brilliant. I've been thrilled with the response from her to my work. But then the whole of Grafton's, since moving across, have been totally behind everything I've done, and very supportive.

*They're obviously pushing *Watchgate*.*

Oh yes, they are. Well, I think they feel that it is different enough and good enough to warrant a place out there in the marketplace.

*The thing I did want to ask you about is that you've got magic in it but it could - if you take the magic away - almost have been a mainstream horror thriller.*

Yes, it could. But then I'm a bit opposed to how... you're pinned like a butterfly to a genre. I write about love, hate, sex, violence, greed, and I happen to use magic; to use fantasy to do it, but I'm still expressing all the things you'll find in any mainstream novel, I think. I suppose I like the element of the fantastical in my work, which is what keeps it on the fantasy shelf, rather than part of the mainstream.

*If you're not reading fantasy and horror and suchlike yourself, what do you read?*

Wilbur Smith, Dick Francis... I do read Steve Donaldson and ... I read a little bit of everything. I sort of hop from book to book. I have a pile of books: Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*; I've got a Ramsey Campbell there, Steve Gallagher - the pile is endless, and there's a great pile of research books for the new work I'm doing now anyway.

*Your influences, I suppose, are just anything and everything? You've done so many things, you've read so many things...*

I know it's a dangerous thing to say, but I think

that if my work has a strength it's the fact that I'm not heavily influenced, because I came to this writing business as a great innocent, and hadn't wanted to be a writer for a long time, I wasn't trying to imitate a style, I wasn't trying to be like somebody else or recreate the world somebody else had already done in a better way, I just wanted to write the story I wanted to tell. Not inhibited by the mechanics of grammar, or the mechanics of English.

*So what comes next?*

Well, next year's book's already done, which is a cross-modern and traditional fantasy together, which was very difficult to do, but I think it's a very successful mix. And I'm now writing another very dark fantasy, set in Norwich again, called *Stone Angels*. What comes after that, I've no idea. But that's '94's book, so...

*Plenty of time.*

Collins are already starting to ask me: "What's next, Mike?", and I've said "Well, when I've got an idea after Christmas for you I'll sell it." Because I normally sell it least a year, two years ahead.

*Do you have a set routine for working?*

Yes. I go into the studio between 8.30 and 9.00 and I work through till 5.00, 6.00, 7.00 in the evening, on the literature. If I'm also illustrating, I'll then work on until 10.00 or 11.00. It depends, as late as it needs really.

*Does it ever get you that you want to work all night to get a particular scene?*

No, I can honestly say it doesn't. For me, I feel there's a set amount that's going to come out of my head in a day, and once I've done that I can squeeze more out but I normally tear it up the next day. So I've learned that when I get to that set point in a day when I feel that I can look in the mirror again and I'm honest about having done a day's work, it's best to go and have a pint of beer. Or shopping, or whatever.

*Thanks very much Mike Jefferies.*

Pleasure. Thanks. Glad to do it.



**COMPETITION - Page 9**

A film of Professor Stephen Hawking's book **A Brief History of Time** was shown on Channel 4 over the May bank holiday weekend, together with a prequel detailing how the film was made.

Both were compelling. Hawking thinks that the book's popularity is due to the public's need for hero figures. More likely it is because he, a genius who has overcome crippling disability, has become fascinating to the public, both as an extraordinary human figure and as a symbol of modern physics, with its bizarre and awesome concepts. But it is understandable that a man given two and a half years to live in 1962, who has subsequently advanced cosmology in leaps not much smaller than Einstein's, should see himself in heroic terms.

Errol Morris' film was very sympathetic to its subject. Its dual narrative, on the one hand a biography of Hawking's life, on the other selections from the book and associates commenting on his ideas, made it easy to stay with; if you knew nothing about physics there was the human story, and if you knew physics there were both stories. In an article in the *Observer*, Morris said that, viewers would not learn anything substantial about physics from the film, but that he could give an idea of the people and the concepts, and that was enough. Hawking originally imagined the film to be a tour of modern physics given life by computer graphics; that idea was quickly scotched; computer graphics are nice to look at, but they can pall, as can even the most bizarre physical ideas and concepts if they fly in too large a quantity at the viewer.

One concept that emerged was geometry. Hawking, like Einstein, is a man who thinks in terms of shapes. Although his concept of imaginary time and a universe that is finite yet without boundary has, by some, derided as a mere geometrical transformation, it has the same quality of scope that Einstein's work has. This came across clearly in the film; glimpses of equations a, starscapes, pencil drawings of black holes and creation events, all these served to emphasise the spatial vision that characterises modern cosmology. The only jarring point was an excerpt from Disney's **The Black Hole**, to illustrate the fact that science fiction deals with black holes.

Hawking has developed a new set of mental tools. These tools are not verbal; he is restricted to a computer vocabulary. The sense of isolation that pervades him, though he is constantly attended by nurses, accentuated by this 'alternative mind' he has been forced to develop, as well as by his difficulty in communication, and by his almost inhuman power of concentration. It is as though he wills himself to continue his life.

This feeling was confirmed by Hawking's family recalling what he was like as a boy and as a youth. He was, again like Einstein, an intellectual misfit; alternately near the bottom or the top of his class, brilliant at Oxford, yet possessed of an air of lassitude; almost of *enouzi*. He described these early years as being "bored with life". It was only after the discovery that he had Motor Neurone Disease, and his meeting with and subsequent marriage to Jane Wilde, that his ability in theoretical physics became focused. He described this time as the revelation that there was work he could do.

Hawking's mother also gave the impression that, without his disability, and the mental change this brought about, Stephen Hawking might not have progressed as far as he has in cosmology. (Though there is no doubt that he was exceptional at Oxford and Cambridge; friends decided that, far from not being in their street when theoretical physics was concerned,

Hawking was not even on their planet.)

The impression gained of the Hawking family was one of mild eccentricity tempered by high intelligence. Errol Morris, interviewing Hawking's mother and two sisters, teased out stories of a boy slightly apart, yet very active and intelligent, and with a strong sense of wonder. Astronomy figured largely in his early years, and no doubt these times were the foundation of his later interests. But there was also plenty of physical activity, and later, when Hawking was at university, he was a cox in the rowing club, giving an impression of somebody both physically active and brilliant; a paradox highlighted by the continual sight of his wasted body in a wheelchair.

Of Hawking's physics there were only extracts from his book and sketches of his ideas. No sustained theory was given. Probably none could have been given. Instead there were computer simulations of what happens to watches when they approach black holes; the slowing of their apparent time, their disappearance from the point of view of an outside observer. Some time was devoted to Hawking's idea of a finite universe with no boundary (a similar geometry to that of the surface of a sphere) and of his assertion that there need not have been a beginning. The Big Bang, it was said, implies a first point - the beginning of space and time, pictured as the apex of a cone. Hawking however, thinks that this pointy apex should be smoothed out into a hemisphere, giving no creation point; much as the north pole is merely an arbitrary point on our globe with no physical reality. Time, on this model, is smeared out into nothingness as all matter and energy are compressed; and this makes a sort of sense, if time is seen as a property of assemblies of particles. These assemblies become increasingly chaotic as the Big Bang is approached, and perhaps at that point lose their property of being assemblies altogether.

For Hawking there is a Big Bang, but there is no first moment, and no need for a creator. When he speaks of "the mind of God", in his much quoted last paragraph, he means the universe. (I feel it was rather unfortunate that he used the word God, since it is loaded with far too much religious meaning to be of any use in such discussions. Religious folk have leapt upon this opportunity to claim that Hawking, the arch-physicist, is really, a theist).

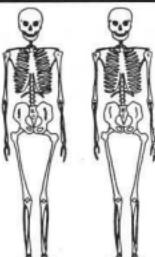
There was an intriguing glimpse of Hawking's earlier mistakes. While developing his ideas of time, entropy and the origin and fate of the universe, he thought that, when the universe was in its contracting phase, time would be reversed, allowing such things as smashed cups gathering themselves off the floor. There was an article in *New Scientist* to this effect. But later this was shown to be wrong. Graciously, he admitted his error.

Another theme running through the film was Hawking's computer generated voice. In 1986 he had a tracheotomy, leaving him unable to speak. An American devised a speech synthesizer for him. This monotonous voice and the sound of Hawking operating a hand-switch, popped up throughout the film, a sort of icon of his utter dependence upon others. Morris' film left the impression of isolation. Hawking, cradled by his wheelchair as if he had no bones, cannot be reached by ordinary human communication. Perhaps in compensation for his physical condition, his mind has created a model of the universe that allows us to visualise it a self-consistent. Perhaps the sense of wonder evident in Hawking when he was a boy has aided this particular vision.

As for the comparisons with Einstein, I think these are not too far off the mark. .



## Everything (Almost) Explained by Steve Palmer



# Reviews

**Edited By  
Chris Amies**

## Body of Glass

**Marge Piercy**

Michael Joseph, 1992, 406pp, £14.99

It is the mid-21st century. Humankind lives under domes to protect from the storms of postnuclear radiation and countless uncontrolled sun. In the free town of Tikva, under attack by the state homeomutants of Yakamuro Shiken, a scientist is building robots designed to protect the people of the enclave. He has built nine already, from Aleph onwards; the tenth, Yod, not only mimics the human in appearance but also surpasses it in mind. Unfortunately these cyborgs have a lamentable tendency to kill people, and Yod is no exception.

Bubeh Malkah has made certain adjustments to Yod, reprogramming it to give it human feelings as well, and conveniently turning it into a lover for her granddaughter Shira. She narrates much of the novel, drawing parallels with the story of the Golem of Prague, raised from clay by Rabbi Judah Loew to protect the Ghetto from the marauding goyim. Since the Two Week War burned the Middle off the map, all return to Israel and the former political divisions in Europe again a reality and golems need once more to be raised from the soil. The parallels become clearer and clearer, to the point where the Golem of Prague, believed human by those around it, attempted to move itself into the human community and was dismantled. Yod, brave, sensitive, Yod, is destroyed to ensure the same thing cannot happen again.

Humankind, it seems, cannot bear very much reality. And what it especially can't bear is creating something which is above and beyond it. While Yod was simply strong and intelligent he posed no threat; an intelligent bulldozer can still be turned off. As soon as he started to have feelings, he began to blur the man-machine distinction. "Can a machine be a Jew?" is the way the question is posed, can it take "Sedekah and observe Pesachim and Jewish... perhaps you're an angel captured in a strong body?" (ch.24); or a demon, a *d'ybbuk*, which is the very word used later to describe the driving spirit within the machine.

The ground that *Body of Glass* occupies in narrative terms is the heartland of cyberpunk: the Net, implants, genetic engineering, Japanese *zaibatai* dominating what's left of the economy, houses integrated with their AIs, pollution, skirmishes with cybernetically-enhanced warriors... Ms Piercy believes this background to be common property, and she's right, what counts is the use we make of it. Tikva is a matriarchal utopia that can only exist with the consent of the world outside, which otherwise would surely crush it, just as the Prague Ghetto was, eventually, destroyed. Utopian it is, even though many of the characters (not least the Book itself) verge upon the extremely annoying. It might just be that the author can't see that and poured so much stoicism into her Utopia that she left out the healthy dose of cynicism it also needed. Where's that, and where's the humour, something that often let the Jewish community survive? Not here. That, and the insistence on repeating certain scenes and interminable *kvetching*, made me feel the novel was a little long for what it was.

This novel puts up some questions and does not really answer them; why should it? Let us chop logic outside the covers if we so wish. Malkah's reprogramming seems in the end to be meddling; she does not stop the creature's homicidal tendencies but only causes it more pain. Yod comes to love Shira and Shira's son Ari, but at the same time he cannot be part of the community; he was at first designed to patrol. A mutation that the 'creators' 'cared' for new types of behaviour' never foreseen by its creators is a threat indeed to the community's stability; Tikva was doing very nicely, thankyou, a sweet little Kibbutz *kibitzing* at the heart of blasted Norika, before the Aleph-Yod

series came along. The last thing Tikva wants is machines that can think for themselves. Non-human ones, that is.

**Chris Amies**

## Chimeras

**Christopher Evans**

Grafton, 1992, 173pp, £5.99 pb

*Chimeras* is sensitively written, well constructed and contains at least one very good, original idea, which is a lot more than you can say for most novels. I found it dreary. The central theme, charting the life and death of a great artist, is a well-trodden path and parallels with Kushner's *Thomas the Rymer* are inescapable. Such comparisons do not reflect well on *Chimeras*.

Evans's artist Vendavo works in a unique medium, and the nature of his art is the most intriguing part of his story. In this rain-washed, strife-torn world, uniformed and indistinct wraiths cluster around the sensitive. A few are gifted with the skill to shape these chimeras, to lend them a semblance of life, which sooner or later (depending on the ability of the artist) degenerates into dull stone. This is a poetic concept of some beauty, raising the question, what is artistic imagination, how does the artist create?

There is a price, as Evans knows well, and he does not cheat the reader. The answer to these questions is both mysterious and subtle. And yet, Vendavo's dilemma is neither gripping nor moving. The problem lies with the characterisation.

We have here an arm's length portrait. The artist Vendavo is seen through the eyes of certain key characters in his life: Shubi, who prostitutes herself to pay for his initial training, his wife, his brother, agent, daughter... Of these, the women are almost uniformly self-sacrificing and noble. They are idealised to the point of incredibility. Appropriately, Vendavo's most celebrated creation is a woman, beautiful and empty.

In *Thomas the Rymer* we have another account of an artist's life seen though the eyes of those around him, but Kushner also allows us into Thomas' own experience, and he comes vividly and memorably to life. We are given a few brief scenes from Vendavo's viewpoint but he remains two-dimensional. We are told that he is a womaniser but there is little eroticism in his infidelities. He never enters our affections, he speaks with no idiomatic power. It is as if he is as unreal as one of his own creations, and while this may be a useful point philosophically, it hardly makes a valid centre to a novel.

*Chimeras* is like a fable, but one curiously enervated. It is a pale water-coloured whisp of a story; delicate and rarefied as a haiku. In the right mood, on a dull autumnal day perhaps, its fading elegance might strike a chord. Otherwise, for a warm concern with humanity and a spark of wit and wisdom, try the living story of Thomas.

**Frances Church**

## Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede

**Bradley Denton**

Headline, 1992, 359pp, £4.99 pb

Picture this, you are a nerd living in Hickville and you are settling down in front of the tube to catch another showing of *The Searchers*. Instead of John Wayne you see the equally late Charles Hardin Holley, claiming to be broadcasting live from Ganymede to every TV set on earth and telling anyone who wants to know that he is the real Buddy Holly. Add to this you look a lot like Buddy, especially with your hornrimmed instead of contacts, and your late ma never said who was your father, just said he was a nice boy who died young and whose name began with C. Being a couch potato you know

what will happen when the great American public are denied their tube corn. They will go looking for someone to blame, loaded for bear, and your name and address is right there in the frame. What do you do? Right, you get on your 1957 black Ariel motorcycle, just like Buddy's, and set off for Lubbock, Texas. That's where the answers are.

Pardon me, Mr. Denton, but if I suspend my disbelief anymore it will hang me. And that's just the beginning. Coincidence, plot demanded stupidity and the just plain incredible hangs over the rest of this story like a tsunami waiting to fall, and fall it does.

So why did I enjoy reading this book? Well, I was born in the fifties and so I am a sucker for anything with a musical pulse running through it, and I'd guess Denton and I have much the same taste in music. Then there are the characters which are mostly likable and reasonably realistic--especially the cyborg Doberman who makes Amie as the Terminator seem like Bambi.

It isn't great Maybe Baby--rather than Peggy Sue--but it's still fun.

**Martyn Taylor**

## And The Angels Sing

**Kate Wilhelm**

St Martin's Press, 1992, 260pp, \$19.95

Like Karen Joy Fowler, who introduces this volume, I discovered Kate Wilhelm some years ago, as a mother of young children. Her stories were often a great comfort to me back then, featuring as they did, women who went places, did something, were somebody. In the years since, during which I have changed my life and forged my own career, I have read little of her work so that it has been with great interest that I set out to read this collection. Most of the stories included date back to the early 1970s, the other nine from 1984 onwards. Wilhelm is writer of great charm and wit, capable of delivering an enormous atmospheric charge. Generic labels are irrelevant to her work; her stories may feature gadgets and aliens, may contain complex philosophical ideas, but they are about men and women, children and parents, and the relationships between them. Many of the characters central to stories in this volume are damaged, incomplete; their lives lonely and unsatisfied leading to dead ends. Although some stories see their lead character through small turning points, leading perhaps to something better, and indeed some of the stories are cheerful in tone, I found the overwhelming weight of the book to be sad, tinged with forebodings of impending doom. Like most collections of short stories, this would be better read in small bites.

In the order of presentation the stories are:

'The Look Alike' - A story about loss, healing and the doppleganger myth. Although it works well, raising an impressive head of fearful horror, I am always slightly suspicious of narratives which depend (like the immensely popular gothic romances) on the main character's state of mind to build the fear and drive the plot. This is one of those.

'O Homo; O Femina; O Tempora' - I'm no Latin scholar; you don't have to be in order to see that this story is about men and women and the way they perceive time. Although the characters are charmingly portrayed in a manner that would be acceptable if we were only talking about individuals, it is clear that we are intended to draw general conclusions. Men are silly creatures obsessed with numbers, communists and the fate of the world, while women, who can do cooking and have babies, know what's really going on. I found this story sexist and embarrassing. I can't believe it was published as recently as 1985.

'The Chosen' - A scientific team from an overcrowded earth are propelled into the earth's far future in search of raw materials. They find a world rich in plant life, but with no insect or animal life at all. This is greatly unsettling to

the majority of the group, but enticing to one man who is tempted to stay at risk to the rest of the party. This story is rich in ideas, even if they don't all seem well worked out, and adeptly manipulates the readers' response.

'On the Road to Honeyville' - Elizabeth's father is recently deceased. She accompanies her mother in a trek back to the latter's girlhood haunts. This is eerie, nasty, understated, atmospheric horror. One of the best stories in the book. 'The Great Doors of Silence' - Cass Mercer is an attractive successful independent young woman who has difficulty in committing to a relationship, and whose family background holds a terrible secret. What is it? An all-too-common story worked out in a highly-charged, compassionate tale of fear and the courage to come to terms with it.

'The Day of the Sharks' - A story with a moral, pointing up the consequences of living selfishly. Regrets, when they come, are far too late to do much good.

'The Loiterer' - Beth is running away from the heartbreak of living with a husband who won't settle down to the stable life that she feels is essential to the welfare of her five-year old daughter Lissie. She still loves and desires her husband but has broken away to start a new life for her daughter's sake. The story centres on the mother's fears both current and those from her childhood, and climaxes as she comes to terms with them. This story is highly charged and atmospheric, but I can't say I understood all that was going on, especially towards the end.

'The Scream' - A story about how one man finds his own path in a dying world.

'Strangeness, Charm and Pain' - a thoroughly charming tale about the joys of teaching loving and watching your children grow.

'The Dragon Seed' - Cory works in a nursery, she is very good at raising plants but is retarded, she 'could not handle money or a telephone, cash register, or take an order, or talk to customers.'

When two college graduates came to work with her and one of them sees her as an easy sexual target, we discover that her skill with plants is not all that's special about her.

'For Ever Yours, Anna' - This one is special; a well-deserved award winner; an unusual, tender and evocative mystery and love story. And, if you haven't read it yet (Why not?) I'm certainly not going to spoil it for you by describing the plot.

'And the Angels Sing' - Eddie is a newspaper man, devoted to his job. A fat, ugly person he has compensated for his loneliness by filling his home with beautiful objects, his life with random kindnesses and by exhibiting a wholly unnecessary devotion to his job. Then one day he discovers an alien. He is torn between the duty to his job which requires him to report his find, and his own compassionate nature. A bitter-sweet story examining the manner in which we decide what is important in our lives.

The verdict: Wilhelm is an indispensable writer, she examines issues important to us as human beings and does so in human terms. Given the state of the world, a certain *tristesse* is perhaps inescapable for a writer of this kind. Buy or borrow this book, and read it slowly; Wilhelm should be forgiven her occasional lapses into the merely commonplace because she is capable of moments of transcendence.

**Catie Cary**

## The Winds of the Wastelands

**Antony Swithin**

Grafton, 1992, 287pp, £8.95 pb

## The Sapphire Rose

**David Eddings**

Grafton, 1992, 525pp, £8.99 pb

When I read the first of *The Perilous Quest for Lyonesse* series, I was intrigued by the possibilities afforded by Rockall, a mythical land far out in the Atlantic. Was it a reworking of the Atlantis legend? Or some "Green" paradise, where man lived in harmony with

nature? Or was it an alternative history of America without any post-Columbian exploitation? I had heard of the island encountered by hints of Rockall's contribution to World War II. Also, by Book Three, *The Winds of the Wastelands*, Rockall has become a mere chessboard, across which the characters are moved and manipulated, forever encountering - and overcoming - one hazard after another. They must be getting very tired by now; if this were a film, they would be looking very haggard indeed.

And to what purpose?

If I remember correctly, mediaeval squire Simon Branthwaite is seeking his father who fled across the sea to Lyonesse. There is mention of this aim in *The Winds of the Wastelands*, but as far as I can tell most decisions seem to be made on the basis of "What lies to the north?" - "Don't know." - "Well, let's go there then." There are some dramatic passages - the storm on the river, for example - but for the most part I found the story hard going.

Paradoxically, as I have found myself losing interest in *The Perilous Quest for Lyonesse*, so I have found myself becoming more interested in David Eddings' adventures. The narrative of Book Three of *The Elvenium* opens with Pandion Knight Sparhawk finding and using a magical gem (the Sapphire Rose) to awaken the "Sleeping Beauty", Queen Ehrlana. In due course, Sparhawk marries Ehrlana and the book ends with them living happily ever after.

But my attention was caught right at the very beginning by the preamble to the narrative: a factually presented extract from a textbook history of the land of Zemoch. There is a map (standard fantasy accessory), and plans of relevant cities - that is different. And instead of the heroes investing some evil fortress, in *The Sapphire Rose*, the "goodies" hold out against the "badies". Siege equipment and techniques are described in fascinating detail. I particularly noted the realistically cynical strategy of deliberately abandoning part of the city to the barbarians, trading real-estate for time, until the rescuing army arrives. Many of the characters are portrayed with human and humorous foibles. Sparhawk snores; I've never known a fantasy hero do *that* before.

Of course, fantasy has its place in the story (most strikingly right at the end), but it is its blend with factuality which has made me appreciate *The Sapphire Rose* most of David Eddings' work so far.

**Martin Brice**

## Hearts, Hands and Voices

**Ian McDonald**

Gollancz, 1992, 320pp, £14.99

Ian McDonald may qualify for the title of the oddest new SF writer to have come out of the 80's; he's also one of the best. *Hearts, Hands and Voices* is his fourth novel. Like all its predecessors, it breaks new ground, never returning to the same characters or background as the last. However, a pattern is slowly becoming apparent: from a tentative start in the short stories collected in *Empire Dreams* through the preceding work *King of Morning, Queen of Day* to the current novel, Ian McDonald is gradually writing a secret history of Ireland.

By this token, do not be deceived: *Hearts, Hands and Voices* has nothing to do with contemporary Realpolitik and everything to do with the subjects of the title. The key to this book is in the hearts of the titanic events which catch up the young heroine, Mathembe (who chooses never to speak, in protest against the world around her) are seen in a confused and uncertain light, refracted through her perceptions and those of the people whom she meets. Mathembe and her family are natives of a colony ruled by the great Empire across the river; an alien culture with alien technologies, hard metal weapons as opposed to the smooth, strange organic artefacts sculpted by her people.

Cultures collide and in the course of events leading up to a civil war, Mathembe and her family are driven from their home, split up and filtered through the teeming cities and concentration camps of the new republic's birth agony. With only her dead but loquacious grandfather's head for company (ensconced in a flower pot) Mathembe sets off across the damaged land, spooling by communal violence and religious strife, to try and rediscover her family and her self.

Despite the echoes of familiar history, this is no simple tale set in any Ireland of the present. McDowell is at his best in depictions of daily life in the most alien of settings. Mathembe's people are by far the most believable in their alienation so far, a strange mixture of the Rymanesque and the surreal sub-continental. He has excelled himself in this novel, creating an *ur-colony* drawn from India and Indo-China and every other victim of post-colonial strife; there are moments of acute *déjà-vu* here for every reading, a sharp reminder that the concerns of the author are a generalization of his statement about the human condition, rather than a narrowing of focus. The horrors of war conjured up by his prose are a literary echo of the art of Goya; the claustrophobia conjured up by his dissection of the semi-nationalised-trapped, heart-laden, soul-severed, limbs-exposed before the stare of a mute girl—is oppressive. This is not an easy book to read, nor should it be, but it is a serious subject seriously examined, and although I am suspicious of the author's teleology I can only proclaim it as a *tour de force*, the kind of book that immediately identifies the author as one whose subsequent work is eagerly awaited.

**Charles Stross**

## Yarrow

**Charles de Lint**

Pan, 1992, 244pp, £7.99 pb

There is a style of transatlantic novel which starts with a number of disparate characters involved in their own unconnected stories, who are eventually drawn together for the spectacular climax. This is one of those. Cat Midhir visits the Otherworld in her dreams, and the stories told to her by the people she meets there form the basis of her very successful fantasy novels. Some months earlier, a few chapters into her latest novel, she stopped dreaming. Eventually she admires her writer's block, and the reason behind it is the proprietor of the local F&SF bookshop, who responds by playing matchmaker and introducing her to a sympathetic taxidermist, who likes her books and who unknowingly has already had a mild run-in with the villain. We are also introduced to the boorish, womanising proprietor of a not very successful computer shop, his wealthy girlfriend, a financier's promiscuous secretary, a tramp, the policeman investigating the apparently unconnected deaths of four derelicts over the summer, a blonde-haired blue-eyed young man, the taxidermist's boss and his girlfriend.

Unfortunately, de Lint likes his readers to know as much as he does about his characters, so that incidental figures such as the grumpy widower who dies in the old folks' home, or the villain's nextdoor neighbour, or the supermarket cashier who finds the tramp's body, are portrayed with as much attention to detail, such as family background, as the main characters.

Is the Otherworld which Cat visits while asleep real? If so, what is its nature? Cat herself certainly believes that the people she meets there exist, and her bookshop proprietor friend is happy to indulge her. After all, where do writers get their ideas from? His companion is shattered when upon being awoken suddenly from a dream she finds Jack with her an Otherworld being: a gnome called Tiddly Mun, who wants to help get rid of the evil that is, destroying his world and killing his friends.

What of the villain? Who is he? What is he? Why is he stealing Cat's dreams? How old is

he? Why hasn't he been caught before? Many of these questions are answered in Chapter One, and we watch as ordinary people in a Canadian town in the early 1980s come to terms with, and eventually defeat, a vampire who gains nourishment from people's life essence through their dreams, rather than their blood. The question is not "Who dunnit?" but "How do they do it?"

As a piece of entertainment, this is competent enough. De Lint does not over-use "mood" adjectives. The novel is reasonably short. The time and place of the action are very clearly defined. His players tend to be stock, off-the-shelf characters rather than 100% original people, and some of the action takes place in very hackneyed set pieces. But these are small criticisms of an above-average trainride book, with some interesting twists to some very old ideas. It is not great literature, but I don't think that matters. Enjoy.

**Valerie Housden**

## Looking for the Aliens Peter Hough and Jenny Randles

Cassell, 1992, 240pp, £8.95 pb

This book is a good idea imperfectly realised. It deals with the broad concept of 'aliens'—somewhere out there in the cosmos or visiting us here on Earth. It covers flying saucers, channelling and other Aquarian topics, the Aetherius society, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence on the radio waves, evidence for planets orbiting other planets, Von Daniken, the Roswell incident, abductions and just about everything else that could be relevant to the theme of the book. Unfortunately I found it fragmented, with no unifying theme to tie the disjointed parts together. It also came across as very little information that I had not already met with elsewhere. I felt, when I'd finished reading the book, that I had accomplished very little by doing so. One part I did find of interest was the early section in which science fiction and fantasy writers were asked for their opinions: but the views of Ramsey Campbell and Rob Shaw are always worth knowing, and highlighted the lack of useful new material in the rest of the text.

The book reproduces the well-known Templeton photograph of a young girl who appears to have a spaceman standing behind her. Unfortunately, the reproduction on this occasion is so poor (a criticism which applies to the photography in the book generally) that the alien has vanished altogether, which would leave any reader unfamiliar with the photograph more than a little puzzled. At £8.95 for 239 pages this is an expensive paperback, too.

**Darroll Pardoe**

## Blood Games

**Richard Laymon**

Headline, 1992, 311pp, £15.99

## Hideaway

**Dean R Koontz**

Headline, 1992, 307pp, £14.99

Richard Laymon first came to my attention in the mid-eighties, when he was with Hodder & Stoughton. In those early days, his stories made little impact, despite Stephen King's endorsement ("...if you've missed Laymon, you've missed a treat") on the paperback covers. But over the last three years his work has become steadily stronger.

In *Blood Games*, we follow the exploits of five young women, Abilene, Helen, Finley, Cora and Vivian, from their college days through to adulthood. In college, they do to their pretentious haridans of a headmistress what we used to wish we could do. If you still remember those evil juvenile things you once dreamed of doing to your sadistic gym master or maths teacher, you will love these young ladies.

After leaving college the girls meet once a year

to go in search of thrills, an escape from their husbands and careers for a week. This year it is Helen's turn, and she has chosen the Totem Pole Lodge, a disused country hotel in which a massacre had taken place.

Laymon has done what only James Herbert has succeeded in doing with any degree of proficiency: combine humour, horror and social stigma (in this case, a woman's fight with obesity and a marriage from which she is afraid to escape). *Blood Games* is a book Laymon should be proud of.

As far as Dean R Koontz is concerned, it is difficult to be objective and critical about the man's work, but with books like *Strangers* and *Lightning* Koontz has set himself a tough act to follow. His latest offering, *Hideaway*, is concerned with psychic experiences of a man who is killed in a road accident and is re-animated by a team of surgeons. While the storyline is not new, the book could have been improved by removing the medical jargon that comprises the second half of the first chapter, and concentrating on the main character, Hatch Harrison, an antiques dealer.

Hatch, after leaving hospital under a glare of publicity, begins having nightmares in which he sees atrocious carnage. From the point of view of the killer's eye (as in *The Vision* 1977/91), is he doing the police? Would he be taken seriously? The story starts well, but the reader may be confused by the odd half-chapters about Vassago, a man who (he says) came from Hell and wants to return. In an attempt to regain entry into the world of the dead, he has created a macabre tableau of naked corpses under a disused fairground.

Sadly, Koontz takes too long to draw the strands of the plot together. It is not until page 120 that we learn Vassago's relevance. *Hideaway* contains a few echoes of Stephen King's *The Dead Zone*, the main difference being Koontz's protagonist is dead (or has been).

It is a poor follow-up to *Cold Fire*, but fans who stick with it will enjoy this book.

**Martin Webb**

## Jack the Bodiless

**Julian May**

Harper Collins, 1992, 421pp, £14.99

**Jack the Bodiless** is problematic in content and structure, coming as a surprise, for instance, that the eponymous Jack Remillard, though a catalyst, is hardly central to the story. In fact, his most remarkable attribute is revealed in the title, leaving only the mildest curiosity as to how he copes with the condition, quickly dispelled once we understand he is the most remarkable meta-psychic the world has ever known.

If Jack is not the force of the novel, is it the Remillard dynasty? The blurb suggests that a strange force, called Fury, is picking them off one by one, implying that the solution of this murder mystery forms the bulk of the novel. However, after sporadically resurfacing when other action flags, it is finally solved, albeit not resolved, in a brief flourish of action, a few pages from the end. The mystery does little to motivate the plot. Neither does the Remillard family provide much interest. Such an over-endowed, glossy, high-powered vision of perfection, already overfamiliar from *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, is inevitably destined to irritate rather than entertain. Their endless scheming moves the reader from one minor crisis to the next while the science-fictional elements are relegated to the background.

They surface in the memoirs of Rogi Remillard, the least talented member of the family and, by some opera comparison, the most mediocre, most worthless, which is not saying much. The problem with a factual memoir is that it is often a personal view of events, written by an unskilled author. This can be borne if the writer is privy to unusually interesting events and aware of their significance. Too often,

however, our informant remains firmly on the sidelines while history is created elsewhere. An intimate life so far removed endures almost the entirety of Teresa Remillard's illegal pregnancy, as she and Rogi hide out in the Arctic wilderness. Not even the fact that it is Jack she is carrying conceals the fact that his foetal activity is not half as interesting as events elsewhere.

To surmount this lack of firsthand observation, the author has Rogi insert a series of historical and scientific digressions into his memoir. Had she done this in her own voice, she would be criticised for too much explication, but an inexperienced, embedded author neatly sidesteps the problem. Harder to excuse is the confusion as to who is telling the story. Where Rogi is not privy to events, she resorts to an impersonal third-person narrator. Either, indeed both, would be acceptable had she effected the transition more smoothly, but the narrative is hesitant and clumsy.

Even Rogi's memories are not hugely interesting. Behind the domestic trivia, May sketches a fascinating series of premises which she then either ignores or mocks. Alien intervention in the affairs of a morally bankrupt Earth is so hackneyed a cliché you marvel that an author risks it yet again and this is perhaps why May feels obliged to sideline it. I regret this for, while the politicking of the Remillard clan barely raises a yawn, we have aliens who seek to raise humanity to a condition worthy of membership of the Galactic Milieu, through the imposition of eugenic practices of incredible severity and the enforcing of distinctions between operants and non-operants which smacks of fascism and racism. Genetic manipulation is normal though its ends are questionable. Yet all this passes with hardly a comment from either characters or author. The whole novel is shot through with an unscrupulous right-wing flavour which may be a sophisticated attempt to portray the reality of invasion but I can't buy it.

What we are left with is an unfocussed novel which does not fulfil either the promise of its very gripping blurb or justify the need for the other two volumes. Extraordinary carelessness on the author's part has already revealed the contents of volumes 2 and 3 and they prove uninteresting; even memoirs, fictional or not, now come packaged as trilogies, with a series title. On the strength of this novel I don't think I can raise sufficient interest to tackle two more volumes which promise to be as thin on content and over-ambitious in intent yet insufficiently supported by technical competence.

**Maureen Speller**

## The Dark Tower 3 - The Waste Lands

**Stephen King**

Macdonald/Sphere, 1992, £8.99 pb

The long-awaited third volume of *The Dark Tower* is at last in the shops. Thicker than Books 1 and 2, *The Waste Lands* is a continuation of the story of Roland (the last gunner) and his quest to rescue the exiled distant Dark Tower. What we don't know is why he is going there, and what will happen when he reaches it - come to that, the author doesn't know either. King also suggests he has doubts as to whether Book 4, Wizard and Glass, will appear: "... always assuming the continuation of Constant Writer's life and Constant Reader's interest... if readers request a fourth volume, it will be provided."

The opening pages are taken up with King's synopsis of the first two books, a pointless exercise when most who read it will have read the first two. We meet Roland, Eddie and Susannah (the schizophrenic cripple) soon after the last book ends. Roland is teaching Susannah to shoot.

One point worth making is that the reader, with the aid of illustrations, builds up a picture of

Roland and his companions, but by changing the artists for each book that getting to know the character is spoilt. I don't say any one of the artists is better or worse than his predecessor, but Roland's face and body have changed since he came on the scene in 1987. Whether it was a decision by the American publisher, Donald M Grant, or Sphere/Macdonald UK, to change the artists for each book, they didn't do the author or readers any favours.

Unlike the first two volumes, there have been no taped editions released with this book. Those who have heard King reading *The Dark Tower* will understand the personal angle, the sense of having the author in one's own living room, that playing the tapes creates. Back to the book. This volume is more imaginative than its predecessors, but in saying so I must also say it is becoming more like mainstream fantasy writing. A fantastic ending, which might be wise of King to end the story in Book 4, before it becomes a Coronation Street or Peyton Place of fantasy - less fun and more predictable.

**Martin R Webb**

## Wolfking

**Bridget Wood**

Headline, 1991, 503pp, £4.99 pb

A thick well-researched first novel, *Wolfking* begins in Ireland after the Apocalypse; here there are Glowing Lands which border Flynn O'Connor's home-forbidden territory to all but the Keepers of the Secret. Joanna loves Flynn but is forced into betrothal with pig of man.

She flees and stumbles into the Glowing Lands and through a curtain into the past of Ireland's High Kings when magic held sway. Flynn must chase after her, and has as his companions a man with the gift of telepathy and a spider-like creature they had rescued from the House of Mutants. The story is crammed with description and character, cold inhospitable castles, evil witches, lustful giants, and plenty of valour. The spider creature evokes pathos and the fate of Flynn's companion Amaigna is quite terrible; Bridget Wood pulls no punches, but whilst some of the passages begin with promise they lacked passion; especially the love scenes and the ravishing of Joanna by the wicked witch. These are minor quibbles in a good story well told. Already the sequel is out in hardback and large format paperback. Good value for money.

**Nik Morton**

## King of the Dead

**RA MacAvoy**

Headline, 1992, 286pp, £15.99

*Lens of the World* apparently related the boyhood of Zhurrie of Sordaling, whose real name was Nazhuret, meaning "King of the Dead". I say apparently, because there is no summary of "the story so far" at the start of this sequel, so I am making an inspired guess. In *King of the Dead*, we renew our acquaintance with Nazhuret, who is now twenty-eight.

The story begins with the attempted assassination of Nazhuret and his pregnant, common-law wife, Arlin. As well as searching for the person behind the assassination attempt - which resulted in the death of Arlin's unborn child - the pair are sent on a secret peace mission to avert war between Velonya and Rezhmia. Their journey to the city of Rezhmia, to meet its king, is beset with dangers, chief among them being an encounter with the warlike tribe of the Naishi, and numerous earthquakes.

In Rezhmia, Nazhuret meets his cousin, Reingish - Minsanaur of Bologhini, and heir to all the Rezhmia territories. Is it just me, or does Reingish's title sound like an Italian pasta dish? Reingish is Nazhuret's double - but dark where he is fair in both looks and nature. The two cousins are soon in conflict, and Nazhuret

becomes involved in averting treason. I was unconvinced by the peace mission plot. It seems to be little more than a device to enable the protagonists to have exciting adventures and get themselves into impossible predicaments. I would have preferred MacAvoy to stop moving her characters around on their endless journeys and allow them to develop and interact more. It also rather strained credulity that Nazhuret is related to nearly every single aristocrat he comes across.

An interesting thread running through *King of the Dead* is the interchangeability of male and female. The hero Nazhuret is vulnerable and emotional: he cries, he gets jealous, he messes up a lot - clearly a "new man". His wife, Arlin, on the other hand, disguises herself as a man and speaks in a gruff voice - she is frequently mistaken for a eunuch in consequence. Arlin is the silent type, and she hardly ever shows her emotions except where horses are concerned; in addition, she is an extremely proficient horsewoman, and an expert with the rapier. Then there is the Naishi magician, Ephen, who seems equally at home as either a man or a woman; he not only dresses the part, but seems to become it. Finally, there is the male horse named Daffodil - but perhaps naming conventions are different in the author's current abode, California. Be that as it may, it is refreshing to see fantasy stereotypes subverted so successfully.

The viewpoint which MacAvoy has chosen to use is possibly a mistake. Nazhuret narrates his memories, complete with asides, to provide a "history" for his mentor. This restricts us to Nazhuret's limited view, which imposes his formality on the people and events. Because of this we see the actions of the other characters but are not privy to their emotions. While each character is competently sketched in, some seem to remain underdeveloped. Arlin, in particular, remains a silent enigma for much of the time - a Dowhn, the jeweller. It is only when someone is really flamboyant, such as Ephen the magician, that he manages to break through Nazhuret's rather mannered prose. The plot's excitement is also curiously muted by Nazhuret's detachment; considering the almost nonstop events, this should have been full of adrenaline - and to be fair, occasionally is.

There is some fine and thoughtful writing in *King of the Dead*, and MacAvoy is really at home when describing horses. Arlin loves horses, and so do I on this evidence. She does not author. The fight scenes are very convincing: they are gritty and literally full of blood and guts. There are some interesting mystical elements to do with the cousins' two rings, and a continued thread of prophecy and vision connected to the "King of the Dead". I think I would have appreciated and understood the significance of these elements more had I read the first book. And I got a little tired of Nazhuret and Arlin continually going "in the belly of the wolf", i.e. meditating.

To sum up: MacAvoy has written a thoughtful, literate and convincing fantasy novel which could have been really good but falls slightly short. It can be read on its own, but is really part of a pair; I have a feeling that, of the two books, the first one about Zhurrie's childhood is the more successful. Incidentally, the cover blurb says that this is a series - you have been warned!

**Barbara Davies**

## Brainchild

**George Turner**

Headline, 1992, 407pp, £4.99 pb

*Brainchild* is essentially a detective story. A young journalist, David Chance, discovers that he is the child of one of twelve genetically engineered supermen. He is contacted by his father and employed to find out why four of his twelve committed suicide.

The detective hunt operates on several levels. On the level of story, David seeks the motives

behind the calm mutual suicide of C Group, whose leader Conrad, it is rumoured, may have left behind a dangerous piece of knowledge. David and his father are not alone in wanting this information, and the competition between various agencies and individuals lends a cops-and-robbers excitement.

There is a kind of detection working in the relationship between David and his father, Arthur, as David strives to find the affection he has missed in a man who has no uses for emotion. This lapses into a stereotypical cold intellect, ceasing to be a plausible character. Easily the best character in the novel is the detective/agent, Jonesy. Complex, muddled, shrewd and warm, with a sharp line in dialogue, Jonesy is the emotional centre of the novel. It is through him that the various individuals and agencies searching for Conrad's legacy are united, and it is often through his insights that we appreciate other characters. It is a reflection of the "detective novel" bias of *Braainschild* that its most influential character is an investigator.

What leaves you wondering where the science is in this fiction. Genetic manipulation qualifies as science, but not as fiction, these days, and the old story of the creation of flawed supermen is not startlingly well retold here. But what is done well is the attempt to consider the quality of the relationships which would obtain between human and superhuman. Though David might find his relationship with his father lacking in warmth and spontaneity, it is nothing compared to the effect Conrad had on individuals he came close to.

It was the strange attraction which Conrad exerted and the warm practicality of Jonesy which made *Braainschild* an enjoyable read.

**Lynne Fox**

## Dayworld Breakup

**Philip Jose Farmer**

Grafton, 1992, 366pp, £4.99

Farmer is one of those irritatingly wayward writers who are clearly capable of better than they choose to produce. He shares some characteristics with Roger Zelazny, notably a career that blossomed with the New Wave of the 1960s and has since degenerated into hackwork and the endless money-spinning series.

Earlier inventions like the Riverworld and the World of Tiers at least had a certain mythic grandeur - a river along whose banks is reborn everyone who has lived or will ever live, pocket gods and goddesses battling it out in their own private universes. They also allowed Farmer to display his own considerable erudition. Dayworld is, by contrast, quite daff; it might have made an engaging short story, but Farmer has so far spun it out into three chunky volumes, and still counting. In the future, pollution, overpopulation and depleted natural resources have meant everyone has to live for just one day a week, the rest of the time, they are "stone", or stored in suspended animation. At the end of Monday, Monday's people file into the coffin-like stoners, and Tuesday's shift is reanimated.

The whole idea falls apart quickly on examination. By comparison with the kind of revolution of attitudes and social engineering programme required to persuade the entire world's population to climb into coffins six days out of seven, a cut in the world's birthrate over a period of generations seems easy to achieve. The stoner is a gosh-wow device whose implications are not though through: it is the perfect antidote to pollution, for example.

Even within this flimsy structure, Farmer shies away from the opportunities. A scene when the entire population of Los Angeles is awoken at the same time, for the first time in thousands of years, takes place off-stage, and is only described secondhand. Yet the first half of the book is taken up with interminable cloak-and-dagger machinations, the permutations of which might have amused Farmer but which are

exhausting and crashing dull for the reader. People are lasered, stunned, treated with truth drugs, treated with anti-truth drugs; secret organisations emerge, then even more secret ones. By the second, somewhat more interesting half, the hero is coping with his multiple personality disorder; by the end, Dayworld is duly broken up, and we await the next volume.

**Martin Waller**

## Searoad

**Ursula Le Guin**

Gollancz, 1992, 193pp, £14.99

Although her publishers herald this as Le Guin's "first completely mainstream book of fiction", any devotee reading the opening vignette "Foam Women, Rain Women" will immediately recognise the hand of the writer of *Earthsea* and *Always Coming Home*. "The rain women... are tall presences of water and light walking the long sands against the darkness of the forest." The juxtaposition of title and subtitle (*Chronicles of Klatsand*) announces a thematically dualistic. The title "Searoad", which naming a street in the beach village of Klatsand, is at the same time suggestive of "the gull's way and the whale's way"; and the word "Chronicles" indicates a spread in time of the human stories comprising this collection. Title and subtitle together represent a reciprocity between people and a changing but change-resistant fragment of Oregon State, lying between wooded valleys of the Coast Range and the ocean.

The ten stories filling two-thirds of the book were first published in various literary reviews between 1987 and 1991. The preamble, and the novella "Hermes" occupying the last third, are new. All are centred on that Oregon locale. So Le Guin, over half a decade, created a cast of interacting characters whose relationship to each other and to their environment is only now fully apparent; yet each story is satisfyingly complete. Their integrated heart is aided by those familiar F/S/F devices - maps and appended chronologies. Although the Klatsand beach community, grown out of a nineteenth-century wilderness, now with its summer residences, motels and small stores, is at the narrative's focus, there are other habitations which, in involving Klatsand dwellers, define polarities or create tensions. Thus, in "Bill Weisler", the title-character, a taciturnly neurotic but sensitive potter, comes into conflict with a Portland dealer, over the ethics of selling barely detectable "seconds" as perfect artefacts. On his return from the city, Weisler seeks and half finds human confirmatory support for his stance, but more convincingly finds it in Klatsand's own ambience.... The story ends: "The light of the day was pure, flawless, a clear pale glow in the solid wall of clouds. Inside the great bowl he could hear the sand and waves made down on the beach." In "Hermes", a Klatsand girl, Jane, marries into big city life in San Francisco, separates and returns to become Klatsand's postmistress. She reflects on how she loved San Francisco. Why the return? "Only I know that I'm fixed here. My soul goes no farther than Breton Head."

Le Guin, as "Always Coming Home" well demonstrated, is a virtuoso of styles and viewpoints. *Searoad*'s opening story, "The Ship Ahoy", is a sociologically flavoured (yet humanely sensitive) account of the history and management of a motel. Other stories are more lyrical/experimental in style. Such is "Texts", a short reflective piece about coded messages incoming from the environment - "foam words lying on the brown sand... written by the erasing sea itself"; and such are the sea-fog musings of immature, pubescent child characters in the "Hermes" poet, Virginia. While Le Guin rings the changes between first and third person narration, her character-empathy makes her particularly happy with the first-person. In "Sleepwalkers", for example, she brilliantly

delineates Hannah's Hideaway Motel, its staff and guests, through a sequence of individual observations of that shared world, these ironically questioning/complementing a visiting outsider's stereotypes ("sleepwalker") judgement. The format of this story anticipates "Hermes", the major work of this collection.

"Hermes" (Heme, a family name) is a novella of four generations of women, their ambitions, disappointments, generosity, and rebuttals. It is a feminist work only in that it conveys with such strength and insight just when and how, as history rolls on, the iron of frustration or deprivation has marked these women. There is resilience in the face of circumstance and (to quote from *Tehanu*) "the indiference of a man towards the exigencies that rule(d) a woman"; but overriding all is Le Guin's feeling for the tragicomedies of transience, her perception of the human microcosm in its temporal setting. The women, each herself a daughter, lose their daughters to, or have their daughters born in other environments, but these environments - the mothers, and to the dunes, the headlands and homes of Klatsand. Backgrounds are years of coastbound movement from the east and the ranching plains, years of wars and world fairs, of bridge-building and forest-felling. A poignant symbol is the herd of elk, diminishing over the years and progressively less often seen as it passes through Klatsand's marshy creeks. An intricate individual/regional/historical pattern is established by fragmenting the four life-stories to present them in intercalated and chronologically shuffled episodes - a technique at first confusing, but soon enabling themes and resonances to merge and re-emerge. One such resonance, sounded explicitly and beautifully in the Virginia Heme sequence (and implicit in other of the daughter-mother relationships), is the Persephone/Demeter myth; and it is perhaps worth noting that *Tehanu*, in which that theme insistently reverberates, was published in 1990.

The ocean, pervading element of *Searoad*, is overwhelmingly masculine at times, at times mutable, fluidly feminine. Its Foam Women "lie at the longest reach of the waves... billowing, trembling under the wind, flying, gone, till the long wave breaks again." In Virginia Heme's "Persephone's unknown daughter" fantasy (evocative of more than one *Earthsea* motif) "Uncle Ocean" is seen as a man-eating, chaotic dragon, driven by white-maned horses; but, as the breakers roar in, the King of the Sea (the old mad devouring king, as her grandmother Jane had called him) and Persephone's daughter both turn to foam. "The waves broke on the sand, broke around the chariot, broke in foam, and the woman was there, the girl, the foam-born, the soul of the world, daughter of the dust of stars." Even beneath those stories nearest to "psychological realism" there lurks such a fabulist's vision, personalised the dialectic of chaos and renewal, shaping history and drama out of the often ruthless interchange and interpenetration of those polarising states.

**KV Bailey**

## By Bizarre Hands

**Joe R Lansdale**

NEL, 1992, 242pp, £4.99

Joe Lansdale's *By Bizarre Hands*, a collection of short stories, starts off slow and far from gruesome. "The Pit" and "Duck Hunt" are pretty weak as far as horror stories go. The praises written on the cover led me to believe I was holding a volume by the next Edgar Allan Poe or James Herbert. While some of the stories are reasonably good, this book was a disappointment. Not only did the majority of the tales fail to stir me, but one in particular, "One Fat Side of the Cadillac Desert with Dead Folks", was vulgar to the extreme. Dead Known how much work goes into writing even a short story, it pains me to say this, but this book should never have been published: poorly written ("by bizarre hands", no doubt),

and poorly edited - if indeed it was edited.

In contrast, another collection, **Dark Voices 3**, showed more promise from the start. As with all anthologies, I found myself checking the list of contributors for familiar names, and found several: Masterton, Morris, Laws, Copper, Campbell, Masterton's offering, '5A Bedford Row', is at first almost pornographic in sexual detail, but as the story unfolds the criticism becomes tension; a horrific discovery is made by the narrator who, alone and broke in Brighton, falls for a seductive unmarried mother occupying the flat below his own. There is something familiar about the plot, but told in Masterton's style it survives the retelling.

In Basil Copper's 'Academy of Pain', we are led through a wealthy man's private torture chamber. After learning that his wife is having an affair with her doctor, Cartairs invites the doctor to his home for the weekend. Cartairs is a genial host, but he has a sadistic streak. Having offered his guest every courtesy, Cartairs drags him and... I'm sure you can guess what's to come. The reader will become engrossed in the tension, knowing the doctor's fate and praying he escapes. Sadly, the story fails to shock as the best horror tales should; as most of the others in this collection do.

There is one story that I personally felt was worth the price of the book: 'He Who Laughs' by Stephen Laws. What appears to be no more than a practical joke soon develops into something hideously evil. Again, a vaguely familiar plot, but Laws keeps the reader intrigued without giving anything away until the last full-stop. After reading this tale and Laws' latest novel, **Darkfall**, in the same week, I am of the opinion that this man is set to become one of Britain's masters of terror in the not too distant future.

**Martin Webb**

## And Disregards the Rest

**Paul Voermans**

Gollancz, 1992, 256pp, £14.99

This is a gust of scorching hot desert air, flying in from the other side of the globe. This is a powerful first novel, which I recommend to all you noble Englishmen.

Set maybe ten or twenty years from today, the title is drawn from Paul Simon's song, 'The Boxer': 'A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.' Paul Simon and Dire Straits melodies echo throughout, forming a haunting soundtrack to a story woven around two lonely people, searching, ever searching...

The hero is Kevin Gore, desperate for the answer that will silence the voices inside his head. The heroine is Gemma Stranger looking for an answer that will provide the thesis for her PhD. Both realize that the key to their shared dilemma is a piece of avant-garde theatre that ended in tragedy.

Two tales intertwine as the reader is allowed tantalizing glimpses of the solution in the form of a manuscript written about the theatre disaster, even as the main protagonists feel their way to the answer as to what, who and why.

**And Disregards the Rest**'s first strength is its Australian feel. Even without the exotic flora, the overwhelming heat, the landscapes stretching into infinity, you never forget this is not England. There's the alien slang, the shy digs at the English mentality, and the backdrop of aboriginal Concerns and Ethos. There's also an extensive cast of exotic media types, agents with purple nail varnish, producers gushing kisses and gentle bisexual giants. Rich plotting, rich casting, rich setting, all build up to an unexpected denouement of death, miracles, reconciliation, and a show that saves the world. So read it: its unique Australian flavour and carefully crafted interest will have you leafing through page by page ever impatiently moving towards that last curtain fall.

**Sally-Ann Melia**

## Burying the Shadow

**Storm Constantine**

Headline, 1992, 400pp, £15.99 hb, £8.99 pb

I found this a frustrating book: some parts moved along, others dragged. The problem was often the author telling me things I really didn't need to know, for example:

"What are your plans?" he asked. Our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a servitor who listed the food available for breakfast. After he'd gone, I said...

Well, not only did the servitor interrupt them, but this also interrupted the narrative flow, and for what? It added nothing to the plot, characterisation, or the book as a whole. I am not suggesting deliberate padding; I'm sure Storm Constantine felt every word was necessary. However I think very few stories really need 400 pages, but, as the fashion is for large books, presumably the majority of the readership don't agree with me.

The book feels well crafted. The author clearly cared; the style is crisp and clear (even the bits I don't think needed there).

The story is most unusual. Storm Constantine combines the vampire myth with that of the fallen angels, to produce the Eloim. We are clearly meant to make this association as the chapter headings are quotes mainly from **Paradise Lost**. The Eloim's nature is hidden from most of humanity; only their "patrons" know the secret, trading blood for the artistic gifts of the Eloim. The Eloim do not die, but as the story opens some are committing suicide. This is unheard of, and something must be done. The story also involves Soulscapers, healers who can enter the mindscape and soulscape of their patients and rectify the disorders causing the illness. Two of the Eloim decide they need the help of a Soulscaper, but the Eloim soulscape is so alien they must use their powers to influence a Soulscaper from the time she is initiated, in the hope she will be able to accept the Eloim soulscape, and thus help them.

The two main characters, both female, the Soulscaper Rayojini and the Eloim Gimel Metatronium, are well drawn; they feel like people. Indeed, I felt the characterisation was a strength of the book.

This is not your run of the mill fantasy. It is an unusual premise, but I wasn't convinced it meshed together fully. Nonetheless, the book is worth your attention. I suspect it is not one I will forget. For all my carpings, I liked it - but would have liked it more if it had been, say, 50 pages less.

**Tom A Jones**

## Ecce and Old Earth

**Jack Vance**

NEL, 1992, 313pp, £15.99 hb, £8.99 pb

Jack Vance is something of an acquired taste. His novels offer few concessions to literary convention, and are instead uncompromising fictions in which unreal characters pursue implausible plots while conversing in an English that no-one has ever spoken. Despite or perhaps because of this, he has produced a number of creditable science fiction novels. Unfortunately, **Ecce and Old Earth** is not one of them.

The story concerns the continuing struggle over the fate of the planet Cadwal that began in the earlier volume **Araminta Station**. For generations, the planet has been protected from settlement and exploitation by its charter from the Naturalist Society of Earth. Now a powerful faction is attempting to overthrow the charter. Determined to stop them are Glawen Clattus and Wayness Tamm.

What is usually part of the charm, just grates here. The names of his characters, for example, are particularly irritating. We have Bodwyn Wook, Spanchetta Clattus, Kelvin Kildue, Eustace Chilke, Melvish Keebles, Gilijin Leepie, Mr Buffums, and of course Titus Pompo, the

Oomphaw of Yipton. This is, moreover, a short, restrained list selected from a book overflowing with names. On this occasion, Vance's name-coining has proven duds; they are too patently foreign.

What of his dialogue? Vance's characters have never made many concessions to the vernacular, but have instead spoken a precise, ornate English. Here it breaks down into sham, becomes unintentionally comic. Consider the episode where Glawen rescues Eustace Chilke from a doghole prison:

"What happened to you?"

"Nothing at all complicated," said Chilke. "Yesterday morning two men jumped me, threw a bag over my head, taped my arms, stowed me aboard our new J-2 flyer and flew away. Next thing I knew I was here. One of the men, incidentally, was Benjamie. I could smell the fancy pomade he wears in his hair. When I get back to the Station, he is out of a job, since he cannot be trusted."

"Then what happened?"

"I heard some voices. Someone led me into a shack and pulled the bag from my head. Certain peculiar things happened next which I am still sorting out. Afterwards I was conducted to the doghole and dropped in. This gentleman here brought me a bucket of porridge. He asked me my name, and mentioned that it looked like rain. After that I was left alone, until I heard your voice, which I was glad to hear."

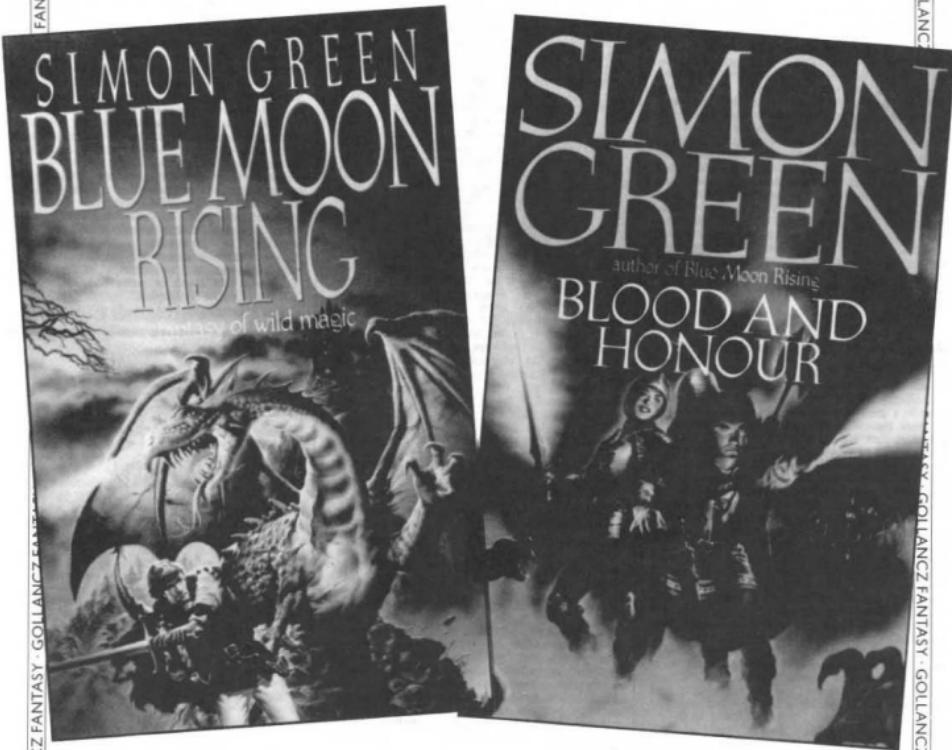
Forgive the extended quotation, but it is necessary to demonstrate the point: only an established author could write this badly and still get into print. If Vance were starting out, **Ecce and Old Earth** would never have seen the light of day. Like old soldiers, science fiction writers seem condemned to fade away, and this is a sad example of the process. **Ecce and Old Earth** is pretty bad, and only of interest to Vance completists.

**John Newslinger**



Artwork by Claire Willoughby

IN THE FIELD OF THE IMAGINATION,  
THE ONLY LIMIT IS AUDACITY



Classic fantasy in the tradition of Piers Anthony,  
Gordon R. Dickson and Terry Brooks

By the author of the bestselling novelisation of  
the film, ROBIN HOOD, PRINCE OF THIEVES