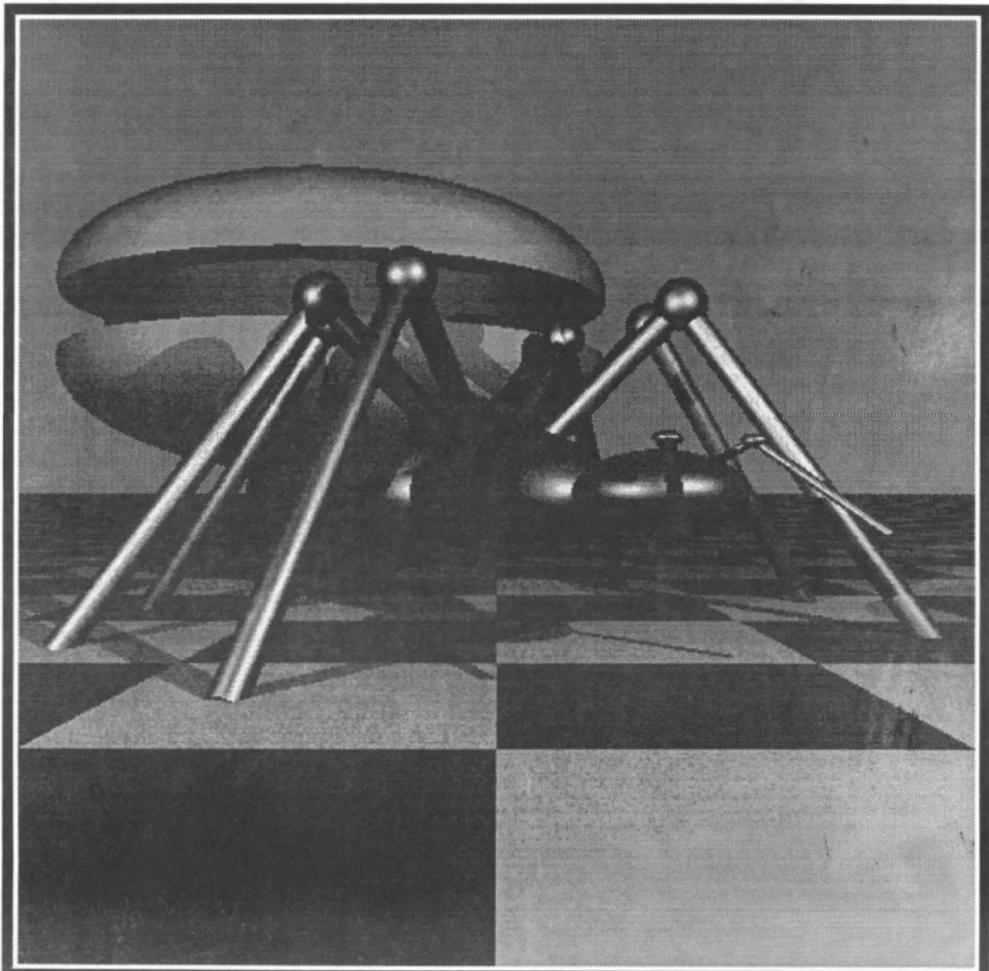


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Front Cover artwork by Steve Hill

Editor & Hardback Reviews

Catie Cary 224 Southway, Park Barn,
Guildford, Surrey, GU2 6DN
Phone: 0483 502349

Paperback Reviews Editor

Stephen Payne 24 Malvern Rd, Stoneygate,
Leicester, LE2 2BH

Magazine Reviews Editor

Maureen Speller 60 Bournemouth Rd,
Folkestone, Kent, CT19 5AZ

Editorial Assistants

Alan Johnson, Camilla Pomeroy

Production Assistants

Alison Sinclair, Carol Ann Green,

Printed by PDC Copyprint, 11 Jefferies

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Nuts & Bolts

First the obligatory, seemingly routine, apologies: I've had a nasty pernicious persistent flu, which has made me late, and, erm, I went and left the disk with the prepared interview with Graham Joyce in Derby (aaargh! BLAM!) Consider me taken out and shot. That interview will be in the next issue...

The necessary rearrangement gave me space to reprint the classic Nick Lowe article, wherein Clench racing is described, if you have never read this, turn to page 7 directly and give yourself a treat.

The beginning of a new series by Gene Wolfe is a major event, devotees of the **Book of the New Sun** will be delighted to hear that his new series looks as if it may equal that masterpiece; the first two books of the **Long Sun** are reviewed by Dave Langford on page 27, I urge you to rush out and read these books!

It is always interesting to look at SF from outside the usual British and US sources; I'm very pleased to be able to include features on Lucy Sussex, a writer resident in Australia with a strong reputation for her disturbing and unusual short fiction.

Finally, I don't think I've been receiving enough letters recently, so in order to stir you up, I present the following entry from Emma Tennant's **The ABC of Writing** (Faber&Faber, 1992, £4.99):

"SCIENCE FICTION

The great days of SF are over. The genre — which depended on the technological revolution to spark off its most fertile creators (Outer Space, Robotic Intelligences, etc.) took an interesting leap sideways with the work of J G Ballard and now is at its most fruitful in the hands of women: Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy and Ursula Le Guin."

DISCUSS...

Contributions: Good articles are always wanted. All MSS should be typed doubles spaced on one side of the page. Submissions may also be accepted as ASCII text files on IBM, Atari ST or Mac 3.5" discs. Maximum preferred length is 5000 words; exceptions can and will be made. A preliminary letter is advisable but not essential. Unsolicited MSS cannot be returned without an SAE.

Please note that there is no payment for publication. Members who wish to review books should first write to the appropriate editor.

Artists: Cover art, illustrations and fillers are always welcome.

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Front Line Dispatches

Readers Letters

Press Reports

From Andy Sawyer, *SF Foundation*

It's with mixed feeling that I read Mike Cobby's letter to Robert Hanks of *The Independent*. For one thing, while there was a certain lack of balance in the piece, you should have seen some of the other press reports, particularly from people who managed to get basic facts wrong after having them stressed verbally and written down in an initial press release and a follow-up hand-out. For another, I'm not sure that the title was Hank's responsibility. And if he has sinned against SF in his piece, his sins are those of omission, not wilful distortion.

Hanks spent an afternoon with me and confirmed details with follow-up phone calls. He was the only journalist I spoke to over that period who had actually heard of William Gibson (a fact which I thought spoke for itself: remember that at the time just about every major and minor newspaper/style mag was running features on Gibson). Yes, I wish he had quoted something from the briefing on post-cyberpunk I gave him, but what he quotes from me is, if partial, at least accurate. And I stand by the reference to Stapledon, read it carefully. The ghost of Olaf Stapledon is still working its way through at least two generations of SF writers: I think Mike is quite correct to (implicitly) argue that Gibson (though not, I think Sterling and Simmons for all their great merits) may well have a similar effect. But while I appreciate his argument, I'd think I'd be more tentative myself; first because we're talking of a different kind of influence from that of Wells and Stapledon, second because deep influence over a period of decades is not the same as fashion and third — well Gibson isn't British anyway (but read Nicholas Ruddick as excellently summarised elsewhere in *Vector* by Paul Kincaid).

I thank Mike for his concern and care in pointing out the omissions in the *Independent* article. But I did feel that Hanks — who

approached me, by the way, even before I sent out press releases — was reasonably knowledgeable and sympathetic to the ideas behind the Foundation Collection.

What seems to have come from this mini-deluge of publicity, by the way, is an encouraging series of contacts from people who have not previously heard about the Science Fiction Foundation, but are remarkably interested in the fact that it exists. Alas, no generous millionaires so far, but apart from one remark that 'A degree in science fiction won't get you a job at Ford's' (perhaps so, but what will nowadays?) comment has been favourable, even enthusiastic. There are more SF lovers out there than we think.

Viva British SF

From Keith Brooke, *Tewkesbury*

Paul Kincaid's 'British SF: an obituary' made intriguing reading — yet somehow it read like only half an article.

How is it possible to write about the demise of a country's SF by discussing only what has been and not what currently *is*? The discussion ends in the late 1970's, apart from a passing reference to *Interzone* and a vague suggestion that British SF has become little more than a poor reflection of American cyberpunk. We are supposed simply to accept that nobody writes British 'island' SF any more (and also that the island motif is, or rather was, the main distinguishing element in British SF). (Please note: I'm not trying to argue that the nature of SF in this country hasn't changed, simply that the discussion of any such changes is curiously absent from Paul's article.)

It all strikes me as somewhat incomplete. I'm not making any great claims that my own work should come under discussion here — I've not exactly been at my most active in SF in the last year or two — but surely the missing last half of the article should have looked at the likes of Brown Baxter, Griffith,

ings, Hamilton, Alderman, etc, etc and at least tried to put up an argument as to why their work might no longer be considered identifiably British in character? Presumably, it's the fault of the book under review (Nicholas Ruddick's *Ultimate Island: On the nature of British Science Fiction*) and not that of the reviewer, but either way I was disappointed that there was so much missing.

Political Correctness

From John Madracki, *Bolton*

So Philip Muldowney fears that the generic term of 'Science Fiction' is under threat from Political Correctness — well he has every reason to be worried.

The use of the term 'sci-fi' has long invited scathing derision from seasoned initiates — although in this particular case, I have always found 'sci-fi' to be a convenient shorthand for certain types of science fiction, and that the scorn with which this label is often greeted arises more out of the clichéd snobbery than ideological nit-picking. Nevertheless, it is probably only a matter of time before 'Science Fiction' too becomes devalued as an unword.

For over thirty years PC Activists have been thundering along their well-paved road to hell and have built up such a head of steam that unless they are thwarted will trample everything in their path.

One of the latest casualties is that innocuous word 'ballocock'. This together with 'stopcock' has now been deemed a non-word and, apparently, the utility service engineers have complied with this ruling without so much as bleat of protest. But we are not plumbers. We are Fans. Language is our currency, a rich vocabulary supplies the tools of our trade and I, for one, will not stand idly by and be told what words I can and cannot use.

Of course the best form of defense is attack and in this instance we are forearmed with a particular advantage. Already the letters SF can stand not only Science Fiction but also Space Fiction, Speculative Fiction and even Science Fantasy. Surely, by adding to the multiplicity of definitions for SF we can bring even more confusion to our enemies.

For example: Scientific Fable could easily be applied to the likes of Wells, Asimov and Clarke. Kim Stanley Robinson, and his ilk, could be classed as Science Fiction, while William Gibson could enjoy the label of Syber Fiction (ouch!). His imitators could settle for Synth Fiction and gross-out merchants like King and Barker could revel in Shlock Fiction, the possibilities are endless. And those who flinch at the very mention of Jerry Cornelius could lay New Wave to rest under the epitaph of pSeud Fiction. (Oh, this is getting painful) Okay, but this is war, and war is a dirty business.

The Usual

From Philip Muldowney, *Plymouth*

I popped through the letter box on Xmas Eve, just in time for me not to tell my family what SF books I wanted for Xmas. What with the mad pagan holiday — have you ever considered the idea that Xmas is really an invention of the devil? All those people over eating, drinking, having family bust ups and

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heart attacks... anyway, I have only come back to **Vector** in the cold light of the new year. Or should that be the bucket of water of the new year?

A production Editor indeed! An unglamorous job I fear. It will be interesting to see what — mug — pardon me, highly motivated, first class individual you get to take on the task. I just hope your increasingly onerous work load does not bring down the whole house of cards down on your head.

Pity about the disk you mislaid. Computers are sent to try us, well at least they can't speak back... yet. The lack of counterbalancing material did reveal how much **Vector** has become a review magazine now, even the articles — SF For Children, *British SF*, An Obituary, had the feel of reviews about them. The whole has a feel of descriptive narrative about it, rather than any incisive critical qualities. A blandness of one tone, that eternal reviews seem to have. They sum it all up in a couple of hundred words, mainly by summarising the plot. The need for more discursive material is illustrated very clearly in this issue. Still perhaps it might not be a bad idea to get your better reviewers to review some more books as the general standard is not that high. While **Vector** is good as a reference, as a secure judgement on literary worth, it is another matter.

To contradict myself! Your interviews are getting good. Kev McVeigh, the man with the roving mic. His interview with Kim Stanley Robinson, was informing and revealing. There are certain books, — Frank Herbert's *Dune* and Dan Simmons's *Hyperion* spring to mind — that you know are going to be classics. The **Mars** series is going to be one of these. So why have they been studiously ignored in the SF awards? Is it because of the leftist leaning of some parts of the book? Personally, I would argue, that the different viewpoints make for the complicated polyglot view of what life is, but that is another point. The Hugo awards over the past couple of years — the Bujold books, even the Vinge and Willis of 1993, illustrate an electorate with a curiously conservative viewpoint, does this apply to politics as well? It will be very interesting to see what comes up in the awards in 1994, because to my mind, **Green Mars** stands out heads and shoulders above the competition.

One statement that struck me as very curious, was by Ian Sales, when reviewing **New Worlds 3**. "I'm not going to explain what **New Worlds** is because it you don't know then you must have been living on another planet". Oh dear, how the years do pass. It is now nearly thirty years since Michael Moorcock took over in the May/June 1964 issue of **New Worlds** (cue for an article?) and nearly fourteen since the magazine finally shuffled off its mortal coil in the Parington version. We are distant from those times, as Moorcock was from the Campbell Golden Years. So why do we look back on those years with that tinge of awe and nostalgia? Is it just that during the late 70's and thru the 80's British SF became so moribund? Although with the whole bushel of new authors of the last few years, the position seems to have changed. The **New Wave** is old hat, and the **New Wavers** are middle-aged and old men. Such is life, and yet there is that

undercurrent of yearning for something like it to happen today. Which of course it will not, because the **New Wave** was a product of its time, that much maligned decade of the sixties! Things are so much grimmer now...

The various articles that appeared in the press, about the Foundation, and the M.A. in SF studies, were a very wide ranging collection. The crass stupidity of the Independent article, was, to give the press their due, the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps it has more to say about the decline in the quality journalism within the Independent itself. When it is easier to do a cheap skate-pan-pie, than a demanding piece on SF at this moment in time. If ever a newspaper had lost its soul... from one of the best things to happen in serious journalism in this country, the Independent has declined to a nearly bankrupt cadaver of its former self.

While we are here though, is it not curious, that the very formation of a university SF studies course should be greeted with such universal amazement? After all, college and university course on SF in the States have flourished for decades, and are an accepted part of the literary teaching scene. So while Paul Kincaid maintains that British SF is somehow wider than the genre, when anyone actually tries to take the whole of SF seriously, in an academic way, the English literary establishment finds it risible. But then, is it not typical of the class ridden chattering classes in this country.

Thanks for another interesting issue, despite what I say about the reviews. Hang in there! I hope you give your production editor.



Wanted Production Editor for **Vector**

Have you got Energy, Ideas, the commitment to work to regular deadlines? Maybe you could produce this Magazine! If you're interested contact Catie (Address/phone on inside cover), to find out more

G K Chesterton

the SF writer that

Time forgot

by Cherith Baldry

Jules Verne and H G Wells, writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, have a secure place in the history of SF, while G K Chesterton, at a similar period, has been neglected. This may be because Chesterton does not fit neatly into the genre of SF or fantasy; his writing inhabits the borderline. It may also be because Verne and Wells concentrated on new technology and possible futures extrapolated from the present, while Chesterton, in the essay which opens *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, neatly disposes of all futurologists from Verne to Hari Seldon.

"All these clever men were prophesying with every variety of ingenuity what would happen soon, and they all did it in the same way, by taking something they saw 'going strong' as the saying is, and carrying it as far as their imagination could stretch... Then the people went and did what they liked."

By deliberately dissociating himself from any intention of prophesying, Chesterton freed himself to speculate in a much more flexible way. He created his future or alternate societies to put forward a philosophy. With a paradox that Chesterton himself would have appreciated, we may respect the writing of Verne and Wells, but they remain immured in their own time, whereas I for one can read Chesterton with much more immediacy, for the issues of his philosophy are still alive.

I make no apology for finding Chesterton a writer of great power. He could be careless — at the same time as the novels he was producing a voluminous amount of journalism — but his writing has an unflagging energy. I want to explain what I think are the appealing aspects of his work, and I intend to look at four novels in some detail: *The Flying Inn*, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, *The Ball and the Cross*, and *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*. He wrote other novels and short stories with SF or fantasy elements, but these to my mind are more

successful, and show the variety of his writing. I hope people who are familiar with Chesterton will forgive me the summaries, while those who aren't will go out and look for him, even if you have to haunt secondhand bookshops to find some of his work.

The Flying Inn can almost be thought of as a mainstream novel. A high-ranking politician, coming under the influence of Islam, attempts to impose Islamic culture and art on the people of England, including laws to introduce prohibition. In opposition, Chesterton creates a group of scruffy adventurers who bring the law into ridicule through the appearance and disappearance of the Flying Inn of the title — which consists of an inn-sign, a keg of rum, and a cheese — and give the writer opportunity for picaresque comedy and some hearty satire at the expense of all the elements of his society which he hated most: the rich, officials, politicians, fashionable art and poetry and journalism, all faddists who attempt to impose their fads on ordinary people. They may wear different hats, but they're still with us today.

The Man Who Was Thursday, which leans more towards fantasy than SF, takes the form of a Buchan-style adventure; at the same time it is a study of good and evil. The hero, Gabriel Syme, infiltrates a group of anarchists whose code names are the days of the week. The leader of the anarchists, Sunday, is a man whose back view seems to promise absolute evil, but face to face is a personification of good, and the same quality runs through the whole novel. Syme is led into a series of crises which are at times comic, at times surrealistic, in which nothing is what it seems. The name of 'Sunday', the final pageant in which the days of the week become the Days of Creation, and the climax in the question, "Can you drink of the cup that I drink of?" raise specifically theological questions, but Chesterton himself always rejected the identification of Sunday with Christ, and if asked to supply a meaning would simply point to the

book's sub-title: 'A Nightmare'. he refuses to provide answers, but the questions he raises, about appearance and reality, good and evil, are still valid.

The Ball and the Cross is a novel in which debate is central. McIan, a Catholic, challenges Turnbull, an atheistic journalist, to a duel, because he insulted the Mother of God. Their duel is continually interrupted, and in their search for a quiet spot where they can fight in peace they discover they have more in common with each other than with the authority figures who do not care deeply about anything, and so see the passion of the adversaries as absurd. Framing this story is a similar debate between professor Lucifer, who flies around in a futuristic machine, and his adversary Michael, a monk who develops in the course of the novel into the archangel whose name he bears, or perhaps into a manifestation of God. Although Chesterton was a Christian, he is less concerned with Christian polemic than with conveying the idea that metaphysical truths matter; his target is not atheism, but apathy.

The Napoleon of Notting Hill is the only one of these novels to be set in a specific future: it opens eighty years on from the time it was written. It is pleasing, though perhaps irrelevant, that since the novel was first published in 1904, its action begins in 1984.

Chesterton, unlike Orwell, sees his future England as pretty similar to his own day, necessarily, since the target of his satire in this novel is the cast of mind that enthrones common sense and economic necessity at the expense of humour and poetry. (Thatcherism? Perhaps he was a futurologist after all) people have become indifferent to their form of government.

"Some one in the official class was made King, no one cared how: no one cared who."

So it happens that the elected King, Auberon Quin, uses his power in what he sees as a fantastic joke, to reinstate the ancient boroughs of London with all their medieval trappings and independence. Quin derives great enjoyment from seeing his former friends, conventional to a man, compelled to approach him in flamboyant robes and escorted by half a dozen trumpeters. But his joke recoils on him because one man, Adam Wayne, the Provost of Notting Hill, takes him seriously.

"Like a priest pointing to the altar, you pointed to the hill of Notting. 'So Long,' you said, 'as you are ready to die for the sacred mountain, even if it were ringed with all the armies of Bayswater.' I have not forgotten the words, and I have reason now to remember them, for the hour is come and the crown of your prophecy. The sacred hill is ringed with the armies of Bayswater, and I am ready to die."

Through Wayne's fanaticism, a genuine patriotism springs up and the colourful life of the London boroughs, which Quin had imposed on them as a joke, becomes established as a reality. The local grocer, looking back,

philosophises:

"I thought nothing of all the wonderful places that my gods come from, and wonderful ways that they are made. I did not know that I was for all practical purposes a king with slaves spearing fishes near the secret pool, and gathering fruits in the islands under the world. My mind was a blank on the thing. I was as mad as a hatter."

It may be passages like this, coupled with his artist's delight in colour, that have led to Chesterton's being regarded as the creator of simplistic medieval-style utopias. I believe this is a misreading. Certainly, Chesterton revels, throughout his writing, in vivid and highly-wrought descriptions of the exotic, but he is always capable of standing back from the effect he has created, and he does so here. His utopia might well be regarded as a dystopia, or simply as a metaphor for the inevitable abuse of power. Not content with establishing the independence of the boroughs, the people of Notting Hill, contrary to Wayne's original vision, attempt to create an empire. The result is the destruction of all that has been achieved.

In these very brief summaries I have already suggested some of the themes which Chesterton uses which are still relevant now. I should like to consider some of them in detail to show what use he makes of his thematic material. Surprisingly, for a writer so obviously and so publicly Christian, he spends little time in active defence of Christianity. This is maybe because in the early years of this century, he felt it needed little defence; he might have written differently today, although somehow I doubt it. Even in **The Ball and the Cross**, where the two parallel debates, between Michael and Lucifer, and between Turnbull and McIan, are concerned with the truth or otherwise of Christian teaching, this is not the main point of the argument. Certainly, Turnbull in the end learns reverence, but this is less important than the fact that Turnbull and McIan have learnt to respect each other, to discover their similarity in being among the few people who take the issues seriously. And the argument between Lucifer and Michael on the subject of faith is interrupted by the immen-

ent collision of the flying ship with the crew on the top of St Paul's Cathedral.

Leaving the transcendental to look after itself, Chesterton homes in on more mundane issues. He finds and conveys a poetry and beauty in the ordinary, everyday things of life, and because he was born and spent much of his life in London, he focuses on the city rather than the more conventionally acceptable beauty of nature, and becomes its apologist.

"... you only see the tree by the light of the lamp. I wonder when you would ever see the lamp by the light of the tree." (**The Man Who Was Thursday**)

Chesterton never loses sight of the potential romance of the ordinary. **The Napoleon of Notting Hill** is built around that idea. In **Malinali**, a novel I have not dealt with in detail, the protagonist, Innocent Smith, travels round the world in order to come upon his own house and family as if they were strange and different. Similarly, Chesterton attacks the jaded attitude of mind which cannot see how important everyday life is; in the same novel, Smith convinces a university don that life is worth living by the simple method of threatening to kill him.

The don, in his unconverted state, is typical of a large number of characters in Chesterton's writings. Chesterton fought a perpetual war against authority: the aristocracy, politicians, bureaucrats, the rich, intellectuals who separate themselves from common sense. When Lucian Gregory faces the Council of Anarchists at the end of **The Man Who Was Thursday**, Syme's only defence against his accusations is that they have all suffered just as much as he has. In the real world, Chesterton felt that men in power had not suffered enough. Over and over again he paints characters who are sanctimonious, patronising and petty. Because of the way they abuse their power, ideas which are in reality monstrously funny attain the force of law; in **The Flying Inn**, the ordinary person cannot buy a drink because inns have been abolished, though of course there are exceptions to the law, such as the bar of the House of Commons. In **The Ball and the Cross**, people have to prove their sanity, or be shut up as lunatics. And the definition of lunacy can be whatever authority — in this case, Lucifer — wants it to be.

On the other hand, Chesterton shows a respect for ordinary people, as he says in the poem 'The Secret People'.

"It may be that we are meant to mark, with our riot and our rest
God's scorn in all men governing. It may be beer is best."

In **The Man Who Was Thursday**, Dr Bull refuses to believe that the ordinary inhabitants of a French town can be in league with the anarchists.

"I knew I couldn't be wrong about the mob... Vulgar people are never mad. I'm vulgar myself, and I know."

Adam Wayne is incapable of seeing why the idea of an independent Notting Hill is funny.

"Notting Hill... is a rise or high ground of the common earth, on which men have built houses to live, in which they are born, fall in love, pray, marry and die. Why should I think it absurd?"

This is very close to the voice of Chesterton himself. He found his humour in high places; the greater the initial dignity, the funnier the eventual slip on the banana skin. **The Flying Inn** is full of incidents in which the authorities are fooled and frustrated by the unexpected activities of the Inn. In an early episode, the efforts of an arrogant land agent to evict a tenant are prevented because money from the sale of drink provides the old man's rent, yet he cannot be prosecuted for selling it because the Inn (represented by its sign) has disappeared. The agent is left seething, while,

"On the withered face of the old man Marne there was a faint renewal of that laughter which has slept since the Middle Ages."

Laughter is Chesterton's weapon. He is a very funny writer, with tones ranging from savage satire to high comedy and pure slapstick. To appreciate the humour fully, you have to read him at length; he is at his best in the long build-up of absurdity piled on absurdity, or in the springing of the cunningly laid trap. Further, the humour is there for a purpose. Readers can be left in no doubt that he hates the abuse of power; in **The Ball and the Cross** it is Lucifer who is in charge of the asylum. But instead of invective, he attacks his targets with humour, and they become at once less intimidating.

At the end of **The Napoleon of Notting Hill**, with the final battle over, Wayne and Quin confront each other. Wayne recognises that they are both incomplete: the idealist without humour, the humorist without ideals. They are the two halves of a complete person, who must combine the love and the laughter. It is no bad description of Chesterton himself.





Classic
Reprint

The
Well-Tempered
Plot Device

By Nick Lowe

This classic and witty article was brought to my attention by Dave Langford who suggested I reprint it in Vector. When I contacted Nick Lowe for permission he agreed, but requested that its age be made clear. Dave Langford provides therefore the following

* All-purpose
Footnote:

This piece started as a talk at Fencon (1982) in rather different format — eg. Clench- Searching was demonstrated in real time. Aeons later, Nick

recast it as follows for my and Kevin Smith's Drilkjis, and galactic cycles after that it became apparent that Drilkjis 7 would not appear: instead I ran this in Ansible 46 (1986). My asterisks are to remind you of time's winged chariot, and that (for example) Asimov's is very much improved under Gardner Dozois. In particular, many of us feel that Gene Wolfe's The Citadel of the Autarch did indeed meet in full the charge that the Claw is a mere routine plot voucher...

Perhaps once in a generation, the science of criticism is shaken by a conceptual breakthrough so revolutionary that the literary establishment can only dismiss it as deluded quackery. Such a breakthrough is described in these pages. If I draw comparisons with Darwin, Einstein, Lyenko, the sceptical reader may smile. Yet they laughed at Leavis; they creased themselves pink at Edmund Wilson; they barfed up gobs of lung tissue at Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. To all such shallow-minded so-called "scientists" I say: go ahead and hoot! The High Speed Train of progress makes no unscheduled stops to pick up late travellers, nor can it be tilted in its tracks.

The failure of the old paradigm is simple. There's a curious bias in the vernacular of critical discussion towards the qualities that make a book *good*. Most of the language traditionally used to describe a book's achievement has to do with its positive qualities: the plot, characterization, style, ideas, significance. Moreover, it's a bias that carries over into all those gruesome handbooks on **How To Write Totally Brilliant Novels and Win Big Cash Literary Prizes**. The reason nobody's yet become a big time novelist by reading up on Diane Doubtfire is just that all the advice in such booklets is directed towards getting you to write a book full of plot, characterization, style, ideas, significance. In short, a *good* book.

Now, it strikes me that this is completely misconceived. You've only got to look around you to realize that most books that get published are *not* good. This simple point makes a nonsense of conventional criticism, which lacks any sort of vocabulary to discuss badness in any meaningful way. And yet badness is the dominant quality of contemporary literature, and certainly of SF. All orthodox criticism can say of a truly awful book is that the characterization is terrible, or the use of the English language makes your bowels move of themselves. It fails completely to grasp that bad writing is governed by subtle rules and conventions of its own, every bit as difficult to learn and taxing to apply as those that shape good writing. But do you ever find workshops offering instruction in how to write the sort of really atrocious garbage that leers at you from every railway bookstall?

Already you can begin to understand why my theories are scoffed at by the neanderthal proponents of orthodox so-called "criticism". History will judge who has the final chuckle. In the following pages I will reveal:

- a whole new language of criticism
- the secret of success in science fiction writing

— and a revolutionary new technique of interpretation that will grant you instant and total understanding of **Star Wars**, the **Lord of the Rings**, **The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy**, and many far less reputable works.

And while I'm about it I'll propose a new definition of magic, account for the existence of Lionel Fanthorpe, and show you a way to derive pleasure from Stephen Donaldson books. (Needless to say, it doesn't involve reading them. *But* neither does it involve burying them under six foot of badger manure and napalming the lot, which you might think

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the obvious answer.)

In principle, these secrets can be exploited by anyone; but you may be interested before we start in testing your native aptitude through a couple of simple and deceptively irrelevant exercises.

1. COMPLETE THE POEM

Leonard Nimoy, currently directing his own resurrection in **Star Trek III: the Search for Spock**, is the author of two books of poems rightly considered too hot for bookshops to handle. They're distributed solely through Athena poster shops, in the same series of icky little volumes with tinted pages and silhouettes of weeds that has given the world the if anything even more deathless works of the legendary Susan Polis Schutz, the Colorado Sappho. (You must know the stuff: "Our relationship / is beautiful / because / it is ours / because / it relates / to us.")

All you have to do is read through the following (genuine) sample poem, and then use your skill and judgement to supply the missing lines from the ones that follow. (These include about 80% of the text of Nimoy's second book of poems, which by a novel inspiration consists almost entirely of excerpts from the first.) Then turn to the end of the article to find out how you scored.

First, the specimen:

Rocket ships / Are exciting / But so

are roses / On a birthday

Computers are exciting / But so is a

sunset

And logic / Will never replace /

Love

Sometimes I wonder / Where I

belong / In the future / Or / In the past

I guess I'm just / An old-fashioned /

Space-man.

And now it's over to you:

(i) *I love you not for what I want you to*

be...

(2 points for the missing line.)

(ii) *I loved you then for what you were...*

(3 points.)

(iii) *My love for you is not a gift to you...*

(1 point.) — and the hardest one: here you

have two lines to guess of a three-line poem.

(v) *I am me...*

(2+4 points.)

2. CLENCH RACING

This is a social and competitive sport, that can be played over and over with renewed pleasure. Playing equipment currently on the market restricts the number of players to six, but the manufacturers may yet issue the series of proposed supplements to raise the maximum eventually to nine.

The rules are simple. Each player takes a different volume of **The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant**, and at the word "go" all open their books at random and start leafing through, scanning the pages. The winner is the first player to find the word "clench". It's a fast, exciting game — six seconds is unusually drawn-out — and can be varied, if players get too good, with their favourite Donaldson words like wine, flinch, gag, rasp, exigency, mendacity, articulate, macerate, mien, limn, vertigo, cynosure... It's a great



way to get thrown out of bookshops. Good razing!

Let me explain the tenuous relevance of these modest exercises to my main subject. Here we have two of the most accomplished of contemporary bad writers inadvertently showing off one of the most valued qualities in their art. I refer, of course, to *predictability*. Donaldson's use of language is so repetitive and his characterization so limited to a few clumsy responses that he finds himself coming back again and again to the same beloved words, to the extent that you can predict their occurrence reliably enough to be able to leaf through and be sure of finding one almost immediately. Nimoy is even more adept in this esoteric art: his banal thought falls so naturally into clichés that you can predict whole lines at a time.

You think I'm jesting when I speak of an Art of the Predictable, but if you think about it it is an art. The grammar of cliché is a language all of its own that's never had the study it deserves. How is it that we learn to spot the ending in advance? how do we know when a particular creaky old line is about to get trotted out? how do we come to anticipate the obvious platitudinous moral the story's setting up? In the same way as we learn a language, by exposure to so many examples of usage that our brains construct, unknown to our conscious minds, an internal grammar of how they're used in practice. After you've seen enough 50s SF films on the box, you come to expect the professor's Faustian dabbings to destroy him in the end, while the young journalist hero clasps the daughter as they gaze on the smouldering wreckage of the laboratory. ("Oh Rick, it's — horrible..." — "It's all right, Jean, it's over now. The nightmare is over forever.")

And this is what I mean when I say there are rules governing bad writing that you simply have to learn if you're to become a successful manufacturer of exploitation fiction. Perhaps I ought to clarify what I mean by that last category as applied to SF: I'm thinking principally of escapist adventure stories with no particular pretensions to engage the higher cortical functions and consisting chiefly of well-worn ideas and storytelling techniques recycled more or less formulaically. But in a way that's the least interesting quarter of the field under survey, because you'll find in practice that the techniques of sf/fantasy fiction have permeated SF to such an extent that you

can observe these same rules in operation even in some jolly good books, and many more with pretensions to being jolly good. I'll be drawing illustrations from all these categories, but obviously it's the last one that intrigues me most. Predictability, you see, even though we use the term disparagingly, has become in recent years a very bankable commodity in SF and fantasy publishing. The publishers know the public knows what it wants: it wants more of the same. Safe books. No surprises. Familiar surroundings from page one. And this means that even writers with considerable literary pretensions have had to learn the Art of the Predictable as part of the basic equipment of their trade. In Gene Wolfe, who is rather a subtle writer, this only results in the occasional irritating embarrassment; in Stephen Donaldson, who is about as subtle as a lead brick, it results in contemptible gaseous claptrap. Examples follow in due course.

Well, by this stage, you're probably bouncing up and down in your seat with barely-continent excitement, thinking, "Wow, am I really going to learn to write like *Stephen Donaldson*?" I have to let you down as gently as I can and say no, it's not quite as easy as that. You have to remember that Mr Donaldson's spent years learning to produce a book so flatulent you have to be careful not to squeeze it in a public place. All I can do in the time available is to offer instruction on the first and most important element of crummy writing, which is (as my title suggests) bad plotting. I can't promise that by the time you've read these pages you'll have learned to write significantly more stereotyped characters, or that your style will have become significantly more leaden and clichéd. But I do promise that you'll be fully conversant with the many varieties of plot device, their use and function, and you'll be able to recognize and admire their handling in the works of the masters: Lionel Fanthorpe, A.E. van Vogt, and the early sword-and-sorcery novels of Michael Moorcock, to name only some of the virtuosos of the plot device I haven't space to mention in what follows.

I choose plotting as the focus of my discussion for two compelling reasons. One is that it's been a persistently underrated art in all kinds of narrative all down the ages, and has rarely come in for any kind of analysis. I think the last person to say anything respectable about the art of plotting was Aristotle, who besides some famous remarks about beginning-middle-and-end laid down a few elementary precepts like events in the story having to follow in a relationship of internal logic, and having to appear to arise out of the interactions between characters rather than being obviously imposed from above by an author. Otherwise, nobody's ever tried to explain how to plot tightly or elegantly, and the whole skill of it's tended to be treated as a rather low form of creative activity, more appropriate to Feydeau farces and TV sitcoms than to high narrative art.

There's a reason for this, I think. Up until very recently, really elaborate plotting has only been possible in comedy, where you don't mind being reminded of the existence of an author by the absurd artificiality of the structure of events. Real life isn't, on the whole,

especially well plotted, and as soon as the good plotting in a story begins to get obtrusive we lose that essential impression of a purely internal logic governing the progress of events within the story. It's only in the last few decades that serious fiction has begun to make serious reference to its own fictitiousness, which is how novels like *The Affirmation, Little Big, or If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* can come into being. Even so, you'll find that most of the highly plotted, highly self-conscious novels within and without the genre tend to be funny — as the various works of John Barth, William Gaddis, and John Sladek. It's significant that Sladek finds himself so attracted to the detective genre, about the only non-comic non-artsy-fartsy fictional tradition that still makes play with the reader's awareness of the plot as something basically artificial.

The other reason I've chosen plotting to talk about is that it's the ideal topic to illustrate my point about rules of bad writing: because, while it's comparatively difficult to formulate any very definite procedure for constructing a good plot, I hope to be able to show that there are all sorts of little rules you can follow to give you an easy, step-by-step recipe for a really crummy one.

This is the point to introduce you to the manual. In my experience, the book that has most to teach about the mistakes to avoid in good fantasy writing, and by that token the one that can tell you most about the rules of hacking, is itself a work of fiction. It's not one that's likely to be familiar to all, and I'd like to take this chance to bring it to notice; because while there may be other books I don't know about that could serve equally well, this is the one I've found to stand head and shoulders above all comparable handbooks of instruction.

It's Lin Carter's novel *The Black Star*. For all I know, every other Lin Carter book may be exactly the same. I don't know; this is the only one I've ever finished. But I've read it more times than I can say, because practically any point you could wish to make about techniques of hackwork can be illustrated from the pages of this remarkable novel, to which I'll be making quite a lot of reference in what follows. It's hard to give any idea of the flavour of this astonishing text from just a few short citations, but here by way of introduction are four passages about the same character from different parts of the book.

Niane fled down the jungle path on frantic, stumbling feet. Her gown was torn. Her slim white legs were scratched and bleeding. She panted for breath, young breasts heaving and straining against the fabric of her gown...

He hastened to untie the girl. She was in a sorry state; most of her clothing had been torn from her, although she did not seem to have suffered any injury save the insulting touch of cold, sly hands...

"Tush, girl!" the old fellow said, blushing a little at the warmth of her



words and averting his keen old eyes reluctantly from the generous glimpses of her maiden flesh rendered visible by the sorry condition of her gown...

In the crude intimacy of the cell they had shared, the temptation to touch her, to allow a comforting, soothing hand to venture an overt caress, to permit his eyes to taste the soft slenderness of her body so artlessly revealed through the sorry condition of her garments, had often been well nigh irresistible. Where another man would have yielded, perhaps reluctantly, to his need — which she as well felt — he but stiffened and grew colder, wrenching his thoughts aside from this insidious channel with distaste...

Unfortunately, I'm limited to discussing the plot. The storyline of *The Black Star* is simple enough — one might say, puerile. In the last age of fabled Atlantis, before the gods pulled the plug and sank beneath the waves that prehistoric continent that had linked Britain and the Falklands while the dagoes were still struggling with their Linguaphone courses in proto-Indo-European, Diodric the Warrior, Niane the Nymphet, and Nephog Thoon the Wizard with the Silliest Name in All Prehistory struggle against troglodytes, sorcerers, and militant anarchists to save the fabled jewel The Black Star from falling into the wrong hands, since the Gods seem to have a bit of a thing about it and will destroy civilization if it's lost. What relieves this at best "routine" (in the technical sense coined by the *SF Encyclopaedia*) story from total tedium is the fascinating use that Carter makes of plot devices in order to get the whole preposterous rattletrap of a story moving along its dried-up water-course of a road.

Here I'd better pause and clarify what I mean by a plot device. In normal usage, when people talk of a plot device they mean something in the story that's just a little bit too obviously functional to be taken seriously. The most famous plot device in recent SF is the Babel fish, the joke about which is that it's such an obvious plot device that it implies the existence of an author. But the term is a flexible one, and I'm going to use a number of more specialized terms for some of the more

specialized varieties of device. The Babel fish is an instance of the plot device at its simplest: a little bit of technology or whatever introduced into the story's world for the sole point of overcoming a little technical difficulty like the fact the characters can't speak to one another. All these FTL drives, instant translators, oxygen pills, and so forth: contrivances so basic to getting interplanetary stories off the ground that we no longer really worry about their implausibility.

This is a fairly innocuous kind of plot device, often quite institutionalized, and nothing you could fairly call a sophisticated hacking technique. For that, you have to move a level up...

"No time for words now, girl. I am sped, but ere I go down to the Kingdom of Darkness I must pass a terrible burden into your hands: alas, that it be so, but thus it must be, for I am near the end of my strength and there is none other here to take up That which I may no longer shield," he panted, and she wondered at his strange, portentous words...

(And this goes on for a page or so, then:)

He plucked Something from the bosom of his robes and thrust it under her eyes. At the sight of the Thing which he held she voiced a small cry and would have recoiled in holy awe, save that his other hand grasped her wrist again, and dragged her near.

"Girl! You know the meaning of this Thing? I read it within thine eyes... Then take it, child."

Well, of course, the Thing in question is the legendary Black Star, as we learn a hundred pages later:

"While this Thing rested in the possession of the Divine Dynasty" (ie, the good guys)

"the favour of the Gods shone upon Atlantis. No Emperor could hold the throne unless he also held the Black Star..."

Which means that the wicked Trotskyite rebels that have temporarily overrun the kingdom will be overcome so long as the goodies retain the Black Star. Notice that the only causal connection between possession of the Black Star and victory is that enforced by "the Gods", for whom of course read "the author", and you perhaps begin to see why I like to term this kind of thing **Collect-the-Coupons** plotting. It would be much too complicated to have three goodies overcome the whole usurping army, or at any rate it would be far beyond the plotting powers of a Lin Carter. So what you do instead is write into the scenario one or more **Plot Coupons** which happen to be "supernaturally" linked to the outcome of the larger action; and then all your character have to do is save up the tokens till it's time to cash them in.

Obviously, this is an artifice which lends itself particularly well to fantasy writing, and is capable of widely varying subtlety of application. I think *The Lord of the Rings*, or *Lord of the Plot Coupons*, is the chief villain here, unless you want to trace it back to Wagner and his traditional sources. Tolkien, on the

whole, gets away with the trick by minimizing the arbitrariness of the ring's plot-power and putting more stress than his imitators on the way the ring's power moulds the character of its wielder and vice-versa. But even so it's a pretty creepy apparatus, and one whose influence has been wholly disastrous. It's so easy, they all cry: you save so much energy by just smuggling a few choice plot coupons up and down the map.

Probably the most distinguished practitioner of collect-the-coupons plotting is Susan Cooper in those awful **Dark is Rising** books, in the course of which the hapless goodies have to run down no fewer than nine different plot tokens before they can send off to the author for the ending. I quote from the end of volume two:

Each of the Things of Power was made at a different point in Time by a different craftsman of the Light
(odd how these discussions of the plot always seem to be signalled by bursts of capitalization),

to await the day when it would be needed. There is a golden chalice, called a grail; there is the Circle of Signs (of which there are six separate components — very busy book, that one); there is a sword of crystal, and a harp of gold. The grail, like the Signs, is safely found. The other two we must yet achieve, other quests for other times.
(Read: two more sequels.)

But once we have added to these, then when the Dark comes rising for its final and most dreadful onslaught, we shall have hope and assurance that we can overcome.

We'll come back to Susan Cooper later on. A collect-the-coupons plotter who runs her close, though, is the inimitable Stephen Donaldson. He tends to pad more than Ms Cooper, so it takes rather more pages to collect each token; but I should think by volume nine of the trilogy he may well outstrip her for sheer multitude of the wretched things. Here's the crucial passage of insight and revelation from **The Wounded Land**, in which Thomas Covenant in a flash of wisdom perceives the whole point of volumes four to six. I've changed just one word throughout; see if you can spot what it is.

*Covenant saw.
The Staff of Plot. Destroyed.
For the Staff of Plot had been formed by Berek Halfhand as a tool to serve and uphold the Plot. He had fashioned the Staff from a limb of the One Tree as a way to wield Earthpower in defence of the health of the Land, in support of the natural order of life.*

And because Earthpower was the strength of mystery and spirit, the Staff became the thing it served. It was the Plot; the Plot was incarnate in the Staff. The tool and its purpose were one.

And the Staff had been destroyed. That loss had weakened the very

fibre of the Plot. A crucial support was withdrawn, and the Plot faltered.

Of course, the word "Plot" in all this replaces Donaldson's "Law" (with one of those significant initial capitals), and of course all Covenant has to do now, in a Lensmanesque escalation of the same basic routine he went through in previous volumes, is go chugging off to cut himself a new Staff of Plot from the jolly old One Tree. I don't know how he does; four volumes was quite enough, though I hear there's an amazingly silly bit with limpet mines in the fifth. Another fantasy first.

At any rate, there's another variety of ingenious plot device that's closely related to collecting the coupons, and that's **Saving the Vouchers**. As the name suggests, it's an activity that can amount to the same thing if your plot tokens happen to have an effective power of their own. A Plot Voucher is one of those useful items that is presented to the hero at the start of his adventure with a purpose totally unspecified, that turns out at an arbitrary point later in the story to be exactly what's needed to get him out of a sticky and otherwise unresolvable situation. ("This voucher valid for one [1] awkward scrape. Not transferable." Young Dirk stared at the object in bewilderment. "But what does it do?," he asked, putting it reluctantly away in his pouch. "Ah," said the old sage, "I am not at liberty to tell you that. But when the time comes, you will know its purpose.") There's a glorious chapter in **The Wounded Land** again where Thomas Covenant is visited by a rapid succession of ghostly characters from previous volumes "to give you gifts, as the law permits". Some of the gifts are a bit of a cheat, as they consist only in explaining bits of the story that don't make an awful lot of sense. But there are two authentic plot vouchers thrown in. "When the time comes," says one character, "you will find the means to unlock my gift." "He may be commanded once," says another of the handy sidekick with whom he saddles the hapless Covenant. "Once only, but I pray it may suffice. When your need is upon you, and there is no other help." Hohum. In the event, of course, the ink is scarcely dry on the page before Donaldson decides Covenant's need is upon him and there is no other help. He also turns out to take a decidedly flexible interpretation of this once-and-once-only clause.

I do recommend the use of plot vouchers to your attention if you're at all interested in writing multi-volume epics of quest and adventure, because they're terrifically easy to use and the readers never complain. You can issue your hero with a handy talisman of unspecified powers at the beginning of volume one, and have him conveniently remember it at various points over the succeeding volumes when he finds himself surrounded by slavering troglodytes or whatever, with no obligation to explain it until the series proves unsuccessful enough to require winding up and the loose ends tying. Last anyone begin to suspect a veiled allusion to certain 1982 Nebula-winning novels, I'd better rip away the veil and confirm their suspicions; because if **The Claw of the Conciliator** is anything more than a general-purpose plot voucher I'm buggered if I can see what. I confess I haven't got on to the

Citadel yet", but can it really explain this kind of thing?

My lungs were bursting; I lifted my face to the surface, and they were upon me.

No doubt there comes a time for every man when by rights he should die. This, I have always felt, was mine. I have counted all the life I have held since as pure profit, an undeserved gift. I had no weapon, and my right arm was numbed and torn. The mungapes were hold now. That boldness gave me a moment more of life, for so many crowded forward to kill me that they obstructed one another. I kicked one in the face. A second grasped my boot; there was a flash of light, and I (moved by what instinct of inspiration I do not know) snatched at it. I held the Claw.

And then the Claw bathes the scene in its wondrous radiance and Severian slips away while the beasties are held rapt. What a let-down, eh?

Even so, there are looser and lazier plot devices even than the voucher system. Don't forget that if you're absolutely stuck for anything for your characters to do, you can always issue them with little plot algorithms prescribing a sequence of more or less pointless tasks that they have to fulfil in order to achieve their end. Again, this is particularly easy to do in fantasy; an ancient prophecy, more often than not couched in mock-archaic verse, is quite sufficient. Susan Cooper is good at this; she's got a little rhyme to summarize the whole series in twelve lines, a shopping-list of plot tokens that encapsulates in a mnemonic nutshell the entire plot of the story, such as it is.

But perhaps the supreme manifestation of the plot deviser's art, and the point where hackwork shades over into genius by virtue of the sheer inspired brilliance with which the unwritten rules of short-cut plot creation are exploited, is what I call the **Universal Plot Generator**. A Plot Generator is a device written into your scenario that will create further stories as often as required, while laying no restrictions whatever on the kind of story produced.

What I think have to be the two most brilliantly conceived specimens of this rarest and most sophisticated of all plot devices came up in the DC comics of my childhood. I don't think this is any accident. The comics have always been a kind of elephant's graveyard of antiquated plot devices, because they've always existed under the three ideal conditions for the genesis of bad plotlines: serial format with regular publishing schedules, an audience of adolescent Americans (arguably the lowest form of intelligence in the galaxy), and truly terrible writers. DC Comics in the middle sixties were a particularly good age in this respect, because while other comics publishers like Marvel and Warren were making tentative sallies into character drama and the adult market, DC were still resolutely plumbly away in search of the lowest common denominator of all narrative art,

under such marvellous hacks as the legendary Gardner F. Fox (whose novel **Kothar — Barbarian Swordsman** ranks among the classics of contemporary prose sculpture).

Anyway, the first of DC's great plot generators is almost too famous to warrant discussion, except that the sheer artistry of the concept is rarely appreciated in full. I'd like you to think for a moment about *red kryptonite*. There was a time when the hues and varieties of kryptonite were being boosted daily by new kryptozoological discoveries, but I think green and red were the only ones that really lasted the course. The effects of red kryptonite, you remember, were as follows. Each individual chunk would affect Superman, but no-one else, with a completely unpredictable effect that would last exactly forty-eight hours. He would then revert to normal and that particular chunk of red K could never affect him again. The brilliance of this only becomes fully apparent when you translate it all into plot terms; because forty-eight hours happens to be the average timespan of a story in a DC comic. What red kryptonite amounts to is a random element in your scenario that can be brought on at any time and introduce any daft plot idea the writer happens to have kicking about; and at the end of the story it will disappear from the continuity as if it had never been. It's hardly any wonder that the series, at its peak, got through chunks of red kryptonite so frequently that someone calculated that, for that amount of planetary debris to arrive on Earth by chance alone, the original planet Krypton must have been about the size of a galactic supercluster.

There was only ever one plot generator among the many in DC's repertoire that ran red K close for sheer elegance (though others like *Dial H for Hero* proved more durable), and that's the little-remembered Idol-Head of Diaboli. The Idol-Head appeared for a couple of years as the continuity in the Martian Manhunter stories, and the way it worked was this. The Idol-Head of Diaboli was an ancient bust created by an evil sorcerer way back in the mists of flashback, and I think it got unearthed by an unfortunate archaeologist or something. Thereafter, it would drift around from owner to owner or float around in the ocean and get washed up from time to time (which was odd, since the Head was carved from stone); and every full moon the top of the head would flip open like a Terry Gilliam cartoon and a new evil would be loosed on the world. Invariably these magical banes would find themselves being tackled by the Martian Manhunter, till eventually he managed to run the Idol-Head to ground and destroy it. What I so admire about this invention is that "every full moon" corresponds almost exactly to the publishing schedule of a monthly comic book, so that you had, written into the set-up, a device that would generate a guaranteed new villain or disaster every issue while leaving the scripter total freedom to fill in the details.

Sometimes, however, even the Universal Plot Generator breaks down. You may find, in the course of hacking forth your masterpiece from the living pulp, that none of the plot devices hitherto catalogued, none of these little enemies to the Muse, will keep the story flowing; that you can think of no earthly reason why the characters should have to go

through with this absurd sequence of actions save that you want them to, and no earthly reason why they should succeed save that it is in the plot. Despair not. If you follow the handbook, you'll find there's a plot device even for this — when the author has no choice but to intervene in person.

Obviously, this requires a disguise, unless you're terribly postmodernist. The disguise favoured by most writers, not unnaturally, tends to be God, since you get the omnipotence while reserving the right to move in mysterious ways and to remain invisible to mortal eyes. There aren't all that many *deus ex machina* scenes where the Deity actually rolls up in person to explain the plot to the bewildered characters, though Stephen Donaldson permits an extended interview at the end of **The Power that Preserves**. What tends to happen instead is the kind of coy allusiveness coupled with total transparency of motive you meet, for example, in **The Black Star**, where our heroes most improbably find a light aircraft in which to escape the overrun city:

It was by the most incredible stroke of fortune that Diodric and the Lady Niane should have stumbled upon so rare and priceless a memento of the gods.

Or perhaps it was not Blind Fortune, but the inscrutable Will of the Gods.

One thinks irresistibly of Gandalf's famous words to Frodo when explaining the logic of **The Lord of the Plot Devices**: "I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker." Frodo, unfortunately, fails to respond with the obvious question, to which the answer is 'by the author'.

But actually, it's not always necessary for the author to put in an appearance himself, if only he can smuggle the Plot itself into the story disguised as one of the characters. Naturally, it tends not to look like most of the other characters, chiefly on account of its omnipresence and lack of physical body. It'll call itself something like the Visualization of the Cosmic All, or Seldon's Plan, or **The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy**, or the Law, or the Light, or the Will of the Gods; or, in perhaps its most famous avatar, the Force. Credit for this justly celebrated interpretation of **Star Wars** belongs to Phil Palmer: I'd only like to point out the way it makes sudden and perfect sense of everything that happens in the film. "The time has come, young man, for you to learn about the Plot." "Darth Vader is a servant of the dark side of the Plot." When Ben Kenobi gets written out, he becomes one with the Plot and can speak inside the hero's head. When a whole planet of gaudy guys gets blown up, Ben senses "a great disturbance in the Plot."

If this is beginning to sound like a silly little verbal game, think again. The reason you can play this sort of game in the first place is that the Force is one of those arbitrary, general-purpose, all-powerful plot devices that can be invoked whenever convenient to effect whatever happens to be necessary at the time. The only ends it serves within the logic of the story

are those of the storyteller. And the reason you can decode so much of SF in this kind of way is that SF is absolutely addicted to craftsmanship; and while science fiction may not offer any more opportunities than any other kind of fiction for crappy character-drawing or crappy prose, the scope for crappy plotting is virtually limitless.

For instance, Lionel Fanthorpe could never have existed in any genre but SF. Everyone knows, I imagine, the story of the Flaz Gaz Heat Ray, perhaps the most outrageous *deus ex machina* ending in all literature. There the heroes were, stranded deep in an enemy sector of space, surrounded by an entire enemy fleet with the guns trained on them, when the maestro realized all of a sudden he had only one page left to finish the book. Quick as a flash, the captain barks out: "It's no use, men. We'll have to use the Flaz Gaz Heat Ray." "Not — not the Flaz Gaz Heat Ray!" So they open up this cupboard, and there's this weapon that just blasts the entire fleet into interstellar dust. One almighty zap and the thousand remaining loose ends are quietly incinerated. Where, but in SF, could you do that?

So this is your challenge. I hope that in revealing to you, for the first time in cosmic history, these precious secrets of how to tune and play your very own plot devices, I've given you some idea of the opportunities that exist for the talentless hack to abuse, short-change and exploit the mindless masses who put up with this garbage. Armed with this knowledge, you are now equipped to go out into the world and create science fiction stories worse than any that have gone before them. The earth will tremble; railway book-stalls will burst with the fruits of your type-writers; small-time hacks like the vermin who write for **IASFM** will be swept away by the new torrent of drivel! From this moment on, the universe is yours. The only thing that could possibly stand in your way would be a united resistance from those contemptible snot-gobbed arthropods the readers themselves, crying out against cheapstate exploitation fiction and demanding stories that can hold the road without the author stepping in every five pages to crank the bloody things up. Small chance of that, eh?

I leave the future of SF in your hands.

May the Plot be with you

- 1-4 Alas! better stay dead
 5-8 Could do well in vanity publishing.
 Don't despair.
 9-12 Not bad, but damaging traces of poetic sensibility probably bar you from the big time.
 Try ghosting for Palenque Strong.
 13-15 Excellent. The nation's greetings cards manufacturers need you.
 RATE YOUR SCORE...
 (V) ... You are you. / Our love is us.
 (IV) ... It is a gift to me.
 (III) ... I miss what I am when you are here.
 (II) ... I love you now for what you have become.
 (I) ... but for what you are.
- ANSWERS TO COMPLETE THE POEM QUIZ:

My Lady Tongue and Other Tales

by Lucy Sussex

recommended
by Steve Jeffery

Compass
8

The cover, with the severed head of Keith Richards flanked by two digitised women's faces set in a blood spattered 1600's lace tapestry panel, suggests this might be horror. It isn't, but the stories inside are as enigmatic, and sometimes macabre, as the cover design. In fact the illustration, credited to John Quinn and Millennium, relates to the final story of the collection, 'God and her Black Sense of Humour.'

Lucy Sussex is New Zealand born, has lived in France and England and moved to Australia in 1971. She has previously written childrens' book, **The Peace Garden** (1989), and edited **The Fortunes of Mary Fortune** (1989)

The collection opens with a feud between two artists, Oliver and Philip, in 'The Man Hanged Upside Down'. The double punning title of the story reflects the artistic pun which sparks the feud when Oliver exhibits a drawing of Philip as being less than well-endowed ('He always was a little prick'). The more vindictive Philip, in a large sponsored exhibition based on the Tarot, repays the insult by exhibiting Oliver as *Le Perdu*, the Hanged Man of the title, attaching in the process an aboriginal curse, a *puri* to the painting. But the significance of a Tarot card may itself be reversed by which way up it appears.

'Quartet in Death Minor' is an enigmatic tale of lost hopes. Death, a beflowered lacework skeleton, is followed through deserted night-time streets by an odd trio of haunted characters: a dancer Magda, an old widower Ghoulief George, and a deranged and barefoot Greek woman.

The strange setting of devolved future ghosts in a film taken at a bleak deserted

beach is the setting for the almost Ballardian Montage b'Gabriel on forced sabbatical from a government research station stumbles on disturbing evidence that their work has (or will have) disastrous uses.

The Australian landscape is most evident in 'Red Ochre', which is set in the post-gene-war ravaged future of the Australian outback. Ian, a worker for a touring circus, is bitten by one of the animals during a riot at one of the shows, and is sent to recuperate at 'mutie' hospital. Under the guise of occupational therapy, he starts to take the mutie inmates out to the nearby aboriginal rock paintings where they begin to rediscover a disturbing and liberating identity for themselves in the magical depictions of the rock paintings.

'Go-To' contrasts the often confused and misguided politics of an animal research worker and differing factions of Animal Liberationists, all engaged in the search for an IQ enhanced cat stolen during the bombing of a research establishment. In this, as in the later title story, Sussex refuses to take the easy option of clear-cut heroes and villains of the piece. Her characters act out of what they see as well-meaning intentions, but their methods are just as often tragically flawed and suspect. The piece stops just short of some very awkward questions about our relationship with and treatment of animals.

Three stories stand out in particular. In 'The Lipton Village Society', a group of unemployed youngsters have become obsessed with the creation of a carefully detailed fantasy world in a room above an antiquarian bookshop, and into which they can escape from a world that holds no promise for them. 'My Lady Tongue' is a love story set inside and out of a segregated

feminist utopia. The sparky and lovestruck protagonist, Raffy, breaks her leg on an expedition outside, and is rescued by Benedict, an isolated farmer of quasi-legal intoxicants and Shakespeare addict. Under their enforced proximity during Raffy's recuperation, an accommodation of sorts, even a measure of mutual understanding, comes about. Here, in the politics of the gender war and mistrust is neatly set against the internecine rivalry and scabbing of the Wornyn-only enclave, between hardcore and softcore, radical and liberal, young and old. As in 'Go-To', Sussex doesn't deal in easy stereotype targets but observes, with a mixture of sharp edged clarity and affection, the very human foibles of her characters.

The final story, 'God and her Black Sense of Humour', is another wry and bittersweet examination of one of the seedier aspects of sixties sexual revolution and counter culture, that of rock groups. The story is given added topicality by the recent death of Frank Zappa, who had a particular fascination with this aspect of rock culture.

Cecilia, a feminist and freelance journalist, is drawn back to the failed idealism of the sixties as she researches an article on the infamous Plastercasters. A chance phone call brings the arrival of Grubbs, a former Zappa roadie and a wealth of contacts among the collectors and acid-head casualties of sixties nostalgia. Instead, she discovers something far more disturbing in a series of pictures of two aloof and beautiful women who appear, in minor variations, in photographs of the rich and famous across almost two centuries.

Very definitely recommended, it you can find a copy.

Lucy Sussex

Interviewed by
Colin Steele



Where are you now and what are the vibes?

Seated in front of the computer, in the front room/study, which is freezing despite the heater labelled '4th Brunswick Browne Pack' (I kid you not!). At my feet are various cardboard boxes full of printer paper, a half-finished novel, the submissions and correspondence for a SF/fantasy anthology for teenagers I'm editing, and also a small leopard-spotted tabby cat. The vibes are as usual.

When did you begin writing and why SF? — or do you regard your writing as "not" SF?

I started with a dream c. 1977, wrote it down, and then expanded it into a story. That it was SF was purely accidental, but I kept on in that vein. My third story to be published. 'The Lipton Village Society' got a fan letter (my First!) from a children's editor, Margaret Wild, suggesting I write for adolescents and younger. I did, with a largely realist novel *The Peace Garden* (Oxford, 1989).

In the meantime I had landed a job as a University researcher, working for Professor Stephen Knight (now at Simon de Montfort University, Leicester). He was interested in crime fiction, so I there I was, getting paid for reading scads of detective writing from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some of those books were exquisitely bad — I recall one in which the plot hinged on two unrelated characters called Maxwell and Boswell Smart, and of course the incriminating letter had been torn across, so all you could read was "... well Smart".

But I digress. When enough of this material had sunk in, I suddenly found myself writing crime fiction. At present I'm working on a novel of which large chunks are a fake detective narrative from the 19th century, but which also involves fantasy elements and the curious phenomenon of biographers taking on the

attributes of their subjects. So I'm all over the place. Ursula Le Guin regards crossing genre borders as a feminine trait: "Our refusal to accept rules we don't make and boundaries that make no sense to us is a direct expression of our being women writers in the ninth decade of the twentieth century" (from the Preface to *The Language of the Night* 2nd Edition). I agree with her.

What have been the difficulties in getting published in Australia and elsewhere?

I've been extremely lucky. My first poem and first short story to be mailed out sold immediately — in the case of the latter 'The Parish and Mrs Brown', twice, at amateur and professional level. After that it got harder. I remember buying a souvlaki and crying into it after a rejection letter from the late Terry Carr.

Still, on the whole, things have fallen into my lap. Because I've worked in various areas, the opportunities have been greater. Through writing SF, I got into children's fiction. Through editing the memoirs of the 19th century detective writer, Mary Fortune, for Penguin, my short story anthology came into my lap. I rang up my Penguin editor, Linda Ristow, to tell her I'd just won a Ditmar (Australian SF award) for best short story. "Oh", she said, "do you have enough for a collection?" "Can I get back to you?" I said. There followed frantic word counting, at the end of which I had established that, by combining unpublished and published manuscripts, I did have enough.

As it happened, *My Lady Tongue* came out from Heinemann, largely because when Penguin got cold feet about the collection, in fact suggested I rewrite, Heinemann were looking for new authors. One of the high points of my writing life was the morning that I received a reader's report in the mail from Penguin, largely unfavourable, and while I was still pondering this, two hours later,

Louise Adler from Heinemann rang up and made me an offer. "Do I have to rewrite?" I asked. "Of course not!" Louise said.

As regards to overseas publishing — in this country, we have what is known as cultural cringe, in which a writer is nowt without international recognition. It's particularly virulent in SF circles. I've only sold two stories in the US, so in prestige terms, I'm well behind Greg Egan (who, incidentally, went to school with my partner, who recalls Greg as a maths whizz, doing calculus at the age of eleven). On the other hand, I do treasure the letter from a press in the States, who, while saying all sorts of nice things about *My Lady Tongue*, rejected it because it "wasn't lesbian enough".

Was it an advantage that your first collection was marketed as a non SF product? The reviews were good — would this have been different if the book had been published by an SF publisher?

I recall a conversation with Heinemann in which they said: "We're not going to mention SF on the cover, it'll put people off." Later on, I was a silent party to an editorial exchange, in which it was decided that I wasn't SF. I was like Angela Carter, and what was she? A fabulist. Therefore, Lucy was a fabulist.

I was too flattered by the comparison with the late and very great Angela to say anything, but in any case wasn't going to argue with the people who had given me a generous advance. In a way, they were right — the collection got far more reviews in the mainstream press than if it had been marketed as genre fiction. Category reviewing in this country varies widely in quantity and quality, with crime fiction getting lots of good press and SF hardly any. I think this means that crime writing is more respectable in the literary sense than SF. Which is curious, because the ratio of good material to crap is roughly the same.

People who knew that I'd written SF, of course, reviewed it as such, but the reviewers who didn't treated it as a pleasant surprise, without recourse to labelling. The book seemed to cross over without any problems. All the mainstream reviews were good; all but two of the SF reviews were equally favourable.

It will be interesting in a few months to do a comparison, review-wise, between two new novels: Paul Voerman's *The Weird Colonial Boy* (Gollancz SF) and Mauria Mehan's *Fury* (Penguin). The later is being promoted as mainstream, despite its theme of transmigration of souls. My guess is that it will get thrice the reviews.

Has the proliferation of new magazines helped in OZ, such as *Eidolon* and *Aurealis* in the young Oz SF writer, or is it better to aim at the literary (so-called) magazines?

The more markets, the healthier the genre! Currently there's more writers of SF in this country than ever before, and they're not only publishing stories, but novels, locally and internationally. In the 1980's, the stepping stones for new writers were anthologies — now it's magazines, which can publish far

more material.

I was talking recently with the editor of a respected litmag, and he complained that it was very hard to find people who could write good stories at under 5,000 words. This length is something SF writers can handle because they're pitching material at that length at the US magazines. And, because magic realism has changed the concept of what is acceptable in arty literature, SF themes no longer mean instant rejection. I think most local SF writers have published in the likes of **Overland**, etc. STOP PRESS — that magazine has just agreed to give its December issue over to SF. Will wonders never cease?

And yet, and yet... I have doubts about the career model of writing shorts, then progressing to novels. Mostly because writing short fiction proficiently is no preparation for novel writing. It's the difference between running a 100 metres race and the marathon. You may be fit and have a gorgeous prose style, but that doesn't mean you can switch from 5,000 to 100,000 word easily. I know of two writers who had some success with short fiction, but then found it took eight or nine manuscripts before they got an SF novel accepted. Some people can switch between the two forms effortlessly, but I suspect they are rare.

Worldwide, the opportunities for magazine publication are diminishing, and it might be

that the favourable situation here at present could prove to be an Indian summer. Perhaps in future writers will aim at longer texts first.

You have used themes from Australian Aboriginal mythology in two stories 'Red Ochre' and 'The Man Hanged Upside Down'. Isn't this something of a political hot potato?

Yeah, first we steal their land and then we steal their culture! I have been admonished for describing a lesbian society in 'My Lady Tongue' and I fully expect to cop it from the Koorie community at some stage as well. I can only plead that I wrote those stories when I was a lot more naive than I am now.

Marie Maclean said, with regard to Terry Dowling and myself, that our use of Aboriginal motifs was like printing sacred images on tea towels. It's a valid point. On the other hand, global culture increasingly draws on indigenous motifs, blending elements from Japan, Guatemala etc. Perhaps the lesson is, when borrowing, do it with respect.

Interestingly, the one Australian SF writer who has proven indigenous ancestry, George Turner, has yet to write about Aboriginal mythology.

Why are your vampires Polish?

To annoy a certain person! I also find

Polish a good source of evocative names, so when having naming problems, I use Polski. Trouble is, I used 'Marek' in a story about eighteen months ago, for a character who was physically unattractive, suicided and became an unquiet spirit. Then subsequently I was mightily stuffed around by a publisher whose name happened to be Marek Polka. Now I will probably have to find another name.

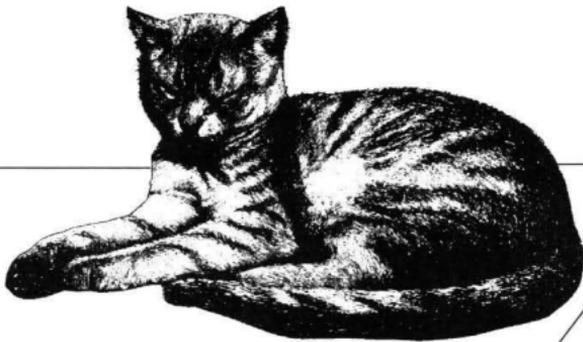
What's coming out in the future?

All sorts of stuff. I've just edited a very good early murder mystery novel, **Force and Fraud** by a woman called Ellen Davitt, who turned out to be a previously unknown sister-in-law of Anthony Trollope. It's available from Mulni Press (PO Box 82, Jamison Centre, ACT, 2614, Australia). Then I'm editing living authors for the first time, with the aforementioned anthology for Omnibus/Ashton Scholastic. My teenage fantasy drug-crazed Celtic Otherworld novel, **Deersnake**, after being sold down the river by Oxford University Press, is now coming out from Hodder and Stoughton. And of course there is the novel at my feet, which the cat is now sitting on.

Thoughts on Life, the Universe and everything?

In millions of years the sun will become a red giant and engulf the earth. Millions of years later the universe will wind down, just like J.G. Ballard's 'The Voices of Time'. And yet we still keep on scribbling and typing...

This interview was conducted by post



Lucy Sussex

A Novel

In Sight



By
Steve
Palmer

Worthwhile Buys

First of four interesting science books is **Complexity** by M. Mitchell Waldrop (Penguin, 380pp, £6.99), a book which claims to go one step beyond chaos theory into complexity theory — the study of how systems organise themselves. This is not a bad book. It takes as its angle the concept of complexity, and also the people who have, over the past couple of years, developed this new science into a very exciting field. However, as with some of the other books in which the lives of the players are described, this is something of a 'matey book'; if you don't know the people involved, which of course applies to almost every reader, much of the immediacy of, say, the trouble experienced by one Chris G. Langton in getting his Ph.D is lost. It's all very well bringing the thinkers into their field of thought, but you have to do it properly; a few lines on someone's marriage and an overview of their character is not enough. So this book falls down, because, although the people could be interesting — as interesting as the science — they aren't allowed to be by the author.

The book is aimed at the high powered reader. People with degrees might find some of it tough going. All sorts of concepts, from phase-transitions to cellular automata to auto-catalytic set models, make their appearance. However, if the reader skips the technical bits and their brief excursions into what so-and-so thought of so-and-so, and what music they listened to in Haight-Ashbury, there is plenty to be going on with. Particularly good are the chapters devoted to John Holland's work; he has devised remarkable theories about how systems make models of the real world. All in all, worth buying, though often difficult.

Next up is **Being Human** by the redoubtable team of Mary and John Gribbin (Dent, 292pp £16.99). Two thirds of this book is absolutely brilliant; one third is infuriating. The authors will know which third I mean because they spend a number of pages telling the reader what bad press sociobiology, their pet theory, has had.

The first six chapters chart, with a clarity very rarely found in a science book, the evolutionary progress of humanity with particular emphasis laid on climate and environment. This really is excellent stuff. All the aspects of human evolution are covered, from our primate ancestors, through geological and climatic change, right up to the often deleterious effect of people on the environment. If this two thirds was published separately as a school text book it would be praised as one of the best ever written, and teachers of geography, earth sciences and biology would weep for joy.

However, the problem is the latter third of **Being Human** in which the theory of sociobiology is espoused and developed.

"Sociobiology is the study of all forms of social behaviour in all animals, including humans." That is, sociobiology studies the way that genetic factors might influence or control behaviour. As the authors explain, this theory has had much mud flung at it, because it seems to take away free will from people. Opponents (or "the extreme opponents of sociobiology" as they are labelled) are supposedly either those of the school of Lorenz and Ardrey, who believe that human beings are innately aggressive, or those of the school of B.F. Skinner, who believe that babies are "blank slates" ready for society to mould as it wills. Apparently, neither author has heard of the humanistic school of human behaviour. And because of this, the authors find themselves concluding that, "We are 99% ape, but the 1% advantage lies very largely in the fact that we are altruistic apes. We act out of self-interest." So, they are capitalists, too!

The problem with sociobiology is this; it entirely fails to take consciousness into account. Whilst the authors could easily devise an evolutionary, genetic-based theory of the arrival of consciousness in human beings, they cannot with sociobiology explain the consequences. This is because social behaviour is abstract: it is not a genetic thing. Human beings long ago transcended their

biologically, or genetically rooted behaviour and became conscious individuals who acted because they all shared the human condition. The properties of the human condition have nothing to do with genetics. In other words, the fact that we happen to share 99% of our genes with chimpanzees is irrelevant to human behaviour, though it is in itself an important fact. Sociobiology is a withdrawal from responsibility. Those who espouse the theory do so because it is easier to say that human beings by and large cannot help the way they are — in this case self-interested though in an enlightened way — than to go through all the difficulty and pain of assuming responsibility for our behaviour.

Human behaviour, according to sociobiology, is determined partly by genetic endowment and partly by environment. But really, the search for clues to human behaviour in, say, the behaviour of animals, is pretty pointless, because the human social world is abstract and the animal world is not.

Published last year, **Dreams of a Final Theory** by Steven Weinberg (Radius, 260pp, £16.99) is both a defense of the construction of a Superconducting Supercollider, and a look at what shape any Theory of Everything might be. It is worth mentioning that recently the American government decided not to fund the SSC project. The book itself is, much like the author's classic **The First Three Minutes**, a lucid and readable discussion of high-energy physics, with much argument over what any final theory might be like. Steven Weinberg's notion is that an ultimate theory will be somehow 'apart', in a sense of being grandly alone; that is, any small perturbations would cause very different universes to appear. It's all mind-boggling stuff, and often too mind-boggling to conceive, unless you're of the author's calibre. On the other hand, there are some curious asides. For example, is the structure of **King Lear** more beautiful than that of the Theory of Relativity? Steven Weinberg suggests that the former is indeed more beautifully structured than the latter.

Finally, Richard E. Cytowic's **The Man Who Tasted Shapes** (Abacus, 249pp, £6.99) is an exploration of the phenomenon of synesthesia, which is a condition in which people's senses are confused, so that they may taste shapes or smell colours. The title of the book, as well as its attitude, owes much to Oliver Sack's **The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat**.

It's an interesting read, but not I imagine aimed at the popular reader, for you would need at least an 'A' level in biology — the author is a renowned neurologist — to get through some of it (these sections I shall not review...). The style is chatty, more so than **Complexity**, and shares that book's desire to involve people and relationships with the neurology and the scientific theorising. The book becomes very interesting at the end, when various accepted metaphors, such as that of mind-as-computer, are questioned, and new ideas are given about consciousness and emotion. All in all another worthwhile buy, but I found myself skipping the difficult bits that occupy the middle section of the book. Oh, and don't be put off by the lousy cover.

CARD CODA BY BEN JEAPES

In the September 1992 *Vector* I wrote an appreciation of Orson Scott Card, focusing on his SF and fantasy work. I didn't mention his non-SF novel *Saints*, which is about the early Mormon church in the nineteenth century. Not only hadn't I read it, but I couldn't see what relevance it might have to Card's late twentieth century SF.

Now I have read it, I can see that this reasoning was completely out, so for the benefit of Card completists I'd just like to say a few words about it.

First off, I said in my article that *Wyrms* features Card's first female protagonist. Not so, *Saints* was published in 1984, quite early on in the Card corpus, and is primarily the story of Dinah Kirkham. She is born into a downwardly-mobile family in Industrial Revolution Manchester, becomes a Mormon and emigrates to America where she becomes a key figure in the young Mormon church, married (at different times) to both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. How much of her life reflects that of Card's own great-something aunt's I don't know, but the book purports to be written by one "O. Kirkham" of Salt Lake City, a descendant of Dinah's brother.

The book has the full quotient that we have come to expect from Card of pain, guilt and people nursing their grudges and hurts so they can grow up as warped individuals, instead of forgiving and forgetting like any sensible person. So, nothing new there.

Essentially, *Saints* should be read by anyone who has read Card's Alvin books. The American scenes are set around Illinois, mostly in Nauvoo, the city that Smith decreed the church should build on the banks of the Mississippi as the new Zion -- a place free of pain, hunger, misery etc. The Alvin books are

set in the same geographical area and, of course, Alvin's great vision is to build the Crystal city -- a place free of pain, hunger, misery etc. Smith and Alvin come from similar backgrounds, are misunderstood by their families, have visions and generally struggle against great odds to accomplish their dreams.

In my *Vector* article I said that I couldn't see the similarity between Alvin and Smith, but that was because there is so far no sign of Alvin starting a new church. In fact, he has no time at all for any kind of religion. However, since he is only 18 at the end of *Prentice Alvin* -- the age Smith was when he started on his life's mission -- perhaps we should wait and see. The main similarity between them, almost on a one-to-one basis, is the visions and ne Zion theme that I've mentioned above.

The Mormons were chased out of Nauvoo before they could finish their temple there, so they headed out west across the Mississippi and settled in Utah. In the Alvin books, the area west of the Mississippi is always a kind of promised land -- it is where Lolla-Wossky leads his brother Reds to escape from white persecution in *Red Prophet*.

A key theme of *Saints* that hasn't yet appeared in Alvin's life, but which I mention because it's so fascinating, is the Principle of Celestial Marriage, known to us gentiles as polygamy. This is plainly a topic that Card is struggling with. He is a happily married man and has no desire for more than one wife, yet he is also an honest man and has to face the fact that the founders of his church both espoused and practised it until it was officially abandoned in 1890. It was indeed, polygamy which so infuriated the gentle mobs around Nauvoo that Smith was murdered and the Mormons driven out of the United States (a

historical footnote which Card doesn't mention -- despite the treatment that the US gave the Mormons, Utah Territory served the Union loyally during the Civil War twenty years later). Smith's reason for it (in the book, anyway) is that it was practised by the early patriarchs -- Abraham, Jacob and that crowd -- so that was how it was meant to be. A kind of theological back-to-basics. It was also a useful binding mechanism, since any plural wife who turned her back on the church was, by the standards of the rest of the world, at best an adulteress and at worst a whore and either way would get little protection. And yet, it was all so darn *honourable* -- it certainly wasn't the excuse for promiscuity and free love that the church's enemies said it was. A man's first wife got to veto all subsequent marriages; no member of a plural marriage could lord it over any other; and (according to Card) most plural marriages were entered into with quite a bit of reservation -- they married not because they *could* but because the Prophet said they *should*. Arguing with someone with a hotline to God is always a non-starter. Smith himself, apparently sat on the Principle for a good decade, before revealing it to a few chosen friends, because he didn't particularly want to practice it and he knew full well what the rest of the world would say.

Saints is let down by its cover, which seems to promise a Cartlandesque frontier romance ("The powerful story of a dauntless woman whose life tested all of her strength!"). But at least it's lost its original title (*A Woman of Destiny*). If anyone wants to get into the mind of Orson Scott Card (with something less solid than an axe) then I strongly recommend getting past the cover and reading the book. I don't know if it's actually published in the UK - my copy was published by Tor and came from Forbidden Planet.

Unequalled Quality

**Dean
Koontz**
recommended
by Martin H
Webb

Compass
Prints
9

In the summer of 1987, having read all my favourite authors (Sharpe, Herbert And King). I was looking for something new, a friend pointed to a new book in his shop and said, "He sells well."

That book was **Strangers** by Dean R Koontz.

Since then Koontz has only produced two other novels that come near to equalling it in style or quality. **Watchers**(1987) and **Lightning**(1988). All three are a must for SF, Horror and Thriller fans. It must also be said that they were (and still are) far superior to most of the material on the market.

With **Strangers** Koontz was able to cross the boundaries of three genres to the fullest effect. W H Allen, who first published this book quoted it as "Koontz's most extraordinary novel yet...deep compulsive mystery."

Despite their need to sell it, Allens were right; extraterrestrial visitors, the horrors of brainwashing and an obsession with the moon shared by five people who have, apparently, never met. Throughout the 710 pages of the W H Allen edition it does not lose pace or tension; a feat in itself.

If **Strangers** works for you as well as it did for me, a good second choice would be **Watchers**. For those who saw the screen adaptation, forget it. The scriptwriter appears to have read the book and thought he could write the story better — as a vehicle for Corey Haim's career, no doubt. Perfectionists will understand what I mean when they read it.

Watchers begins with a depressed and lonely man (Travis Cornell) trying to capture the lost innocence of his youth in the Santa Ana Mountains, a genetic experiments lab and

a woman freed late in life from the control of a dominant aunt.

It is in the woods beneath the mountains that Travis meets with a Labrador. The dog doesn't pass him by, but tries to warn him of impending danger — and saves his life, though he doesn't know what from; yet. The dog's part does not end there. It goes on to introduce Travis to his future wife. That would be enough for a story on its own, but the dog has other tricks up its sleeve, and to retain its freedom shows Travis that it can read. As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that the dog is one of two escapees from a laboratory in the mountains, the other escaped creature is the ultimate killing machine afraid of nothing but the dog which it wants to kill, for the dog has brain while the creature has only brawn.

For most, myself included, the dog has to be the star (no pun intended). Again, Koontz has drawn elements from other genres together to create an exciting read.

Finally, I dare even the strongest of hearts to read **Lightning** without feeling just a little gooey inside. The SF ingredient in this tale is space/time travel from Nazi Germany to 1980s America in search of the secret of atomic domination which the US wielded so dramatically in 1945, and which would have turned the tide of the Second World War in Hitler's favour.

Laura Shane is a novelist whose book 'Shadrak' has earned her one and a quarter million dollars advance, but her life has been wrecked by tragedies; and each tragedy was marked by a thunder storm and ... **Lightning!** In a parallel time, unbeknownst to Laura, she would have been a cripple, a victim of child-rap and many other horrors but for her 'Guardian'.

Stephan is a Nazi scientist who has built a time machine. He used the machine once to travel far beyond the 1980s and saw crippled Laura autographing books. He was smitten by her bravery and her writing. I suppose you've guessed what he does... he uses the machine not for the military purpose it was designed for, but to give Laura the life he felt she deserved. A life with legs.

But in doing so, he sets off a chain of events that threaten to change history as we know it.

There is a third party interested in Laura., the Nazi Party. They want to stop Stephan from meddling in the future they are working towards.

The intricate plot is tighter than **Strangers** and as Koontz says through one of Laura's friends:

"You're able to capture people's lives on the page, and when the people are gone, the page is still there, the life is still there... anyone, anywhere, can pick up that book and feel those same feelings, you can touch the heart... It's what all writers try to do but seldom achieve." Those lines describe **Lightning** perfectly.

In all his books Koontz has been able to incorporate all human emotions and horrors without "in depth gore and sexuality" which puts him in a class of his own. These books are still available for Headline in hardcover or paperback.



First

Impressions

Reviews of Hardback & Paperback Originals

Edited by Catie Cary

Stephen Baxter
FluxHarper Collins, 1993, 366pp, £15.99
Reviewed by Mark Plummer

Stephen Baxter's last novel, *Anti-Ice*, was something of a departure from his two previous novel-length works — a scientific romance/alternative history. Here he returns to his more characteristic hard science territory. *Flux* is part of his Xeelee sequence, a background used in many of his short stories in *Interzone* and elsewhere, and has much in common with his first novel *Raft*: a relatively conventional plot framed by a seemingly implausible but doubtless well researched scientific premise.

A human society exists in a mantle of superfluid in the interior of a neutron star. A barely remembered history tells them that they were created and placed there by the ur-humans who subsequently abandoned them, taking all the technology with them. Dura and her brother Farr are part of a primitive colony — calling themselves the Human Beings — which is decimated by a glitch (a kind of starquake) in the mantle. Their home is destroyed and their stock of food animals lost. During the subsequent hunt for new food supplies, Adda, an elder member of the tribe is injured. A farmer from the technologically more advanced polar city of Parz comes to their aid, somewhat reluctantly, and takes them back to the city for medical treatment. The glitches become more frequent and serious threatening the whole mantle society, and Dura embarks on a mission to save the world; you can probably guess whether or not this will be successful. In terms of plot, it does all seem pretty familiar stuff.

Yet, as he suggested in his article in *Focus* 25, Baxter has clearly given a lot of thought to the environment of the star and the result is genuinely inventive. The world within the star has been thoroughly researched. By taking the primitive Dura, Farr and Adda to the more advanced city there is plenty of opportunity to

give them (and thus the reader) an explanation of how things work and these expository lumps are (generally) well integrated with the story. However, there is much to be explained; aside from the make-up and ecosystem of the mantle, the 'human' inhabitants have been substantially modified physically. For starters, they are only a fraction of a millimetre tall and we are constantly reminded of the scale; Parz City is about a centimetre across and major journeys are measured in metres. Some scenes seem to be have included merely to show that Baxter has considered that aspect of life; sex in the superfluid of the mantle would be different, but the only function of the single sexual encounter in the novel seems to illustrate how. Such background material may be interesting, but isn't always necessary.

Comparisons with Arthur C. Clarke are invoked by the publishers: the front cover carries a quote from the man himself and the inside flap suggests that Baxter is Clarke's British successor. Whilst one is entitled to be wary of such claims, in this case the comparison conveys the right sort of impression: a good, solid, traditional hard SF novel

Lois McMaster Bujold
The Spirit RingPan, 1993, 369pp £8.99
Reviewed by Vikki Lee

The Spirit Ring is a debut fantasy novel for this Hugo and Nebula award winner of science fiction novels, and a very promising debut at that.

The story is set in what seems to be a version of 15th century Europe, and begins in the workshops of Prospero Benefort, mage and creator of enchanted *objets d'art*, and his talented daughter Fiametta. Master Benefort is commissioned to create a dowry gift for the twelve year old daughter of his Lord, Duke Sandrine, on the occasion of her betrothal to Duke Ferrante. It is at this betrothal that events take an unexpected turn and Prospero

and Fiametta witness the wearing and use of a spirit ring, a foul artefact of black magic, by Duke Ferrante. Unfortunately for Prospero and Fiametta, this knowledge makes them dangerous in the eyes of Duke Ferrante and his evil mage, Niccolo Vitelli, and they end up fleeing for their lives.

During their flight from Montefoglia, Prospero and Fiametta are caught by the pursuing soldiers of Duke Ferrante. Prospero dies defending Fiametta and she eventually escapes with the body of her father to the north.

The Och brothers, Uri and Thur, lead entirely different lives. Whilst Uri is a respected Captain in Duke Sandrino's army, Thur remains at home in the mountains working in the mines, eking out a meagre living for himself and their mother. It is a hard life, but Thur is not unhappy with his lot until a letter arrives from his brother telling of a possible post in the foundry of Prospero Benefort. Thur's mother urges him to go and seek his fortune and he starts his journey to Montefoglia and a new life. Little does Thur know, he will never see his brother *alive* again.

Journeying south with a merchant and his sons, Thur learns of events in Montefoglia whilst stopping at an inn. Thur is asked by the innkeeper to try and coax a madwoman from one of his rooms for the reward of ale, food and free lodgings. The woman turns out to be Fiametta. Prospero is hanging in a shed being smoked with the hams as surety against Fiametta paying her dues when Duke Ferrante's soldiers raid the Inn and steal the body, taking it back to Montefoglia. Thur worries about the possible fate of his brother Uri, and the two set off for Montefoglia together, but for very different reasons.

This is a page turning tale of murder and black magic. The reader is drawn into actually caring about what happens to Fiametta and Thur. Admittedly, there are few surprises in the developing relationship, but there are plenty of surprises in store for the reader as the tale trundles along towards a climactic conclusion. I love it when the 'bad guys' in any story get their comeuppance, but this ending is particularly satisfying. It seems there won't be, or need to be a sequel to this story, but I look forward to future fantasy from Bujold.

Lois McMaster Bujold
The Vor GamePan, 1990, 342pp £4.99
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

The Vor Game is part of a series of books and stories by Bujold around the character of Miles Vorkosigan, and although it refers back to previous novels it stands perfectly well on its own, the story being contained within the framework of the book.

Miles Vorkosigan is a member of the Imperial Vor family and it is clear within the opening few pages that he has needed his rank to counterbalance the physical disabilities which resulted from exposure to toxic gases while still in the womb (small stature, fragile bones etc) to allow him to enter and graduate from the Imperial Academy. It is also clear that he has the mental dexterity to compensate for physical incapacity, as his commanding officer points out. Miles is a hero

All — and Nothing

Paul Kincaid

Curiouser and Curiouser, as Alice said. What are we to make of *Omni*, science fiction's only glossy, mass market magazine? Though it has one of the genre's most respected fiction editors, Ellen Datlow, its audience doesn't seem to be quite the middle ground of SF readers. As Datlow says in the introduction to the first of these three volumes, "*Omni* has brought science fiction to readers who have never read it before." One is tempted to make the assumption that they never read it in any other forum either. *Omni* isn't really a proselytising journal, rather it occupies that awkward middle ground of purveying science fiction for those who don't read SF. Thus, of the 31 stories which appear in these three collections, barely 11 are built around familiar SF trapping of robots, aliens, space stations or strange planets. And even these tend to find ways to defuse the strangeness, so that Robert Silverberg's invading alien in 'The Perfect Host', for instance, sounds more like it comes from the Bronx than somewhere unimaginably distant out there.

And what are we to make of three collections called *Omni Best Science Fiction One, Two, and Three*? After all, these hardly count as an *Omni* greatest hits, since 22 of the stories are appearing here for the first time, but it would be a bit presumptuous to consider these the best works of modern SF in some broader sense. There are good stories here, and good writers (and sometimes the two coincide), but with a few exceptions they don't actually stop you in your tracks with admiration for their dazzling literary skill.

(Though at the same time, none of them stop you in your track with wonder at how something so terrible could make it into print, which in itself is pretty rare these days).

Finally, what are we to make of the stories? By some strange chance, the stories in each of the volumes seem to have a slight thematic unity. This doesn't seem to be intentional — certainly, Datlow doesn't make any mention of it in her introductions, except with the run of short-stories around the theme of alien sex in the third volume. Nevertheless, these short-short stories by Le Guin, Disch,

Gahan Wilson and John Crowley are joined by longer stories or novelettes on the same theme by Pat Cadigan, Ian McDonald and Scott Baker.

Pat Cadigan's 'Love Toys of the Gods' is a bright and jokey story about good ol' country boys who are enjoying sex with beings from a flying saucer. When another local gets taken up to the saucer and starts blabbing about his experience to the press and the FBI, the others conspire to hide their secret by telling the truth. Scott Baker's novelette may seem to be as light — it concerns a computer programmer hired to provide a virtual reality simulation of sex between humans and cows in order to keep alive a ritual from ancient Egypt. But despite the silly premise, this is actually a darker and more powerful story than its outline would imply. Darkest and best of the three, however, is 'Some Strange Desire' by Ian McDonald. This is the story of human-like shape-changers who have been hidden amongst us for millennia, operating as prostitutes in order to feed off sexual energy. This is a brooding atmospheric tale which gives a taste of being set on dark nights and in gloomy rooms, while the plot is driven by a sense of despair and weary inevitability as one of the creatures faces the prospect of draining a human in order to cure its sister of the alien equivalent of AIDS.

Not all the stories in this collection tie in with the same theme. Pat Murphy's 'A Cartographic Analysis of the Dream State', for instance, links visions of the yeti with the discovery of life at the Martian pole; while the one reprint, 'Palindrome' by Thomas M. Disch, tells of god-like beings manipulating a plane crash as part of some game (an interesting exercise but not, I would have thought, one of the *best* stories to have come out of *Omni* in recent years). Nevertheless, a doomed lesbian relationship is at the centre of Simon Ings's story of mental disintegration, 'The Black Lotus' (the relationships at the heart of the story are well done, though the basic situation seems contrived, or at least not sufficiently well realised to carry the story). As a pendant to this linking thread, there is the

unconsummated but touching love story between a man and a recently dead woman in 'Moving On' by Bruce McAllister, the only writer to appear in all three collections.

Sex also plays a part in 'In the Month of Athyr' by Elizabeth Hand in the second volume, a rather overwrought and over-written account of the suicide of a living sex-ovt generated out of heron stock. However, the artificial creature and the setting on a space station also tie this story with the second volumes linking thread: the use of more traditional SF devices. Thus we get robots and hackers in Tom Maddox's 'The Robot and the One You Love', projections of werewolves in Gregg Keizer's 'Chimera Dreams', a gateway to another reality in Bruce McAllister's 'Kingdom Come', artificially stimulated psi powers in 'Black Velvet' by Maggie Finn and a thief planning one last heist on the Moon in 'One Small Step for Max' by Dan Simmons. This last is the weakest story in any of the three collections, though the Maddox and the Keizer aren't far behind. I don't think it is merely coincidental, *Omni* seems uneasy with straight down the middle SF, and it is only when the trappings are approached from left field — as with McAllister's story of a bickering couple who are helpless witnesses of a catastrophic intrusion into their world, or with the Pat Murphy mentioned above — that out and out genre SF seems to work here.

Certainly the best stories in this collection are George R.R. Martin's 'The Pear-Shaped Man' which tells of a woman haunted by the unsettling man who lives in the apartment below her's. Lucius Shepard in familiar territory with a story of a drug deal going wrong on the Egypt-Israel border, 'All the Perfumes of Araby', Pat Cadigan with a deceptively simple story of criminal rehabilitation, 'Mother's Milk', and Garry Kilworth's 'The Cave Painting' about tourists encountering a curious aboriginal cave painting in the middle of the Australian desert.

The Kilworth brings us to the theme which dominates the first volume and which overlaps with the other two: the disaster story. This is most curious of all, for the disaster is usually

OMNI

BEST SCIENCE
FICTION ONE



Including original stories by
Robert Silverberg, Elizabeth A. Lynn,
Bruce McAllister, R. Duns, Richard
Kantley and Paul Park

OMNI

BEST SCIENCE
FICTION TWO



EDITED BY ELLEN DATLOW

Including original stories by
Lucius Shepard, Pat Cadigan, Maggie
Finn, Dan Simmons,
Garry Kilworth, and Elizabeth Hand

OMNI

BEST SCIENCE
FICTION THREE



EDITED BY ELLEN DATLOW

Original stories by Ursula K. Le Guin, Thomas
M. Disch, Pat Murphy, John Crowley, Gahan
Wilson, Pat Cadigan, Scott Baker, Ian McDonald,
Bruce McAllister, and Simon Ings

seen as typical of British science fiction, and in fact as antithetical to the usual impulse of American SF. Yet here we have a predominantly American collection (Kilworth, Ings and McDonald are the only non-Americans in the three books) which time and again raises epiphanies of loss and defeat.

This may be small scale in some stories—Elizabeth A. Lynn's 'California Dreaming' takes the loss of the motor car as symptomatic of a far greater loss in the American psyche—although some are large scale indeed—both Kilworth and Suzy McKee Charnas, in 'Listening to Brahms', present us with the end of the human race.

Generally the sense of loss seems to involve the environment. The Keizer in the second volume, and Bruce McAllister's 'Sister Moon' in the first involve the loss of animal life from some unexplained cause. Neal Barrett Jr's 'Diner' gives the cause as unleashed germ warfare, though that is only incidental in this account of people surviving in a barren America ruled by the Chinese. There is a man-made cause, too, in Richard Kadrey's 'Horse Latitudes', which features nature run riot as tropical rain forest engulfs California, and in J.R. Dunn's 'The Heart's Own Country'. If in one to read a sociological significance into these stories it would be a loss of confidence in America, a feeling that a price now has to be paid. Whether this mood chimes more with contemporary American mainstream literature and so has a broader appeal, it is difficult to say. But even in those stories which aren't directly about loss, for instance McAllister's 'Moving On', Crowley's 'Exogamy', Murphy's 'A Cartographic Analysis of the Dream State', and Hand's 'In the Month of Athyr' to name four disparate examples, there is an elegiac tone and a feeling of quietness which seems out of step with most American SF.

Even the four stories in the first volume which aren't traditional disaster stories in form—Tom Maddox's 'Snake Eyes', Robert Silverberg's 'The Perfect Host', Paul Park's 'The Lost Sepulcher of Huascar Capac' and Jack Dann's 'Tattoos'—feature some sense of our individual human integrity being lost or invaded. Maddox's hero had his mind invaded by medical experiment, while Silverberg's protagonist is the unwilling host of a miniature alien lodged inside his body. Park's story features a journey away from reality and into memory, while Dann's 'Tattoos' provides a psychological link to the dehumanisation of the Nazi holocaust.

Curious collections, then. American SF which doesn't seem to conform to the norm. Best collections which don't seem to be the best of anything. And an unrepresentative taste of an unrepresentative magazine. Yet you can't help feeling that stories as good as those by McDonald, McAllister, Charnas, Dann, Kilworth and Martin make these very readable collections. And perhaps even important?

Omnibus Best Science Fiction One
(Omnibus Books, 1992, 267pp, \$8.95)

Omnibus Best Science Fiction Two
(Omnibus Books, 1992, 250pp, \$8.95)

Omnibus Best Science Fiction Three
(Omnibus Books, 1993, 266pp, \$10.00)

- All edited by Ellen Datlow

who relies on brain rather than brawn.

He is posted to a remote Arctic Station as Meteorology Officer where he comes up against a crazy commander, a problem which sends his career off onto unexpected paths, so that instead of the straightforward military progression he had expected, he is shunted sideways into covert operations. From hence he is placed in the unexpected position of being the only person who knows the whereabouts of his cousin, the Emperor. In this muddle Miles uses his wits to keep all the balls he is juggling in the air, catching and adding extra balls as the plot gains in complexity.

It is a cracking story, with a fast moving, exciting plot, plenty of action and no violence for the sake of it (the advantage of a physically disabled hero is that he avoids brawls). The fates of the Emperor, the Empire and various other worlds end up in Miles' hands and how he deals with it all is an excellent read.

Despite enjoying the story, I found the goodies too good and the baddies too bad. The characterisation lacks depth and there is little personal conflict or growth, or even room for development, except for Gregor, the Emperor, who is fed up with his figurehead existence. The best characterisation is on the Arctic station at the beginning of the book, later on when the action heats up, the characters get thinner as the needs of the storyline outweigh the needs of the characterisation. Miles is also extremely young. Without wishing to be personally ageist about it all, people are generally inclined to judge on appearance, and to take a nineteen year old boy as seriously as they all do stretches my credulity.

Despite these small reservations the book is fun, tells a good story and passes the time pleasantly. It is light, but also light hearted, and taken as that is worth thinking about.

C J Cherryh
Faery in Shadow
Legend, 1993, 249pp
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This is the second book in a multi-volume series. The story is an Irish-Celtic style fantasy, chronicling what is clearly only one episode in the longer tale of Caithe mac Siabhan (human servant of the Sidhe) and Dubhain (his faery companion, a pooka). The plot is based around a number of traditional 'fairy tale' elements. Caithe and Dubhain's main task, for most of the story, is to help their Sidhe Lord, Nuallan, escape from the enchantments of the witch Moragacht. At the same time they are trying to cleanse the waters of Gleann Fian of an evil power, one of the dark Sidhe, that haunts them. Caithe also seeks to unravel the mystery surrounding two chance-met companions, Ceannann and Firinne, one of whom—but which?—was fathered by a selkie.

The prose Cherryh uses is expansively descriptive and elaborate, reminiscent of the Irish storytelling tradition (or rather, its Anglo-Irish translations and imitations). In contrast, the character list is very restricted, as the principals move through the empty landscapes of wilderness, abandoned field

and pasture, and deserted shore. The significant events of the story are also few in number, and they are recounted at length and mused over by the characters, rather than jostling and crowding each other for page-room. Action adventure this isn't. It's more of a mood piece, an evocation of a magical-romantic-heroic 'Celtic twilight'. The rich and leisurely style evokes a bygone, slower-paced age, as does the close, consistent attention to the sensory detail of the natural world. Lovers of traditional fairy stories and Celtic style will find **Faery in Shadow** a good modern equivalent.

Stephen Donaldson (Ed)
Strange Dreams

Harper Collins, 1993, £8.99, 529pp
Reviewed by Kev McVeigh

Strange Dreams claims only to be one thing, an anthology of some of Stephen Donaldson's favourite fantasy stories. As such it makes no attempt to proselytise about how great fantasy can be, nor to present any kind of historical account of the evolution of the genre, nor even to offer the weakest of definitions of fantasy. It is, simply, a personal choice. (Or so it is presented. The discreet hand of Martin H. Greenberg is at Donaldson's back, yet there are none of the thematic links which normally characterise a Greenberg anthology.)

In common with many serious readers, Donaldson's taste clearly ranges across genre boundaries; there is horror here in Orson Scott Card's 'Eumenides In The Fourth-floor Lavatory' with echoes of Ellison's 'Croatoan' amidst some dodgy moralising; and Ellison himself is here with the justly famous 'Jeffery is Five' in which a little boy fails to grow up; there is straight-ish science fiction from John Varley—'the time travel short story' 'Air Raid' which became an awkward novel and poor film, **Milennium** and there are non-genre choices from Borges ('The Aleph'—a complex literary maze) Kafka ('In the Penal Colony'—a dark parable on punishment,) and Kipling ('The Mark Of The Beast'—a colonial werewolf story).

There are other famous stories here: M John Harrison's 'Viriconium city', 'The Dancer From Dance'; Garry Kilworth's blackly funny 'Hogfoot Right and Bird Hands'; Michael Bishop's 'The House Of Compassionate Sharers'. However, if there is a point to this anthology however, it must lie in the selection of less well-known writers or less-famous stories. Surely this explains the selection of Lucius Shepard's 'The Storming Of Annie Kinsale' an evocative and strongly written tale of an Irish witch, but scarcely Shepard's best short fantasy. Equally, R.A. Lafferty's 'Narrow Valley' is, for all of its distinctive Lafferty charm, rather slight.

On the other hand, there are stories which deserve this new attention: Nancy Kress' 'With The Original Cast' is a dark look at method acting taken a stage (ahem) further; Robin McKinley's archly romantic 'The Stone Fey' takes a wry look at the conventions of happy endings; and the reprinting of almost any Theodore Sturgeon short story should be acclaimed. '...And Now The News' is a strident reaction to the fears of the Cold War

Cyberpunk is Dead...

Catie Cary

"...many drugs, like rock and roll, are definitive high-tech products... It is not for nothing that Timothy Leary proclaimed personal computers 'the LSD of the 1980s' — these are both technologies of frighteningly radical potential. And as such they are constant points of reference for cyberpunk."

Bruce Sterling, *mirrorshades — the cyberpunk anthology*

Cyberpunk, like the PC explosion, was a phenomenon of the 1980s. Its initial practitioners fused an intense streetwise style with dizzying extrapolations of the possibilities for the fusion of man and machine, machine as drug, the electronic path to the gates of heaven or hell. Cyberpunk ransacked popular culture for structure and material, often utilising the hard-boiled detective style of American thrillers, and borrowing images from music, film, and drug cultures. As is the way of revolution, the original works offered a genuine new vision and a cutting edge thrill that ensured a popular acceptance beyond that of the ghetto readership. The influence has spread widely, reflecting back into the movies and popular music, and inspiring a vast number of second generation writers to imitate the Cyberpunk style. And style is the operative word, since this second generation Cyberpunk tends to pile on the pace and the violence, without deepening the extrapolation or widening the vision. Such work is unambitious and fails to satisfy. However, the two books under review seem to me to attempt something more ambitious: they take the themes and interests of Cyberpunk and in a variety of ways, attempt a reaction. These are third generation books, each offering their own vision, either as extension or revision of the Cyberpunk idea.

William Gibson, is one of the founding fathers of Cyberpunk, and has been much quoted on his disillusion with the genre, so it is perhaps to be expected that when he revisits the territory, he will have a new purpose in mind. In an interview in *Spin* magazine he says "... the guiding principle for writing

Virtual Light was the feeling I should go back to the cyberpunk material and take another pass at it, but turn the volume way up on the naturalism... and force it to make a lot more sense". In his early work, Gibson a self-confessed technical ignoramus, romanticised computer technology and glamorised the lives of the people who employed it, more concerned with machine as metaphor and gateway to altered states than with any attempt at realism. In **Virtual Light**, however the hackers are presented as nerds ("Buddy had a haircut that wasn't quite skin, some kind of gadget in his mouth to straighten his teeth, and an Adam's apple about a third the size of his head.") and losers, sometimes malicious but always unimportant. The technological Nirvana has failed the ordinary person; technology is seen as serving the corporations, fuelling their growth and acting, as always, as a

pacifier for the increasingly dislocated masses. Gibson's dream has turned to nightmare, but he is not so much patterning the future as exposing his revulsion at the here and now.

While Gibson has re-focused his vision on the meeting of man and technology, he still uses the stock thriller plot as scaffold to his story, which may be summarised as follows: Teenage Courier, Chevette Washington, impulsively steals a pair of expensive looking shades from an importunate lecher; failed cop, Berry Rydell, is hired to trace her and repossess the merchandise; meeting her and recognising his employers as black hats, Rydell switches sides, two small-time, small-town, nobodies pitted against the almighty corporations, they go on the run in a car chase across Southern California pursued by a host of hired goons; magic wand, happy ending.

However the plot is not the thing; Gibson is a writer of style and vision, and the rewards to be gained in reading this novel are crammed into the interstices of the story, (like the beautiful description of the occupation of the San Francisco Bridge by the homeless and the darkly humorous account of the religious group who believe that salvation will come through watching TV) or sleeky coat the exterior (His depiction of the language and lives of America's urban underclass has always ranked with the best, and achieves in this volume an intensity of realism that may be unparalleled). The novel is a success in Gibson's own

terms, it hacks at the romantic visions of Cyberpunk and presents the bleak alternative of technology in the (invisible) hands of the system; its incursions into the life of the masses being irrelevant or threatening.

However I would have liked to see him turn the same new eyes to the structure of his novel, as I felt that the formulaic thriller elements diluted the message, and brought what could have been art, to the level of product.

There are some superficial similarities between **Virtual Light** and Neal Stephenson's

Snow Crash (first published in the USA in June 1992). Both feature a nerdy ex cop and a teenage courier as their main protagonists and feature thriller style action in near future California. But their aims and style are very different. While Gibson's bleakly realistic thriller is laden with dark humour as entertainment, Stephenson uses an ironic reconstruction of the thriller plot, to add a layer of darkness to his lightly told joust with the end of the world.

The first two chapters of **Snow Crash** briskly introduce us to our two main characters, and their world of suburban city states and franchise management; they are also, incidentally, extremely funny. Hiro Protagonist, pizza deliverator for the Mafia, freelance hacker and intelligence gatherer for the Central Intelligence Corporation meets YT, fifteen year old valley girl and skateboard courier, in circumstances not designed to raise his self esteem. However, YT sees in our nerd a new career opportunity, and they go into partnership, she will provide him with leads and information when they come her way.

Though he is a loser in the real world, Hiro is a big cheese in the Metaverse, a shared computer generated virtual reality, in which he was one of the original programmers and continues to have privileged access. And it is in the Metaverse that he first encounters **Snow Crash**. Now then, **Snow Crash** is a virus to which computer programmers are particularly vulnerable because of the neuroinguistic



pathways in their brains — "Your nerves grow new connections as you use them — the axons split and push their way between the dividing glial cells — your bio-ware self-modifies — the software becomes part of the hardware." This is a virus which spreads from the computer screen to the human victim via the optic nerve, (some people with scientific training may find this a little hard to swallow, but the argument is internally self-consistent and well-presented), the disease may also be spread through the blood of an infected person. The effect of the virus is to attack the parts of the brain dealing with language and logic. The most obvious symptom of its presence is "speaking in tongues" which reduces an individual's speech to monosyllabic babble. This is related to the biblical story of the Tower of Babel and much Sumerian history and Mythology is imparted.

Snow Crash is being delightfully spread by L Bob Rife, a self-made Church magnate with a hatred for programmers, who wants to take over the world. In his employ is Raven, a large man bearing the tattoo 'POOR IMPULSE CONTROL' on his forehead, and with a nuclear warhead attached to his motorbike and an impossible sword in his hand. The action is fast; the delivery dryly funny, and in the end the world is saved.

Although the narrative follows the expected path of the American thriller, expectations are undermined in a number of subtle ways: the female characters are brighter and more competent than the men; the villain is more sexually attractive than the hero; the real victories are achieved by brain power rather than brawn; technology is shown to be vulnerable, and when the world is saved our heroine goes home to her Mom and carries on life as normal.

This delightful novel takes the now well-worn themes of Cyberpunk and makes fun of them: instead of the *Sprawl*, we have rampant suburbia; where man merges with machine the result is seen as pathetic; corporations are mocked as purveyors of bland routine through the omnipresent three-ring binder; extrapolation is pushed to the brink of absurdity.

Stephenson's extrapolation and explication of computer technology is unimpeachable, his bio-science is somewhat more shaky, and his info-dumps of Sumerian material are too lengthy, and not sufficiently related to the plot. It is worth working through these passages though, because the story is witty, well told, crammed with incident and character, and the twined themes of information and virus are capable of interpretation on many levels.

Virtual Light is a fine novel, and it is interesting to see how exposure to the reality of the hacker world has coloured Gibson's vision, but when it comes to re-examining the territory of Cyberpunk in the light of experience, **Snow Crash** is a landmark novel; Cyberpunk can no longer be written straightforward.

William Gibson
Virtual Light
Viking, 1993, 296pp, £14.99

Neal Stephenson
Snow Crash
ROC, 1993

and McCarthytic witchhunts that shows no sign of its nearly forty years.

As **Strange Dreams** is a personal selection, it perhaps expects a personal response. Stephen Donaldson has picked stories by several of my favourite short story writers, yet in many cases I would have chosen different stories (Shepard's 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule' for example). Still, it was good to be reminded of these others, and in the case of Ed Bryant to find a story unknown to me by this neglected author.

It was equally good, if not better, to find the totally new in John M Ford's 'As Above, So Below' and Patricia McKillip's medieval fantasy 'The Lady Of The Skulls' which was perhaps predictable in its result yet told with vigour and style, and seemingly original to this book.

There are disappointments here. Walter Jon William's Liavek story 'Consequences' is over-long and demonstrates far too many of the clichés of modern genre fantasy, and I've never taken to C.J. Cherryh's fantasy though her SF has sometimes impressed. In fact, though Donaldson offers no restraining definition of fantasy, this anthology suggests that many of the best stories, and perhaps this is true of any genre, are those which refuse to conform so closely to the norms of that genre.

For all its shapelessness, this is a good collection, with several great stories in it. That I would argue over individual choices is no bad thing, because if nothing else, this is a stimulating book full of pointers and neglected trails. It only lacks biographical details on contributors to ease and encourage the further exploration Donaldson's lead should engender.

Sheila Gilluly
The Emperor of Earth Above
Headline, 1993

Reviewed by Valerie Housden

Our hero's name is Aengus and he is a pirate, he is also a mage, is in love with the prince's girl, keeps painting scenes from the life of his ancestor, Colin Mariner, and has fought the evil lord of the Dark Fire. Unfortunately he also has total amnesia. So when he is shipwrecked, alone, with a seriously broken leg, on a tropical island the friendly natives call him Red Fish on account of his hair and summon their local mage who is unable to do anything about his memory loss but does see him as the one who will take over when he dies. Aengus helps the natives get their revenge on raiders who sack the village. However the marauders return, massacre the villagers and take the children to the Forbidden City to be sacrificed to feed the Emperor on the Day the Sun is eaten, so he promptly sets off on a quest to rescue them.

This fantasy contains every cliché going, and yet it is neither a parody nor a load of rubbish. The twists that enliven the climactic struggle in the Forbidden City are clearly signalled throughout the story and still manage to surprise the reader when they occur. The contrasts between the carefully drawn tropical setting and the very Celtic memories which break through Aengus' fugue now and again, are well managed. The natives not only speak a different language, they have a different

culture which Aengus has to come to terms with. The story is told in a serious manner, with light relief when necessary, but with due consideration for the tragic episodes. And the characters are (mostly) credible people, although I have my doubts about the talking mouse.

This novel is one in a series, and obviously I would have understood more if I had read the earlier ones. However I did not find this spoils my enjoyment of an intriguing tale well told. It is not great literature and is not breaking ground in fantasy writing, but it is good, competently crafted entertainment. I am not a fantasy fan and would not normally spend money on this sort of thing. However I am tempted to borrow the other volumes from the library.

Laurel K. Hamilton
Guilty Pleasures
NEL, 1993, 266pp £4.99
Reviewed by Tanya Brown

Guilty Pleasures takes us to an alternate St. Louis, where zombies and were-rats hang out in fast-food joints after dark. These are heady days. It's just two years since the Addison Vs Clark lawsuit defined "what life was, and what death wasn't". Suddenly, the American Dream has been extended to the undead — and a whole, uniquely American sub-culture has congealed around them, from action groups like Humans Against Vampires to Guilty Pleasures itself, the world's first vampire strip club. Humans come to scream and stay to be seduced. Maybe they get hooked in the vampire's kiss, but it's a safe terror.

Enter the Executioner, Anita Blake, vampire slayer and animator (we're talking zombies, not cartoons) has been hired by the master vampires of the city to find out who, or what, is killing vampires and tearing out their hearts. The trail leads from a hen night that goes horribly wrong, via a suburban freak party (rather like an orgy, but with vampires), to the Church of Eternal Life — the only religion to practise what it preaches, though you have to over 18 to be converted. Anita, a cynical, Dr Seuss-quoted Episcopalian, isn't seduced by the promise of immortality, and has the scars to prove it. With her friend Edward — "I'm the Executioner, he was Death" — she is drawn towards a very real, and terrifying, heart of darkness.

Like all the best speculative fiction, **Guilty Pleasures** doesn't labour its point. First and foremost it's a crime novel with a startling denouement. Beneath the fast pacing and exotica, however, there's a complex society in which the supernatural is something to be confronted in everyday life, something that won't crawl back under the bed when the lights go on. Someone who's scared of being bitten by a werewolf can be inoculated against lycanthropy; or a man who wants to apologise to his dead daughter can have her raised as a Zombie. Life's never that simple, though; the supernatural merely presents a new set of problems.

Hamilton isn't offering us a trite, good-versus-bad whodunnit. The outstanding characteristic of the book is the variety of evil which it describes: it's refreshing post-Anne

Thick & Fast

David V Barrett

Has anyone here not read Tom Holt yet? Is it still necessary for me to compare him with Terry Pratchett? Oh, well, then, but in that case I insist on invoking the name of Douglas Adams as well (after all, Pratchett kept being compared with Adams until he became more famous). Okay, lets get it over with: to put it simply, think of everything you love about Pratchett or Adams: it's here in Holt. Think of everything you loathe about Pratchett or Adams; it isn't. Right, can I get on with the review now, please?

Holt is pouring them out; or Orbit is catching up with his output. *Overtime* was published in hardback last January, **Here Come the Sun** last May, **Graiblazers** this January, and **Faust Among Equals** will arrive this May. And thick and fast they came at last, and more and more. Good. When a Holt drops on the doormat, I start it that day; in contrast, I haven't got around to the last couple of Pratchett's yet; Adams? — who he?

Overtime is a romp through history, with a typical Holt wet hero, a 2nd World War pilot, Guy G Oodlet (gosh!) who is saved from crashing when Blondel pops up in his palne. Blondel is still looking for Richard Coeur de Lion, after all these years, and takes Guy along with him on his travels, meanwhile Guy falls in love with Blondel's beautiful but appalling sister. The gateways through time are all those doors marked "Private: No Admittance"; you can find them in any public building, including Cromwell's parliament. There's also a trio of cross-century insurance brokers who decide to become Blondel's management, and arrange huge gigs for him throughout time. King Richard, meanwhile, spends 800 years sitting in a prison cell, talking to the obligatory rat, feeding it his food: "After a couple of sips, it looked up, shook its head and slunk away. From a far corner of the cell came the small, clear sound of a rat vomiting." Rats aren't actually able to vomit, but I love the image. I also love the running joke of Guy's utter inability to hit anyone he shoots at.

In **Here Come the Sun** Holt's heroine Jane is, for a change, supremely efficient and competent. She has to be, she's just been given a job sorting out the Civil Service department that runs the Earth. Not just the Earth itself; the Sun has to be cranked up and piloted across the sky every day; it has a sprung gasket, and it's long overdue for its next service. Then some joyriders nick it and Jane has to come up with a solution; she distracts the Sun's population by creating a diversion: the biggest car boot sale ever, which gives the immortals the opportunity to get rid of 20,000 years of accumulated junk, and makes enough money "for the workshops of heaven to cast, found, finish and launch a brand new, all-alloy sun with teflon bumpers and an ABS braking system." The immortals don't like being called either angels or devils; "we are a distinct metaphysical group with our own unique cultural and spiritual identity, and I'd be grateful if you'd respect that." The Civil Service parody is predictable, but that's the

whole point; that's what makes it so hugely enjoyable. In **Graiblazers** Boamund, an idealistic but not-very-bright knight, wakens after 1500 years of enchanted sleep and is told to find the Holy Grail. He's reunited with the five remaining Chivaliers of the Sangrail, who are now a pizza-delivery man, a window cleaner, a market trader, a "resting" actor and an insurance salesman, and not best pleased at "Snotty" Boamund turning up to disrupt their lives. Their faithful dwarf Toenail has more nous than the rest of them put together. Their three preparatory quests take up most of the rest of the book: to find the Apron of Invincibility in deepest Australia, the Personal Organiser of Wisdom in Atlantis, and the Socks of Inevitability at the North Pole. When you find that other characters include Simon Magus (aka Joseph of Arimathea), the Queen of Atlantis (an off-shore tax-haven selling dubious insurance policies), and her ex-husband Klaus, a bad-tempered Father Christmas, you know that mythologies are going to get tangled in a typically Holtian fashion. Who cooked the Last Supper, and annoyed Christ by making him do the washing up afterwards? Which Wise Man gave the baby a pair of socks?

Like all of Tom Holt's novels, this is hilarious nonsense. The heroes, as usual, are quite feckless, the scrapes they get into are gloriously over-the-top, the plot is utterly inevitable and the story-line ridiculously complicated. The whole thing is quite excellent.

These are just slices of each book; the plots are so wonderfully convoluted that a synopsis wouldn't be much shorter than the books themselves. Sometimes the humour bledges you into submission; sometimes it's so subtle it almost sneaks past without you noticing. Holt's distorted visions of reality are very British, and truer to life than any newspaper — but a damn sight funnier. I was going to compare him to a couple of other British SF/fantasy humourous writers I know of, but there's no need; Holt stands out on his own. Oh, and his publishers have stopped using Josh Kirby covers; that's a good move. Makes my point really. If you *haven't* read any Tom Holt, go out and buy one now. At least one. But don't blame me for any laughter-induced injuries.

Tom Holt
Overtime
Orbit, 1993 243pp, £14.99hc £4.99 Pb

Here Comes the Sun
Orbit, 1993, 282pp, £14.99hc £4.99 Pb

Graiblazers
Orbit, 1994 298pp £14.99pp

Rice, to find vampires who, despite their supernatural glamour, aren't the much-maligned good guys, but are genuinely and inhumanly evil. Neither are they the nastiest characters in the book; there's very little type-casting here. **Guilty Pleasures** invites us to look beneath the surface — in more ways than one, since the the cover artwork might lead one to assume that this is nothing more scary than bad porn.

Mike Jeffries
Stone Angels

Harper Collins, 8/93, 301pp, £8.99
Reviewed by Colin Bird

This is a handsome book with a stylish cover by Geoff Taylor and stark illustrations by the author. This novel is dark fantasy rather than horror and is aimed at fantasy fans who would not enjoy a full-blooded spine-chiller.

The story concerns an evil angel, Abaddon, who exists in the form of a blood-stone statue in Norwich Cathedral. The cathedral was built on the site of a pagan temple where ritual sacrifice was practised and Sammeal, the angel of death, accepted souls into the Gates of Hell. Sammeal is trapped under the cathedral but the stone angel, Abaddon, is periodically revived to commit ritual murder and thus resurrect Sammeal. The plot is uncovered by ecclesiastical archaeologist Jarvin Mandrake, together with Joni, a pitiful wastrel, who witnesses the murder of a fellow tramp in the cathedral. Jarvin is psychologically disturbed by a previous brush with the little demons who act as Abaddon's evil helpers. The story boils to a predictable climax as Jarvin frees a good angel to do battle with Abaddon before Sammeal can be released.

This is a story driven by visual ideas, resulting in a few sections where the stilted narrative and overheated prose cramp the flow. There are several nice touches and a good use of the cathedral as a centre for the action. Jarvin finds examples through his archaeological investigations suggesting craftsmen throughout the history of the church had witnessed terrible deeds which were suppressed everywhere except in their carvings and illustrations. Ultimately the story and characters lack substance but it's a pleasant enough read.

Paul Kearney
A Different Kingdom

Gollancz, 1993, 310pp, £15.99
Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

In the rural Ireland of the post-war years, young Michael Fay falls down the bank beside the river and finds himself in a different world, peopled by strange and frightening inhabitants. Although he returns swiftly to reality, from then on Michael's childhood is twisted out of its proper course by repeated encounters with, and brief excursions into, this other world.

The young Michael's closest relationship is with his Aunt Rose, herself a girl in her teens. Rose brings shame on their family by becoming pregnant and is forced away from home to have her baby in secret. After her death is reported to him, Michael becomes convinced

that somehow she is still alive in the other world and that he must go in quest of her.

As he grows older, Michael has become less afraid of the strangeness, and more fascinated by it, particularly when he comes to know the mysterious girl, Cat, who reminds him of Rose and becomes his lover. They journey together in the Other place, the Wildwood, encountering its inhabitants, some helpful and some threatening, and none wholly to be trusted, and pursued by the Horseman, whom Michael equates with the Devil. When Michael makes the decision to leave, still without discovering Rose, he returns to the body of the adolescent boy he was when he left, but retains the memories of his life in the Wildwood, which warp his capacity for a normal life in the real world. He must visit the Wildwood once again, to discover the truth about Cat, the Horseman and about himself.

Stylistically I found this book uneven. The narrative line is tangled, and I wasn't convinced that all the flashbacks or flashforwards were logically necessary. The encroaching of the Other Place on the real world is sometimes described with great subtlety, whereas at other times, such as the point where a mysterious animal is seen snuffling round the farm buildings, I felt that the writer was relying on ideas that have been used many times before.

Michael, the central character, is the only one described with any complexity. He is appealing, the flavour of childhood accurately conveyed, though as he grows up his naivete and callowness can be irritating, and the theme of his developing sexuality is explored with such thoroughness that boredom sets in. Still, because the novel's point of view stays with him, the reader stays on his side, and is glad when he achieves his final reconciliation.

The scene-painting in the novel is striking, and divides into two parts: the depiction of the mundane detail of life in rural Ireland forty years ago, and the portrayal of the Wildwood. I found the former much more successful, with a concrete accuracy that is totally compelling. I was less sure about the fantasy elements. Though the writing is vigorous and expressive, I never felt quite translated into the other world, nor convinced by the pull of its beauty or the force of its horrors.

I did not find this book completely successful, but I thought it was interesting and worth reading. It goes hard with me, as a reader of fantasy, to say that I enjoyed the mainstream elements more, but I think that the novel's greatest strength is in its minute observation of what is, for most of us, an unfamiliar way of life.

Tanith Lee Nightshades

Headline, 1993, 311pp, £16.99
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This collection contains 'Nightshade', a previously unpublished 100-page work, and twelve previously published short stories in various styles and moods. The collection is a nice demonstration of how Lee's fiction works by creating a strong sense of locale and milieu. Style and sensory detail evoke place, place evokes mood, and each story grows from that as though it were the only story, the

archetypal story of that time and place.

'Nightshade' explores one of Lee's favourite moods; rich, decadent and dark. Set in an unspecified Mediterranean locale, it focusses on the empty relationship of Kristian, a cold and wealthy collector of rare and beautiful objects, and Sovaz, his wife. The god Dionysus is invoked by a murder, and inevitably madness and terror ensue.

'The Mermaid' (11pp) is set in a Celtic-fringe fishing village, and is a dark-fantasy reworking of the traditional encounter of man and mermaid — a creature half-woman, half-fish, and wholly fascinating. 'After the Guillotine' (15pp) appears to be an out-take from a historical novel about the French Revolution. It is a straightforward account, from a reincarnationist perspective, of the experiences of four souls after death. 'Meow' (11pp) is a cat horror story in a hard-boiled American style. 'Il Bacio (Il Chiave)' (17pp) recreates the illicit passion and fascination of the Renaissance Italy of the Borgias. 'A Room with a View' (15pp) recounts the life of a sentient room in a seaside lodging house.

'Paper Boat' (15pp) is a story based on the death of Shelley, and for me was one of the least powerful in the collection, perhaps because its mainspring lies in the tensions of a twisted set of relationships, not in the sense of locale. 'Blue Vase of Ghosts' (21pp), set in a generic fantasy landscape, deals with the true desire of a magician whose power has brought him, finally satiety and boredom. 'Pinewood' (8pp) has no fantastic elements, but is a straightforward account of a woman unable to come to terms with the reality of her situation in life. 'The Janfia Tree' (16pp) is a dark reworking of the dryad legend — a tree spirit lover. 'The Devil's Rose' (23pp) is a second story with no overtly fantastic elements. Set in an unspecified Central-European provincial town, it is a commonplace, though horrific, melodrama of dream, sexual desire, and betrayal. 'Huzdra' (19pp) is a traditional-type fantastic horror story about the working of a seven year curse, placed by a murdered peasant girl on a sorcerous Count and Countess. 'Three Days' (31pp), the final story in the collection, is a fine psychological study much weakened by the unnecessary melodrama of its ending.

In summary, this collection seems to be representative of both the strengths and weaknesses of Lee's short fiction. The strengths are the rich descriptive language, her strong sense of locale and atmosphere, and her keen psychological insight. The weaknesses are a love of melodrama, a fascination with decadence, and a focus on sex and death which stales with repetition. Don't read all these at once.

Andre Norton Brother to Shadows

Avon Books, 1993, 311pp, \$20.00
Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Brother to Shadows is the story of Jofre, who was discovered as a small child in the wreck of a spacecraft on the planet Asborgan. Knowing nothing of himself, not even his own race, he is trained as a member of an elite caste of bodyguards and assassins, the Shadows. At the opening of the novel, he is

rejected by this organisation on the death of his Master, and thrown onto his own resources.

The novel falls into three linked sections. In the first, Jofre takes service with a scholar and historian, Zurzal, a being of a reptilian race, who has developed a device to recreate the past; in the second Jofre and Zurzal are kidnapped and taken to a planet where the ruler wishes to make use of Zurzal's device; on this occasion they become involved with another shadow, a woman, and a semi-telepathic creature, the Jat. The third episode returns to Zurzal's original mission, in which the threads of the story are drawn together. The book ends with the implication that sequels are possible.

A new novel by Andre Norton is bound to arouse interest. I began reading with very high expectations; perhaps this is why I was to some extent disappointed. There is no very great complexity or ambiguity in any of the principal characters, and although the various alien worlds are described vividly, I never felt that I'd been there, or, indeed that I wanted to go. The complexities of the plot are on a level of intrigue, rather than arising organically from the characters.

I found the language particularly dense and difficult, especially in the early chapters, where Andre Norton is taking us into an unfamiliar world and culture. Sometimes I found myself reading a sentence twice because the structure made the meaning obscure. As the plot progresses and the action speeds up, this became less of a problem, but I never felt totally at ease with it.

If this is the opening book of a sequence, it is perhaps unfair to make an absolute judgement at this stage. I found myself reading on, because there is a lot to enjoy. I hoped for the success of the central characters because they are attractive and they deserve to succeed. However, as a book by a writer I respect as much as Andre Norton, I found **Brother in Shadows** unsatisfactory.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch Traitors

Millennium, 1993

Reviewed by Carol Ann Green

Fifteen year old Emilio Diate runs from his homeland, The Kingdom, in fear of his life after the slaughter of his family, by the Queen. **Traitors** follows Diate as he makes a new life for himself on the island of Golga. As the protégé of the Golgoth, he finds a place amongst the Gologans, and finally returns to The Kingdom to avenge his family twenty years later.

But, **Traitors** is about a lot more than the bald précis above might indicate. The novel is about treason, treachery, hate, betrayal, revenge and rebellion. At the same time it is about family, loyalty, forgiveness, trust, peace and love. The two sides of the same coin.

Diate's father dies because of his belief, that the Talent system operated by the Kingdom elevates 'Talents, and [for]ces' the rest to a hard-scrabble existence.' (p7) Diate has no time for his father's politics, but flees the country rather than stay and dance for the government that killed his family.

Expecting execution, he seeks asylum with the Kingdom's enemy, Golga. He is adopted

by the ruler, the Golgoth and eventually finds his place amongst the Gulgans as the Head of the Detectives. His loyalty to the Golgoth is complete. "They would never know what true loyalty felt like, unless someone had given them a second chance." (p36)

With the arrival of two women on the scene, Martina, a badly injured Kingdom member, and Sheba, with whom Diate falls in love, only to find that she is the Kingdom's Minister for Culture; the pace of the novel changes. Diate becomes caught up when the Golgoth agrees to meet the Kingdom's Queen for Peace Talks, ordered by the man he loves as his father to publicly betray him, Diate is torn between his old world and his new world.

Traitors is a novel rich in human emotions, it explores the dichotomy between love and hate, loyalty and treachery, trust and betrayal. The plot twists and turns throughout the novel and you can never be complacent about the outcome of the novel. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and recommend it to all. I for one will be on the look out for Rusch's other work.

Dan Simmons Lovedeath

Headline, 1993, £8.99, 306pp
Reviewed by Kev McVeigh

Lovedeath is a collection of five novellas linked to the twin themes of the title. Each approaches these universal themes differently, covering the entire span of Simmons previous output, Horror and Science Fiction mingle with American Mainstream, a Native American Fantasy, and a Historical Fantasy.

The Novella is often claimed to be the ideal form in science fiction, and some of the finest works have been of that length. It is a difficult form in many ways, but Simmons, who has at times been considered almost unable to produce books of less than several hundred pages, here seems to find the constraints of his chosen form to his advantage. The novella is less common than it was, but these five easily make up for the lack elsewhere.

The first story, 'Entropy's Bed At Midnight' won a Locus Award for Best Novella. A man and his daughter travel away from the ruins of his marriage on a short holiday together. He reflects on how fate, or Entropy, has brought him to this. At the same time episodes from his Orange File of bizarre Insurance Claims come to mind. The story proceeds with a growing sense of impending disaster through a moody meditations on the role of accident in Love, to a neat twist in the final paragraph.

From the mainstream of the first story to a nasty little horror story, 'Dying in Bangkok'. Simmons has written about AIDS on several previous occasions, this time he creates an unpleasant character fighting a creature who could have easily been created by Clive Barker. This is not a story for the faint-hearted, and it makes no concessions to political correctness as Simmons illustrates the lengths some people will go for gratuitous pleasure, but at the same time it contains a rich streak of eroticism which only serves to highlight the multiple horrors within.

In the third story Simmons takes a new line once again. 'Sleeping With Teeth Women' is a fantasy about a young Lakota Sioux who is somehow destined to save his tribe. 17 year

old Hoka Ushte is a very reluctant messiah however. As with his Bangkok and other settings, Simmons' research into the Lakota mythos is deeply convincing, creating a superb fantasy milieu within a real world. There is also an unusual element of the personal in the story as Simmons lambast the condescending attitude of the film 'Dances With Wolves' with undeniable passion and reason.

The weakest story here concerns a futuristic world where the drug of the title 'Flashback' allows users to relive a chosen moment of their past. An old idea, but Simmons uses a dirty realism and neat ironies to create a dark side to John Varley or perhaps even Robert Sheckley.

Finally, the biggest story here in all sense, is 'The Great Lover' in which the fictional Great War poet Edwin Rooke tells of his encounters with The Lady during the Battle of the Somme. Interspersed with real poetry by Brooke, Sassoon, Owen and others (which all blend perfectly with Simmons own descriptive passages), this is a historical fantasy worthy of Tim Powers.

Each of these five novellas feels bigger than it really is, and one could imagine them stretched and padded to make competent novels on their own. Instead they are tight, and hence potent, and as a collection they fit together to create a sum greater than their individual parts. In his introduction, Simmons explains how his intended title was **Liebestod**, and there is a recurrent essence of Tragedy here but at the same time the author is on an epistemological quest (as demonstrated by all his works).

Joan Slonczewski Daughter of Elysium Avonova, 1993, 521pp, \$25.00 Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Writers use words in many different ways. They use them to try to simulate reality, or to disorientate and jar your faith in reality. They use them so you believe in the truth of what you read or so you know from the first that it is fiction. They use them in a hard, stripped-down, barren statement of a language, or in a lush, layering of description upon description that is almost tactile. Joan Slonczewski uses language to awe her readers. She writes in a way that is designed to make the reader surrender to her embrace, to trust her implicitly as a guide through the exotic and alien world she has created.

Her technique is simple and familiar. In the first page she hits you with words that trigger no accurate visual image, with names that sound no cultural echo. In the first page alone of this weighty new book we encounter; Ocean Moon, Doctor Blackbear Whiteclan, Shora, Sunflower, his goddess Raincloud (a person, not a belief), the Clickers of Bronze Sky, Hawklaton, rei-gi garments, fireweed, native sharers, ageless Elysians and more. Out of around 300 words, probably as many as 50 are not doing any of the things we would expect words to do — connote, denote, signify, mean something or at least paint a picture. These images are hazy, because no proper description gives meaning to the words. Relationships do not gel because the

words seem to be linked awkwardly according to some design we haven't yet discovered.

This is not a new technique, nor is it a bad one. You will find something similar from writers as diverse as James Tiptree Jr. and Mary Gentle, for instance, and in fantasy it is so common that it has become almost a cliché. It serves one important purpose; it says to the reader, this is a lie, it is so different from your experience that language has become different, it is complex that you can not encompass it in words you know. Fair enough, anything truly alien would indeed demand a new language to describe it. And out of this alienness we are being told; do not try and make sense of it, just trust me, the writer, and enjoy the exoticism I conjure.

But this technique can only work when you trust the author. When, on the second page, you get "any contrivance that produced light and speech from no discernible origin" your faith begins to waver. The, a few pages on, we come to "the air inside breathed of floral perfumes". These aren't words or phrases which make you stop and look again because, in the common deployment of language, there is something wrong. The spell is broken, for words built on words depend on a delicate magic, and such misuse of common English takes away the prop upon which the alien is supported. The complex world she should be creating becomes a series of incoherent images, for we are no longer overawed enough to assume that this really does make sense. Time and again Slonczewski betrays a deafness to what words actually do, that makes her whole world pop like a soap bubble.

Elysium is a city within a sphere that floats in the waters of Ocean Moon (no mention of the planet to which it is a satellite). The sophisticated inhabitants of Elysium have developed a kind of immortality, along with a rigid and elaborate social order, but they are threatened by the barbarian Uruites who are threatening war against their civilised worlds. So the goddess Raincloud is summoned from the backwoods world of Bronze Sky where she is one of the rare interpreters of the Uruite language. With her comes her husband Blackbear who will join the immortality research team. (Slonczewski has a reputation as a feminist writer, but here all she does is reverse the usual domestic arrangements of the Whiteclan family, which doesn't seem particularly radical.)

We are on familiar ground. One lone heroine turns out to be the catalyst who will solve key puzzles and make things turn out right in the end. Along the way we get a cheap Cook's Tour of various peoples and social orders. And somehow none of it rings true.

Kathryn S Starbuck India's Story

Harper Collins, 1993, 338pp, £4.99
Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

India, novice in psi-training, continually complains that she doesn't know what place she is in or at what time she is there... readers, initially at any time, may become equally plaintive. Refugee from a violently abusive big-time drug-peddling father, India gets

herself off-planet and pursues a career in the Orion sector: that is, in her normal "planetary" life. Synchronously, however, she has been removed to a "dimensional" existence on other planes of being and consciousness. The release of her latent psi-potential, is an objective of her teachers there, who encounter emotional and amnesic blocks in India's psyche. To move her from the first stage of education at Level One to a further stage at the (interdimensional) Hostel, where, as a maid-of-all-work, her training is advanced, she has to travel through the No-Place, a grey limbo, abode of the Disembodied and guarded by "Mama", a spidery monster. There she is in peril of being swallowed by the Collective Unconscious. If this sounds confusing — it is: and confusion is not lessened by interludes of dreaming; by unexpected narrational transitions from one period or mode of consciousness to another; and by some of the dialogue being "in plain" while at other times it is italicised as being telepathic.

As I've said, India herself doesn't find it easy. That, in fact, makes it more possible to empathise with her. Anara, her chief instructor, explains to her that the Collective Unconsciousness is 'sort of the medulla oblongata of humanity, a kind of societal id... The Disembodied are never far from it. they never reach contact with the Greater Consciousness.' The narrative continues: "What is the Greater Consciousness?" asked India curiously. "That's not something we covered in Psych. 101." "If you sense the faint echo of Wonderland in that, you are surely not mistaken. There are allusions and parallels in dream and "virtual" imagery: a fall through the fissured ground; a confusion of doors and keys; doors which access surprising lawns and vistas. There are Alice-like reflections ("People come and go so quickly here!" India murmured to herself.).

Once the metapsychic goings-on are disentangled — or you have become acclimatised to them — the novel becomes increasingly enjoyable; particularly in the second half, where the locale mostly varies between the No-Place and future Earth, and where the action is centred on a fantastic chase from Quebec to San Francisco, India and Theo (a self-appointed grandfatherly

minder) travel by land cruiser, bicycle and trans-continental subway, pursued by Harry and Grindle, incompetent agents of a power anxious to control India's mind and the information hidden there. They reminded me of pantomime broker's men. all this is good value and often very funny. The progressive removal of India's psychic barriers leads to a denouement which makes sense, more or less, of the whole bizarre story. Kathryn Starbuck is married to Raymond Feist and this is her second novel. Weird as it is, weird as the further reaches of virtual reality, it offers a strain of fantasy both evocative and original. It will be well worth looking out for more.

David Sutton
& Stephen Jones (Eds)
Dark Voices 5
Pan, 1993, 381pp
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

This is the latest in Pan's series of horror anthologies, (which has been running steadily for 34 years, by the way) and what can you say about a series that has run for so long and scared so many people, (I remember the ones that I read at school...)

There is a side of most people that makes them like having adrenaline pumped into their heart by devious machinations of a horror writer. The interesting thing about following a series like this one is that you can chart the trends in horror. A couple of years ago I wrote,

"This is one for all of those folk out there who won't read horror because it's full of blood and gore and other such tasteless stuff. This book contains 20 stories, very few of which have any blood in them at all."

Today's horror harks back to the bad old blood-filled days of yore when the scare was less psychological and more "look at all these guts here, heh, heh". This collection contains 20 stories in its 381 pages, most of which reflect this current fashion. Here there is blood aplenty, not all of it shed by horrible monsters, some, like in Nicholas Royle's 'The Editor' is almost psychosomatic, while the blood (and gore) in Melanie Tem's 'Phantom' is most definitely self-spilled.

Of course, it isn't always so gory, Les Daniels' 'Loser', a chilling tale for the image-conscious nineties, and Daniel Fox's slow-building 'How She Dances' are firmly rooted in the darker crannies of human psychology.

There are monsters here too, both nonhuman, like Brian Mooney's 'Lady of Dubhan Alla...'

"As he passed her, the woman struck at him with those poisonous claws, ripping into the jacket he wore but missing his flesh. Canavan back-handed aside and ran."

... and human, like the rich man who buys Gerassimos Flamotas' daughter in Simon Clark's 'Gerassimos Flamotas: A Day in the Life'.

The quality of writing in these stories is generally high, reflecting the inclusion of such talents as Rob Holdstock and Kim Newman, and reflecting also the higher writing standards that are demanded in the horror field in general these days.

No collection can be perfect, the hope is

always that there are more stories you like than the stories you don't like. This one works for me.

John Whitbourn
Popes and Phantoms
Gollancz, 1993, 289pp, £15.99
Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Having completely warped the course of history as we know it in his award winning debut *A Dangerous Energy*, John Whitbourn attempts to place it back more or less on its true path in his second novel. This formidable undertaking is carried out through the agency of one Admiral Slovo, pirate, mercenary and instrument of the mysterious Vehme, a secret organisation with a long term plan to mould the course of history to its own ends.

The career of Admiral Slovo, from his rise to power and recruitment by the Vehme, and his subsequent part in the most formative moments of European Renaissance history, is recounted as a series of episodic flashbacks from the end of his life. Although in some way, Slovo's life is already written. His interventions in the lives of the brisk succession of Popes and Monarchs at the turn of 16th century Europe and England seem already foretold in the Vehme'd guiding Book. Slovo, armed with a Stoic detachment, and a concealed stiletto, is merely placed here and there as an historical catalyst, and events take their predicted course through others more easily swayed by life's passions.

In one sense, *Popes and Phantoms* is an engaging historical romp through the heady, and often bloody, flowering of the middle Renaissance to the Reformation. Slovo rubs shoulders with the Borgias and a haunted and avarencious Henry VII, with Martin Luther and Thomas Cromwell, Machiavelli and Michelangelo, warping the career of each to the Vehme's purpose.

Historical and biographical settings are underscored with footnotes at the end of the book, which begin to prove as distracting as they are informative. As, after a while, does the mock portentousness of the chapter titles, such as 'The year 1510: THE FLOWERING OF THE REFORMATION & FATHER DROZ'S LITTLE OUTFIT: A symposium on faith, carnal lust and sausage. I guiltily sow weeds in the fields of Mother Church.' A conceit Whitbourn carries over from a *A Dangerous Energy*, and that Moorcock has used in books like *Gloriana and Dancers at the End Of Time*.

In one respect, though, this is a Fantasy of an alternative history that could have been. Left to its own devices, destiny seems prepared to take an entirely different course, and Slovo is granted brief visions of radically altered England or a grim industrial Venice. In this latter episode the book slides into a not entirely successful whimsy, hinged around a brace of groaning puns, that sits oddly with the darker and more malicious humour of the book. Perhaps Whitbourn has a particular dislike of accountants as he trains Slovo's artillery on the obvious icon of Luca Pacioli's vision of a future ruled by double entry book-keeping.

Here, too, comes the most jarring anachronism (alongside a couple of misplaced



Exploring the Long Sun

Dave Langford

One problem with reviewing Gene Wolfe is that often there's so little to say that isn't trespassing — peeling away at least some of his veils of sneakiness and indirection. Another is that with only the first two books of a new series to hand, critics can confidently expect a gleefully grinning Wolfe to pull the rug from under any too-rash understanding of what's going on...

As far as I can see, it is not actually stated anywhere in **Nightside**'s text that the setting, the 'whorf', is a vast generation starship modelled like a cylindrical space colony (or like Clarke's Rama), with its artificial 'long sun' running down the central axis. Part of this emerges in the blurb — which after all has to tell us *something* — and the picture will soon be evident to any SF reader used to picking up on clues like the skylights visible overhead when the sun is shaded, or the scavenged building material called shiprock. And does 'whorf' hint at cloud patterns shaped by Coriolis force down the long axial vista? Pay attention! (I made that tiny speculation before reading **Lake**, which explicitly gives another though not incompatible origin for the name.)

This new sequence **The Book of the Long Sun** is set 'in the world of **The Book of the New Sun**'... but remotely and not near the period we know. The whorf's launch is ancient history in the **Book**, its presumably slower-than-light technology long superseded by the mirrors and ships of the Hierodules. As though in passing, **Lake** drops the name of the autarch who once ruled many worlds and ordered the launch of this 'starcrosser': we have met him in **The Sword of the Lictor** and **The Urth of the New Sun**, after which his mere name adds a whiff of gigantic vanity and hubris to the star-voyage. That allusion apart, it is not necessary to have read the four or five books of the **Book**.

Now, three centuries on, the whorf's launch is forgotten history in this new series too ... a

venerable sf tradition since Heinlein's **Universe** (though here longer and variously reliable memories are owned by certain AIs and robots — called 'chemical' beings or 'chems', for all that they appear to be metallic and nuclear-powered). Equipment is dying with age. Dwindling stocks of old-technology slug-guns, 'floator' hovercars and video-phones coexist with swords, pack animals, labour-intensive farming. The gods — whose nature is best indicated by the fact of their heaven being called Mainframe — appear only very rarely at the windows of the electronic altars. The whorf is already old.

Perhaps necessarily, the setting doesn't at first seem as deep and wondrous as Urth in the **Book**. But this is Wolfe, and things are subtler than the easy SF summation above. When the new books' hero Patra Silk, teacher and priest, is touched by a god, it is not one of the nine chief gods of Mainframe who gives him enlightenment and purpose, but the shadowy (though known and accepted) Outsider. There is mystery here, and probably Mystery... we are given to understand that the Outsider is the only god whose dominion and creation extend outside the whorf; and that once, incarnated, he may have driven merchants from a temple. Is it significant that for a little while before violence intervenes in the final chapter of **Lake**, Silk finds himself heading for acclaim in his home city and about to enter it on a donkey?

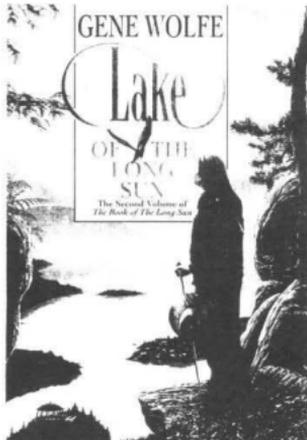
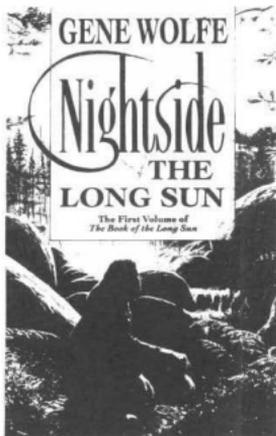
Silk is a new and likeable variant of the Wolfe hero, seen from outside in third-person rather than first-person narrative (cf. Severian, Latro) for a change. He's truly devout and even celibate despite some severe temptations so far ... yet ready to turn his hand to burglary *ad maiorem deorum gloriam* when his church and school are sold off to pay taxes. Silk's bravura attempt to steal them back forms the centrepiece of **Nightside**. The whorf's nightside refers to its criminal

underworld as well as the darkness under the long sun's revolving shade. And there's some nice thieves' cant to go with this: as expected from this author, the more esoteric terms like 'dimber' (meaning approximately 'nifty') can be traced to authentic English historical slang. In the cant, to burgle a residence is — precisely but euphemistically — to "solve" it.

So we shortly find the young, bright, resourceful and entirely inexperienced Silk solving a crime-lord's mansion which is surrounded by high, spiked walls and guarded by a monstrous, tracked killer robot ('talus'), oversized lynxes and birds, novel weapons, etc. People have banged on so much about Wolfe's elusiveness, his games of indirection, that it's worth noting how frequent, well-crafted and straightforward are the passages of high adventure or suspense.

Our hero is also capable of solving problems in the detective sense, like Father Brown. (Little ratiocinative treats keep recurring in this author's work: remember the lochane in **The Shadow of the Torturer** who deduces Severian to be no impostor but a genuine torturer, without so much as looking up from his desk?) Later in **Nightside** Silk unravels a murder in a brothel, uses knowledge painfully gleaned from his earlier adventures to tackle a case of almost literal demonic possession, conducts a ritual cleansing and exorcism, and is rewarded by a numinous encounter with one of the lesser Mainframe goddesses.

All these strange activities appear to be having a catalytic effect on Silk's home city of Viron, one of very many city-states in the whorf, whose democratic Charter has long been suspended along with the office of president or 'caldé'. Instead, a bunch of evidently corrupt councillors (the Ayuntamiento) has held on to power for a period which seems not merely illegal but impossible. There are whispers in the streets,



and by the end of **Nightside** the words "Silk for Caldè" are appearing scrawled on walls...

Lake of the Long Sun illuminates much of what has gone before, with the new light casting longer and darker shadows. Further theophanies occur. This time Silk's journey to the underworld is literal: searching for the secret meeting-place of the Ayuntamiento, he finds himself ensnared and lost in endless tunnels within the skin of the whorl, down where it's colder and closer to space. Here we find the chem soldiers who were placed to defend each city against the others, most "asleep", those on guard worrying that after three centuries the defence plans may no longer suffice: more wheels within wheels.

The deeps also contain humans in biological stasis. Devotees of the **Book** will wonder if it's important that Silk, already lame like Severian, helps call a "dead" woman from the deeps of time as Severian did... Other mysteries and wonders abound, including a window through which Silk at last sees stars and one brief dazzling glimpse of what must surely be, for him and all the whorl's passengers, the New Sun. There are confrontations with members of the Ayuntamiento. We have seemingly come to the brink of revolution and war, with portions of Viron's above-ground human army — prodded in some cases by the electronic goddess who most favours Silk — halting him as leader. The next book is to be called **Caldè of the Long Sun**.

I haven't even mentioned the still unexplained case of apparent vampirism, the secular rationale for possession by gods, the too-obvious-to-see system of naming which is demurely revealed in a glossary at the beginning of **Lake**, the talking night-chough, the thief, whose and other-city spy who variously befriend Silk, the highly-charged dreams and prophecies, the flying men who glide watchfully far above the action (and the subplot about hawking for one with an eagle), the submarine in Lake Lima, the careful delineation of the three females who run the church school with Silk (one human, one chem, one half-and-half), the ultra-black joke when one of those "corrupt" councillors proves to be *literally* so, the inevitable discovery that the tokens used as coins in the whorl are not coins, and much more. These books read so very smoothly that one feels a distinct jolt on looking back to realize how thoroughly crammed they are with colourful invention and incident.

The prose remains fine and precise. There's a temptation to remark that it contains fewer of the deep notes, the magical resonances and ironies that throb through the original **Book**... but many of those moments of the **Book** went unrecognized or half-understood until the entire work was available for rereading as a whole. **The Book of the Long Sun** remains maddeningly incomplete.

So far: vintage Wolfe, indeed. His hand has not lost its cunning. Be sure to buy the whole series.

Gene Wolfe
Nightside the Long Sun
Lake of the Long Sun
NEL 333pp £15.99
Tor 352pp \$22.95

colloquialisms like "OK" and "vibes") as Pacioli's defeated ruling demon confronts Slovo with the threat "I'll be back".

The history that Slovo follows through a series of historical pressure points is identifiably our own, and suggests that things may have turned out entirely differently, though for the better or worse is difficult to say. At the end of his life, Slovo is rewarded with a glimpse in to the future that he has helped to forge. And here, at the end of a life that has followed a course mapped out in the pages of the Vehme's **Book**, he takes his first and last independent action since his twin conversion to the philosophy of Stoicism and the Vehmic cause.

An oddly uneven book at times. One that tries to be several things at once and sometimes dips in the process. Recommended, but I would plump first for the impressive debut **A Dangerous Energy**, and hope that Whitburn can pull off the trick again in his next book.

David Zindell The Broken God

Harper Collins, 1993, 607pp £15.99
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid.

"It is both mysterious and miraculous that roughly the same intelligence necessary to flake a barbed spearpoint is sufficient to discover the theorems of mathematics"

That thought comes roughly half way through this bold and perverse novel. It is the sort of notion which stops you in your tracks, the sort which is littered throughout this book. David Zindell has attempted something few other science fiction writers would seriously contemplate: he has tried to show how human thought — philosophical and religious — will develop over millennia. Time and again you come across such mysteries and miracles.

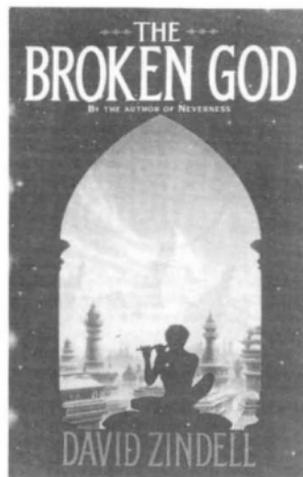
We are in Neverness, the ice-bound city of Zindell's first novel. Mallory Ringess has disappeared, perhaps on a mission to save the Universe from the terrible destruction which is gathering. Now, in this city of cults, he has become almost a god in his own right. And into this religious melange come Danlo the Wild, Mallory's son, raised among the neanderthal Alaloi. The story of his youth is a fairly standard rite of passage, as Danlo enters the college whose medieval regime will train him to become a pilot like his father. We get familiar friendships and enmities forming and dissolving, while Danlo, a *tabula rasa* in this realm of sophisticated beliefs, samples the many religions available, until he becomes the focus of a new sect.

But if the basic plot line is predictable, Zindell has dressed it in a daring and often impressive analysis of the ways man's thinking changes and grows. The pseudo-medieval setting of Neverness is appropriate for this new age of scholasticism where the nuances of intelligence which turn mankind from toolmaker to theoretician become of life-or-death importance. Zindell's exploration of these far future ideologies is painstaking, there is the sort of piling on of detail which is reminiscent of Realist writers trying to recreate the outside world by listing all of its elements. But Zindell is far from a Realist, for the world he is creating is the world of far future imagination, and the hunting down of a

stray "pensée" is much more important than the chronicling of objects or character.

It can be thrilling to watch Zindell work out theories and sophistries, to watch what aspects of human thought will change and what will stay the same. But it can all too often be done at the expense of character, plot and event. On page 222, for instance, we are told "it was this name-passing that led directly to the terrible incident (and to Danlo's terrible discovery) that occurred ten days later at the Academy's main library". The very next line takes us to the library and the day in question; but we are then invited to contemplate the architecture of the library, the functions of the librarians, the inner workings of the library computer, the meaning of the gypsy-like signs of the "harjian", the philosophical underpinning of syntax as a way of comprehending the universe, a new language of "ideoplasts", what it is to be a God, the history of one particular cult, and how a human retro-virus works. Then, after 19 pages of such meditations, there is a brief explosion of incident, far reaching in its effects but quickly over so that the book can move on to further meditations. The plot, the novelistic interplay of incident and character, therefore could be encompassed in a book a third the size of this one. The thought games and philosophy which interrupt the action can be slow and they can be hard work, though it is a testimony to the daring and quality of Zindell's writing that it is never dull.

A perverse work, therefore, that is more text on the future history of human ideas than it is a novel of incident and character development. But it is bold for the same reason, and if I applaud the boldness more than I lament the perversity, it is a measure of how well it is done.



BARBED WIRE

Kisses

Edited by
Maureen Speller

Consider this: in 1992, according to figures mentioned in a recent *Locus*, *Amazing* had a paid circulation of 6,400. By contrast, *SF Age* had achieved a paid circulation of 68,000 at the end of its first year despite, in my opinion, being an inferior product. It won't surprise anyone to learn that TSR has suspended monthly publication of *Amazing* and are, according to Kim Mohan, editor-in-chief, "exploring a redesign in terms of format and schedule. For now, the newsstand edition will be going on temporary hiatus." What this means is anyone's guess, though TSR executive editor Brian Thomson is apparently exploring ways of keeping *Amazing* afloat. Two *Amazing* Stories anthologies are already promised, containing two-thirds new stories, and there is a possibility of a quarterly publication like the old book/anthology issues of *New Worlds*. Perhaps something radical is called for, like advertising the magazine more widely. Very few people read *Amazing* because very few people knew about it and I daresay that the TSR ownership might have led them to suppose that it was all about product placement rather than good fiction. Regular readers of this column will know that I thought very highly of *Amazing* and I'll be sorry to see it disappear. Let us hope that the hiatus is indeed temporary. In the meantime, let the last five issues of *Amazing* set the benchmark for this column, reviewing the American A4 output of the last few months.

"Vidim", the lead story in the August 1993 issue of *Amazing*, was a slightly sentimental offering from Mark Rich which nodded heavily in the direction of Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*. Pilots, stripped of their bodies, navigate between space stations and are obliged to receive entertainment to enable them to maintain their individuality. This is provided by Ents, little more than cerebral gigolos with a head full of memory chips. Petra, who is well aware of her own individuality, thank you,

rejects the Ents wholeheartedly while Rod Teller wants to be honest in his memories and his conversation and rejects the chips. His not-quite-girlfriend, Tiko, has achieved a balance between her art and her work, but also attracted the attention of the Ents' supervisor. You can probably see where this story is heading: boy meets girl, boy loves girl, boy meets spaceship, supervisor fancies girl, supervisor gets come-uppance. And sure enough, it came to pass, in a very lame conclusion.

I single out this story, though, because it marks a theme throughout the five issues of *Amazing* that I'll be discussing, the need to preserve individuality. Science fiction has always thought big: conquering the stars, reshaping planets, wiping out whole races at the flick of a switch, shifting whole populations to colonise a conveniently empty planet. People have always seemed happy to embrace the new technology and even when they questioned it, they questioned in a BIG way. This technology was bad, this was good, this would never be used again and the world would be a better place., or this technology would save millions of lives so who cares if five people disapprove of it. And if we slot the individual human into the cosmic frame, inevitably we have the one pitted against the many. It makes good drama, particularly when the one wins against all the odds but for those whose vision of the world is narrower, for whatever reason, what relevance does it have? In "Vidim", Petra comments: "Individual identity — she could think of nothing more worth valuing" and for all the story's big SF trappings, we are talking about individuals struggling against the loss of their humanity as the world moves on. Which is probably why I like this story a lot more than it really deserves. Technically, it is sloppy and poorly edited but it speaks.

A story in the same issue, "Other Heads" by Arlan Andrews Sr, tackled a similar theme. Gruette, the narrator, is a Retard, because he cannot cope with the hydra rings which most people wear, allowing them access to "other heads". To put it another way, they are able

acquire extra consciousness by putting on a ring, rather as you would insert a memory chip into a computer. It's something almost everyone can do. Society develops to a high degree but then goes into stasis because everyone is so preoccupied with their intellectual existence. In the midst of this serenity, a series of bloody murders occurs. Because no Normal would do such a thing, the Retarded are suspected, but a leading Normal also suspects that only a Retard can solve the problem, as proves to be the case. The denouement is both expected and unexpected. Gruette discovers that he possesses an eidetic memory, which explains why the hydra rings never worked — he never needed one — but his acceptance of his uniqueness is tempered with a sense that he will exploit his skills and a newly-acquired hydra ring as much in revenge for being shut out as to save the Normals who have espoused their own destruction through taking on too many heads. Again, the story is flawed. I particularly liked the point where the narrator commented, "God, this is long-winded. Get to the point!" echoing my own feelings precisely. Nevertheless, I thought Andrews did a fair if intermittent job of exploring what it is like to be outside such a closely-knit society.

September's *Amazing* had a fine story from Ursula Le Guin, "Dancing to Ganam", which tackled the theme in a very different way. A small party of scientists manages to make landfall on a world where one of them has already visited and been accepted. The travelling method, churltencing, can have a peculiar effect on those who use it, affecting their perception of consensual reality in a manner which, I confess, I did not quite understand. Indeed, I suspect it was there simply to set up the arguments about whether what we see and comprehend is really what's there. What Dalzul sees is that he has been made king by these people, which he has. What he has failed to understand is what it means to be king in this place. Anyone with a passing acquaintance with Frazer's *Golden Bough* is probably already suspecting that Dalzul is the Summer King, the sacrifice to be made to keep the land fruitful. Indeed, it's something of a surprise to me that Le Guin's other characters hadn't deduced this if they were experienced anthropologists but they eventually work round to this, and in truth it has to be said that real field anthropologists would avoid the temptation of slotting societies into neat categories. Dalzul, though, will not see this, for one extraordinary reason. On a previous assignment, he was defiled by the inhabitants of a planet and worshipped as a god. Thus the notion of godhead, of assuming kingship again entirely blinds him to what's really going on and he deludes himself that it is specifically him, Dalzul, who is wanted, not any handy person willing to lay down their life. It's a difficult story, one which repays careful reading, several times, but certainly gives a new slant to the thought that colonists of the future might not be welcome.

We are also accustomed to assume that colonisation is a good thing. It's an accepted genre stereotype, the inhabitants of an overpopulated Earth fleeing to the stars and a new freedom. All stereotypes are ripe for overturning and George Zebrowski does this in "In the Distance, and Ahead in Time" (*Amazing*, November). The few remaining colonists on a

planet are scraping a meagre living on a plateau which may crumble at any time. With a myopia worthy of small-town America at its best, they refuse to explore the world any further, on the basis that what was good enough for their parents is good enough for them, even though their world is literally falling apart around them. Alan characterises this stance. The land is his, won by his family, to be kept by his family. He attempts to manoeuvre his sister Gemma into an alliance with a local man to ensure that the land can be passed on while trying to forge his own alliance with the man's sister. Land is the currency of relationships but Gemma cannot accept this any more than she can accept the man everyone assumes she will marry.

The arrival of other colonists who have, for environmental reasons, stuck to their space habitat, and who want the planetside colonists to join them forces the issue into the open, provoking a fascinating discussion of the whys and wherefores of colonisation. The landside colonists will not accept the surveys provided by the environmentalists, which claim that sentient life is evolving on the planet but neither will they accept the offers to see for themselves. The overt reason is suspicion of treachery, the underlying reason, that they don't want to measure themselves against the whole world which will engulf them, only against the plateau where they are lords of all they survey.

I particularly liked this story because it avoided all the pitfalls of making colonists and environmentalists so vehement in their beliefs that they were better tuned out. Each side was clear about what it wanted and why it wanted this. I was also interested in the albeit oblique discussion of a woman's role in all this. Both Alan and Cyril make assumptions about Gemma's future but Zebrowski portrays a woman whose need to learn on her own terms severs even the tight bonds of family and community.

Tempering this earnestness, there has also been a strong vein of whimsy. Take, for instance, Paul Di Filippo's 'Campbell's World.' My heart sank as I started on a story which seemed to be about John W Campbell's influence on the SF world. Self-referential or what? Only the dates were wrong and, to the best of my knowledge, Campbell had never held a master's degree in medieval studies. Nor for that matter had he read Sanskrit. And the dates were all wrong. But the person described seemed familiar. I turned the page and discovered that we were talking about an alternative world in which Joseph Campbell, scholar of mythology had run **Astounding**.

It's not so odd-ball as it sounds. Apart from the coincidence of initial and surname, both men, certainly in their early days, were characterised by a passion for new ideas, a mission to save the world from its own stupidity. John Campbell, as is well-known, had a powerful effect on his authors, encouraging them and feeding their ideas. Joseph Campbell occupies a similarly inspirational place in many people's hearts and I'd venture to suggest that, unlike John W, he kept his mind open to new possibilities right to the end of his life. Both men had an appreciation of the presence of 'magic' in our lives. John W once famously said that 'science is magic that



works" but, unlike Joseph, I don't think he appreciated that the old magic still exists in SF, remade over and over.

Another of my non-SF reading passions is for ghost stories. It's rare to see them in the short story magazines; generally they have a logical explanation. Juleen Brantingham's 'Tourist Attraction' (**Amazing**, August) is as authentic a ghost story as you're likely to find in this setting. Two elderly ladies entertain each other with stories about their imaginary ancestor, Beatrix Franklin Nettleton, and gradually the story takes over their lives. People come to visit the house where Beatrix Franklin lived. Photographs of her are discovered, she is cited in textbooks. The Misses Nettleton are at a loss to understand and nothing is ever entirely explained. Instead, we are left with a delightful bitter-sweet comedy of manners and unfulfilled hopes.

Eric T Baker's 'Uncertainty and the Dread Word Love' (**Amazing**, October) is similarly about unfulfilled, or perhaps unrecognised hopes. Set in post-First World War Oxford, as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is being discussed, the scientific uncertainty is juxtaposed with the narrator's personal uncertainties, especially his unrequited love for Jane. Through his eyes we witness her uncertainties about her future. Should she continue to pursue her scientific studies, against the wishes of her family, or should she capitulate and become the typical girl they and her fiancé want her to be. I admit that the plot is a little clichéd. What I like, though, is the way Baker, a new name to me, employs SF metaphor without needing to use more than the most peripherally SF setting, an almost perfect example of it kind.

Most bizarre is Howard Waldrop's 'Household Words or The Powers-That-Be' a seasonal story concerning Charles Dickens' thoughts as he performs a reading from his best-selling 'The Christmas Garland', a story which looks remarkably like 'A Christmas Carol'. As ever, Waldrop leads his readers on a merry dance through the back alleys of his researches, mixing actuality with invention. Tiny Tim becomes Giant Timmy, a huge child, backward, capable only of working as motive power in factories. As the story progresses, the alternative Christmas Carol takes on a surreal air and it becomes hard to disentangle 'fact' from 'fiction', partly because Waldrop's account of Dickens' own performance is inaccurate and faithful to contemporary accounts. It's definitely a story to reread.

Which brings us, sadly, to the last issue of **Amazing**. It trod a sometimes lonely but always adventurous path in this latest incarnation, Kim Mohan's taste in fiction being commendably eclectic. It showed how well a magazine could be illustrated, with specially commissioned colour artwork for each story.

So, what have we to replace **Amazing**? **SF Age**? **Tomorrow**? **Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine**? **Aboriginal SF**?

Science Fiction Age is the most obvious successor to **Amazing** in terms of glitzy presentation, colour artwork and so on. The stories are never less than competent, though there are far fewer of them than in **Amazing**. As has been noted before, **SF Age** is heavy on advertising, which is great if, like me, you have a passion for weird American advertising but which does little for one's fiction habit. I also have to say that finding **SF Age** in this country is like looking for the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow which is why I'm reviewing issues 1/5 and 2/2, all I've been able to get recently. However, I've just fixed up a regular Stateside supply so reviews should be less erratic in future.

Issue 1/7 featured an unpromising cover, alien in space suit carrying naked human body, though judging from the face it's a human male body so cliché is averted. To find fiction, you have to fight your way past 32 pages of advertising and general non-fiction to a small, perfectly-formed Terry Bisson story. I've been wondering for some time why Bisson hasn't gone off the boil in the last year or so but **The Toxic Donut** sees him back on his usual Larson-like form with the gameshow to end gameshows, or rather not to end gameshows, or anything else for that matter. You too can save the universe by eating this donut into which has been concentrated all the toxic waste produced this year. It's weird, it's off-the-wall: in a world where people beg Mr Bobby to visit their homes why shouldn't be volunteering their friends, neighbours, relatives and enemies to eat the donut. Some people will do anything to be on television.

Ernest Hogan's 'Tezcatlipoca Blues' tried hard but didn't quite make it. After a storming beginning, when Beto runs a program to trap an Aztec god in his computer, it dwindles away to an ending where Beto's sometime girlfriend and *her girlfriend* trick the god once again. Gullible god, huh? On the other hand, Piers Anthony's 'A Picture of Jesus' came as a pleasant surprise, just to remind us that he can do something other than churn out excruciating puns. This strange tale of a man, otherwise sane, who can see dragons around him certainly caught my imagination. Rick Shelley's 'Afterwar' creates a grim scenario as intergalactic war stops and an entire race inexplicably commits suicide. We are as much at a loss as the characters themselves unless we consider the Jews at Masada or the Albigensians, who committed suicide rather than surrender. I'm not fond of militaristic SF but Shelley caught very well the soldiers' incomprehension as they are deprived of their victory.

Issue 2/2 featured a couple of stories which had the authentic tang of the fantastic. Mary Turzillo's 'Encore' features a pair of

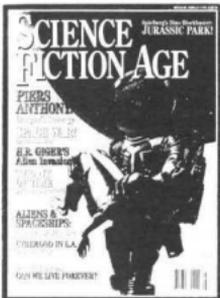
lovers, endlessly reborn through time and destined to be torn apart by war. Curiously un sentimental though very touching, 'Encore' shows clearly that there's nothing new under the sun, that we never learn. In contrast, D William Shunn's 'Two Paths in the Forest Toulemonde' hinges on the fact that while true love might be eternal, its exponents frequently aren't. Etienne and Marie are destined to make their way through the forest more often separated than together in Shunn's neat and almost timeless allegory.

Scott Edelman believes that his magazine presents the cutting edge of SF every two months. If it's cutting, it slices with a blunt blade where ideas and experimentation with form are concerned. Nevertheless, the stories are of good quality. The authors might not be in the first rank but they're often close and Edelman, like Mohan, recognises the value of high quality colour illustration. Fewer advertisements and more fiction might well make this a contender for **Amazing's** crown.

Tomorrow Speculative Fiction retains the fifties flavour I noted in a previous review. Perhaps it's the cover artwork with its old-fashioned sensibilities: huge machines crushing defenceless people, a man with a chin so ruggedly delineated you could cut bread with it. I have to say it's the sharpest thing I saw in issues 5 and 6.

The bulk of the two issues was taken up by a novella (no.5) and novelette (no.6) from William Barton, both featuring Ike, a man who was placed in stasis in our own time, woken briefly in the 23rd century and then left to himself for billions of years until he wakes and, having forced his way out of the holding area, meets Shaah, with whom he proceeds to cavort around the landscape for page after page, only very chaste because she is to all intents and purposes sexless. Society has abandoned sex in preference to immortality. All this could have been condensed into one short story; instead, we drag through page after page of mind-numbing description of the days' activities, which aren't that interesting when you're living in Eden, the only guarantee being that almost every page will feature the words 'they made love' or some variation on the theme. Paraphrasing an American hamburger ad, 'where's the science fiction?' Where's the speculative fiction, even? All we're left with is a wistful harking back to the days when sex in science fiction was the big issue. Now characters talk to each other as well and all the groping and fumbling in the world isn't going to make these stories more attractive.

In a literary universe when soft-tech SF seems almost de rigeur, it's difficult to find stories that embody the sense of otherness that I favour. Don D'Amassa's 'The Library of Lost Art' (no.5) is charming but little else, carrying as it does, by way of Richard Brautigan's Mayonnaise Library where people deposit their unpublished manuscripts, only here the books appear on their own. Steve Rasinic Tem's 'Pathetic Fallacy' (no.5) is a surprisingly conventional love story set in a virtual park. However, Eliot Fintushel's 'Herbrand's Conjecture and the White Sox Scandal', though perhaps old-fashioned in its perception of alien invasion is told with verve and enthusiasm. The characters leap off the



page and clamour for attention.

Issue 6 was more promising, not least for the inclusion of a story by Nina Kiriki Hoffman. Here at least, Algis Budrys and I agree. I also consider her a brilliant writer, even if this isn't her best work. 'LaZelle Family Christmas' stars a family with unusual extra-sensory talents and a teenager on the threshold of her powers. Cue, you might suppose, for mawkish bits about learning what it means to be an adult, with Christmas as an extra tear-inducing backdrop. Oddly enough, the story doesn't turn out like that. Instead, Hoffman dodges the sentimentality mostly, to show an extraordinary family being very ordinary.

K D Wentworth's 'Along the Old Rose Trail' almost worked. Instead of driving cattle, in this world roses are herded, don't ask me why, and they befriend a girl who has lost her family to outlaws, almost been raped (why is this beginning to sound like a bad Western?) And that's really what it is, but I cannot rid myself of the bizarre image of roses rustling up the track on their roots.

I'm still getting to know **Aboriginal Science Fiction**. It's a slow business. While not as distinctive as, say, **Analog**, its flavour is still decidedly old-fashioned. Alien encounters feature heavily among the stories, many of them militaristic in character. Which is not to say that some of the stories don't tug at the brain, more that the bulk of them aren't that memorable.

Doug Franklin's 'If I Should Die Before I Wake' (Aboriginal 41/42) promised to be interesting. Amelia Earhart, a new character in the ever-expanding pantheon of real people imported into fictional events, has crashed her spaceship on a remote planet and settles down to die, secure in the knowledge that she'll be rescued and housed in a new body. Her navigator isn't quite so lucky and will be replaced with a replica of Chuck Yeager. That's more or less it, leaving several tremendously important questions to go a-begging. Like how, if Amelia Earhart went missing, did they manage to replicate her? And why are they using replicated pilots in the first place. Mine not to ask apparently this lack of curiosity about the really important elements of a story persists through the magazine spoiling a potentially good story.

Sometimes, it doesn't matter, as with Patricia Anthony's 'Gingerbread Man' (Aboriginal 41/42) which rapidly turns into an

alien abduction story. Curiously, it's a subject I don't recall being tackled in short form but Anthony has obviously thoroughly researched the statements made by so-called abductees. She handles the story sensitively and calmly as she explores the effect of Anna's beliefs on her relationship with her husband. No answers are offered, no problems solved; the reader is left with the knowledge that Anna will go on through life wondering what it is that's wrong with her.

By this time, one might have the impression that **Aboriginal SF** purveys very gloomy stories. It is, I have to admit, not exactly light-hearted. Anthony J Howard's 'The Recyclers' confirms the suspicion I always have when cryogenics is discussed, that we're making a lot of assumptions about what the people of the future will want from the people of the past. In this case, it's not 2nd year sociology students, especially not when food and power are strictly at a premium.

Michael Belfiore's 'The Salesman' comes as a welcome relief. The anonymous salesman, a telepath, peddles dreams of a better future, using small papier-mache 'bombs' as the attraction. Though he is a crook, he's an idealist too, selling his dreams as he travels the countryside. And yes, he's run out of town and yes, he loses the girl, but he's the sort of character who won't be kept down for long.

Issue 43/44 (for some reason every issue is a double issue) brings us the same diet of gloom, doom and despondency, although D G Grace's 'The Other Lesson of Phaedrus' is a cleverly constructed study of madness and paranoia. The scenario is simple. A paranoid pilot has murdered the occupants of two spaceships but is needed for a third mission because no-one else is available. McClintock is similarly called up to be her director. As the story unwinds however, various possibilities open up. Is McClintock mad? Is the shipboard computer mad, and if so, who sabotaged it. Is McClintock monitoring Janet to find out how she circumvents the system. Is she watching him? Is this all an elaborate charade or a sophisticated way of driving a ship. We are no wiser at the end but it's worth going round for a second read to see if it makes sense.

The other outstanding story is Valerie Freireich's 'The Fade' where the only good black man is one who's been bleached white, which promotes a new form of apartheid: why bother with the blacks if they don't get their act together and get bleached? Outstanding, yes, but still I felt the story was superficial. Yes, there was a resistance to the notion but it was kept firmly in the background and even the protagonist's nervous attempts to conceal his origins fall apart very unconvincingly once his black sister and white girlfriend meet.

There is something very unsatisfying about **Aboriginal SF**. A reader wrote in to say that 'most of the stories seem to me to be written to be read, rather than written to be published'. To him this seems to be a commendation and I think I understand him as meaning that the stories aren't run-of-the-mill. But I find the majority to be only too familiar in their content. **Aboriginal SF** currently lacks excitement.

Of all these magazines, I have most problems with **Fantasy Magazine** and it cer-

tainly won't replace **Amazing**. I am not entirely sure what the problem is. I read fantasy before I read SF and still enjoy it. Perhaps the conflict arises because I prefer the mythic variety so eloquently described by Paul Di Filippo whereas **Fantasy Magazine** espouses a very conventional (and by this I don't mean "traditional") form of fantasy. Settings are rarely contemporary, almost always in some strange and unidentifiable fantasy landscape. Characters are mostly women, rarely men, though this may reflect the gender balance among authors. They are mostly healers or swordswomen, with an occasional princess thrown in for good measure. Truck drivers don't make good fantasy subjects, obviously.

The best story from issues 20 and 21 is surely Tanya Huff's "First Love, Last Love" (FM 21) which touches on the quintessentially American partnership of a boy and his first car. Nigel, moving to the country, discovers the wreck of a car on his land, identical to the first car he ever owned. Gradually, the car absorbs more and more of his time although he is not, as he claims, restoring it. Instead, he endlessly relives memories of the car and of the friends who travelled with him. His son, belatedly aware of the danger, is sucked into the dream as the wreck metamorphoses. No explanation is given but it seems that something magical and threatening is taking place, time and again. It's a story that resonates far more powerfully than any amount of stories about beautiful young healers.

Having said that, Isabel Cole's "Maiden, Are You Warm?" takes a traditional subject, a meeting between a human and the embodiment of the season, and infuses it with a steel that is too often lacking in this sort of tale. Here, the younger step-sister discovers the elder's secret, steals King Winter from her but then leaves him in turn, knowing that even in death her sister can pursue her. It's a story ripe with possibility, well-characterised and with the flavour of the traditional while entirely modern in sensibility.

So, no obvious successor to **Amazing** seems to exist among the American A4 format magazines, except perhaps **SF Age**, which would benefit from including more fiction if it wants to be a serious contender. Of the other magazines, **MZB's Fantasy Magazine** is out on a limb though the publishers of **SF Age** are discussing the possibility of producing a fantasy magazine. I should like very much to see how that turns out and whether it encourages **Fantasy Magazine** to explore new areas of writing. **Tomorrow** and **Aboriginal Science Fiction** cling to their retro vision of science fiction, almost as though the New Wave of the '60s, the Cyberpunk of the '80s and the humanist backlash never happened.

Crisis of Identity

Non-fiction magazines reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Why do people produce magazines about science fiction? I don't mean the critical/academic studies, the **Extrapolations** and **Science Fiction Studies** of this world, I'll get

to them later but they seem to know what they are about. It is the other journals which don't fill so readily identifiable a niche.

I have before me, for instance, **Nexus**. **Quantum**, **Science Fiction Eye**, **Sirius** and **Territories**. I would be hard put to say what any of the editors thought they were doing with the magazine, or what any average reader might expect to get from them.

In each one you might find critical articles about science fiction, with varying degrees of rigour, competence and interest. Interviews with any passing SF author, with varying degrees of insight. Some vague diatribe which will either be about SF, or by a recognised SF author about some other subject.

Something which might loosely be described as sociological, about SF authors or fans or readers as a breed. A think-piece or general interest piece, which might be sparked by something science fictional but which is usually about something out with the genre. Odd bits and pieces whose connection with science fiction is even more tangential than the above but which interest the editor so he (it's always "he") decides that SF is a broad enough church to encompass it. We get science fiction as a line to which all the rest is pegged, but this isn't a coherent vision or an identifiable message. You open one of these magazines and you don't know whether you're going to get serious critical analysis or something which is barely a step away from a fanzine (I'm not criticising fanzines, but their amateur status gives them a different remit, the editor's interest has the sort of status that the reader's interest needs to have in a pro or semipro magazine) the trouble is that the editors don't seem to know either. So they throw together a grab-bag of anything and everything, and what seems to be most notably lost in the process is any idea of quality.

That the two British examples, **Nexus** and **Territories**, add fiction to the mix only makes for greater confusion. Are the stories there as a sweetener for the non-fiction, are the articles padding the space between fictions? And is the same editorial taste and discrimination relevant to choosing fiction and non-fiction? Given the leaden writing, unexciting ideas, and general lameness of so much of the non-fiction, it's perhaps just as well that fiction is not part of the remit of this review.

Let us start with **Territories** (issue 3, Summer 1993), which advertises itself as "the slipstream journal". "Slipstream" is a term that Bruce Sterling came up with to describe all those things, from postmodernism to literary fantasy, which aren't exactly science fiction but which still give science fiction readers something like that old sense of wonder. It's a facile term which enjoyed a brief vogue but which hasn't really proven to be very useful. Still, it would suggest that **Territories** does have a coherent vision.

Unfortunately we get all the ingredients mentioned above. The critical article is Craig Marnock's "A Beginner's Guide to Slipstream", which this time is about Russell Hoban. From this we learn enough to gather that Marnock has read most of Hoban's books, but though he offers a brief and reasonable commentary on each there is little attempt at analysis, no understanding of what makes them distinctive

or slipstream. The interview is with Kim Stanley Robinson what makes this most straight-down-the-line science fiction writer "slipstream"? Together, these suggest a serious intent, so where do you put Mike Cobley's diatribe (all rage and no argument) or Fergus Bannion's think-piece ("Everything you never wanted to know about Neuro-Surgery because you were too well-adjusted to ask") or the tangential stuff like an article on Australian rock group Radio Birdman or an interview with Mr C of the Shamen? The magazine seems to fire off in every direction at once, and though diversity can be entertaining and invigorating, here it feels like incoherence.

Still, it is fresher and better than **Nexus** (issue 3, spring 1993), which seems to follow the guidelines with considerably less flair. The critical element is reduced to a supplement, "The User's Guide to Science Fiction" which consists of a listing of "new" books (not much use since the magazine appeared so late anyway, and something which goes past its sell-by date very rapidly) and capsule reviews which are as brief, superficial and useless as such things nearly always are. A related article by Gwyneth Jones about reading some of these books while on holiday in India adds nothing new in the way of insight or overview, but it does tell us that she went to India on holiday. The diatribe/think-piece/tangential material is mostly whimsical (Dave Langford, a squib by Malcolm Davies on that familiar old target, Lord of the Rings), or oblique (Charles Stross on the Internet, Jessica Palmer on horror films), or both (Chuck Connor on language). Individually these pieces are fine (though I would expect some of them to turn up more in a fanzine than a prozine), but en masse they take up such a proportion of the magazine you begin to wonder what is its connection with science fiction.

The sociological centrepiece of this issue was supposed to be an overview of Mexican IV (staged in 1991 — you can tell how late this magazine appeared). The piece is prefaced by a remark that, "owing to technical difficulties" the report isn't as comprehensive as intended. I don't know what the difficulties were, but no extract from any programme item appears, even though that was the original intent of the convention organisers. Instead we get a series of brief comments from attendees, edited into a rough chronology, but nothing that goes beyond what you would get in a convention report in any half-way decent fanzine. Without recreating any of the ideas or the argument staged at the convention, this fails in its stated aim as a record of that convention.

Mind you, the new Australian magazine, **Sirius** (issue 1, March 1993, issue 2, June 1993), is no better. The critical material is particularly poor. Christine Hawkins's article on time travel amounts to no more than a selection of plot summaries, at least Colin Steele's survey of Aussie SF since the 1975 Worldcon seems to have some sort of coherent idea behind it. The reviews — even of the 2nd edition of the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* are remarkably unrevealing. Have these people even read the books? Only Van Ikin gets to grips with any sort of analysis though I think that giving over more than half a review to one long extract from the book in

question (Robert Silverberg's insubstantial **Thebes of the Hundred Gates**) is to say the least suspect. While the "checklists" they publish seem nothing more than space fillers (who wants a listing of every story that ever appeared in the Fontana Great Ghost Stories series?).

The interviews seem particularly facile (surely Dan Simmons should have something more interesting to say than this?), equal critical weight seems to be given to David Eddings and Sheri Tepper, Robert Jordan and Ursula Le Guin (and the quality of the writing tends to be poor or superficial). Nevertheless, despite having a (presumably) smaller constituency of SF professionals and fans to call upon than their British counterparts, **Sirius** at least has the ability to stick more closely to its chosen subject and use its limited resources imaginatively. In other words, **Sirius** isn't yet as good as either **Territories** or **Nexus**, but it seems to have a clearer idea what it's doing, and that promises better for the future.

Of course none of these have the resources, or the track record, of the American magazines. Now we have the final double issue of **Quantum** (issue 43/44, spring/summer 1993) before it merges with **SF Eye**, and the last issue of **Science Fiction Eye** (issue 12, summer 1993) before it incorporates **Quantum**. At this moment of flux it is curious to compare the two. They are both big magazines. **Quantum** is 84 pages, **SF Eye** 122 pages. (**Nexus** and **Territories** together make it to 84 pages). Both have an impressive line-up of contributors (Paul Anderson, Michael Bishop, Charles Sheffield, Gene Wolfe in **Quantum**, Richard Kadrey, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Steve Erickson, Bruce McAllister in **SF Eye** though these aren't always necessarily at their best, Paul Anderson contributes the sort of maudlin reminiscence about John W. Campbell and Anthony Boucher that we've read all too many times before, Gene Wolfe goes on a ramble about implausibilities that never quite gets to where it makes a great deal of sense, and Richard Kadrey's column is just a list of music books and mail-order record suppliers that doesn't really do anything with this information as if his eclectic taste is all the justification he needs). Charles Platt and Paul DiFilippo appear in both (they are inescapable these days) but generally the two magazines seem to be drawn from two different traditions. **Quantum**, 20 years old, has a somewhat older stable of writers, a layout that still owes much to the fanzines of yore, and a solid but often stolid approach to the genre. The reviews are worthy but hardly challenging, interviews with the like of Brian Herbert and Lois McMaster Bujold hardly take us to the cutting edge of SF, David Alexander Smith's article on writers' workshops is so mechanical you wonder that any sort of inventive talent actually emerges from them. Strangely it is David Bischoff, in retrospective mood like many of the contributors, who shows what **Quantum** really could do well when it set its mind to it, a personal perspective on the value of literature that falls outside the academically acceptable canon.

SF Eye is younger and built around that core of would-be iconoclasts who were behind the pseudonymous **Cheap Truth** of ten years ago. Sterling and Shirley are regulars in **SF Eye**. There is, then, a sort of house rule that

they be sharp and stylish, though that doesn't mean there is always substance behind the style. Charles Platt loudly trying to propound today's fringe science such as cryogenics (in which he has an interest) as a vital area for SF is so much raucous diatribe, until you realise that he is trashing Kim Stanley Robinson's **Red Mars** because Robinson doesn't see frozen bodies as a major part of his future. The exchange between Takayuki Tatsumi and Larry McCaffery is about as pretentious as you can get without coming within a mile of explaining McCaffery's hip new notion of "Avant-Pop". But Paul DiFilippo's lauding of Ishmael Reed, Ron Drummond's archaeological excavation of Steve Erickson (a beautifully judged pastiche of Erickson's own writing), and the article by Erickson himself all show that it can produce material of real interest. Certainly none of the other magazines under review could begin to muster work as stylistically adventurous, as wide ranging in their choice of subject matter and as challenging in their ideas, or, indeed, as straightforwardly readable. There is still a formlessness about **SF Eye**, a tendency to sprawl, a belief that being up-to-the-minute and flashy is an excuse for laziness in other areas (the Kadrey, the Platt, Stephen P. Brown's review of the Clute Encyclopedia which fails to get to grips with its subject, and Takayuki Tatsumi's review of Richard Calder's *Dead Girls* which is twice as long as the Brown review but says little that doesn't seem self indulgent), it is the most interesting of the magazines reviewed, and is often the best, but you still sometimes wonder what editorial concept guides it.

Not a problem you have with the academic/critical side of the coin. They know precisely where they stand, providing publishing credentials for academics seeking tenure, and contributing to science fiction as a recognised part of the curriculum. Such certainty, of course, means that you don't tend to get the off-the-wall approach or serendipitous delight that might sometimes occur in, for instance, **Science Fiction Eye**. And both **Extrapolation** and **Science Fiction Studies** have been known to produce worthy but dull articles on the usual small circle of suspects. This time round, for instance, **Extrapolation** (Vol.34, No.4, Winter 1993), has yet another article on Blade Runner, which must be the most critically dissected film in the history of SF criticism. But, for a wonder, that is the only article in either journal which treats such a well-trodden path. True, Walter M. Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz ("From the begetting of monsters: Distortion as Unifier in A Canticle for Leibowitz" in **Extrapolation**) and Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy (*The Erotics of Becoming: Xenogenesis and The Thing* in **Science Fiction Studies** (No.61, November 1993)) are hardly ignored by the critics, but they are relatively unexplored territory so these articles can be read with a certain enjoyment of the new.

In the main, however, both these issues plough quite fresh furrows. In **Extrapolation**, for instance, we get Gary Westfahl exploring neologisms in SF. He takes as his sample seven novels and one novella ranging from Gernsback's **Ralph 124C41+** to Sterling's **Islands in The Net**; though I would have thought it obvious from the start that Philip Jose Farmer's linguistically experimental

novella 'Riders of the Purple Wage' was going to distort the results. Unfortunately, most of the article is taken up with a rather pedantic account of methodology. Towards the end he briefly touches on the way that the types of new words invented by each author can reveal interesting things about the nature of their work. Cyberpunks Gibson and Sterling, for instance, invent more words for weapons than supposedly more militaristic writers such as Heinlein or Philip Francis Nowlan; while in the style-conscious world of Neuromancer the relative lack of words relating to personal style and fashion makes it seem a cold and impersonal piece. This is interesting stuff, here we have a potentially powerful new tool for examining science fiction, but the analytical part of the essay is so short that we are left feeling that an opportunity has been missed.

Also in **Extrapolation**, Virginia Allen returns to her examination of the relationship between H.G. Wells and Henry James, but this time uses it as a springboard to show how the rise of belles lettres and the decline of rhetoric in English studies at the end of the last century was responsible for the way science fiction was excluded from the canon of what could be studied in the universities.

Science Fiction Studies has always been the real heavyweight of SF critical journals, the chosen soapbox for most disquisitions on topics such as SF and postmodernism. So it comes as something of a surprise to find that a large proportion of this issue is given over to a work of fiction. But don't worry, the stars still turn in their courses. **SFS** is not following the same route as **Nexus**. This story, 'The Great Romance', is a little known futuristic utopian novelette published in New Zealand in 1881 which immediately disappeared, so that most critical histories and bibliographies pass it by completely. Yet, the accompanying introduction suggests, it could have been profoundly influential on such key works as Bellamy's **Looking Backward**. The story, by the way, is curiously disjointed and charmingly naive, but it is worth reading.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that this novella appears in the same issue as a survey of 35 writers and critics on "Unjustly neglected works of SF". There are the usual obscure names and pretentious choices (Larry McCaffery selects William Burroughs and 21 records by people like Lou Reed and Patti Smith), but it is interesting to see names like Waldrop, Delany, Robinson, Ryman, Banks, Gwyneth Jones and M. John Harrison cropping up.

But in among the articles on Starmont House, Carlos Fuentes, Quebecois dystopias, and surviving armageddon in SF films (a survey which had enough omissions (**The Day the Earth Caught Fire**) and misreadings (**The Lord of the Flies**) to make me doubt the findings) one curious and curiously readable article really stuck out. 'Optograms and Fiction' by Arthur B. Evans is a survey of the curious 19th century belief that if you photographed the eye of a newly dead person you would see the image of the murderer. This is a particularly fascinating story, because as you follow the ins and outs, you get the notion that early science fiction picked up on the notion, but it was the appearance of the idea in fiction which made people believe it in reality.

Paperback Graffiti

Edited by Stephen Payne

Signposts

Ursula K Le Guin Tehanu

I'd recommend this book, both for the quality of its writing and its strength of characterisation. Susan Badham

Tanith Lee Elephantasm

Elephantasm is Tanith Lee's magnum opus, but she'll probably have topped it before the head goes off my Guinness. I wouldn't put it past her —the minx. Graham Andrews

Megan Lindholm Cloven Hooves

Cloven Hooves might have been more successful ... as a mainstream rite-of-passage novel... Nevertheless, I found it a fascinating book, and recommend it to **Vector** readers. Alan Fraser

Anne Rice The Tale of The Body Thief

...both an exciting adventure tale and an enthralling exploration of the nature of Good and Evil. I highly recommend it. Stephen Tew

Reviews

Piers Anthony Harpy Thyme

(*NEL*, 21/10/93, 343pp, £15.99)
Reviewed by Chris C. Bailey

Piers Anthony's awesome talent for churning out huge volumes of fantasy fiction at the drop of a hat, never ceases to amaze. **Harpy Thyme** is the seventeenth novel in the classic Xanth sequence and merits, in my opinion, a read by all, if only to try to spot a sentence without an intentional pun. Yes, **Harpy Thyme**, like the likeable, earlier Xanth stories, consists of masses of one-liners and (un) funny puns, intended by the author, no doubt, to either appease or infuriate connoisseurs of light-hearted fantasy. The storyline of **Harpy Thyme** consists of a small but colourful group of unlikely characters who stumble around the Kingdom of Xanth, fighting off the usual quota of hairy, blundering, man-eating monsters and assorted malign non-animate objects, in order to discover whatever fate has in store for them, thereby hoping to fulfil their individual grails. Such AwGhost (pun intended) characters as Gloha, the one and only winged Harpy-Goblin single-mindedly bent upon finding a husband, together with the now retired, but temporarily rejuvenated, magician King Trent, Cynthia the winged lady centaur and, of course, Marrow Bones. As to whether or not they each succeed in their quests... You'll just have to read it yourself, won't you.

Initially I found **Harpy Thyme** to be a novel intended for the younger reader, although after I'd read the first few chapters, I found that I had stopped unconsciously grinding my teeth at each newly discovered pun and was able to sit back and enjoy the yarn for what it was. An essential read for the Xanth connoisseur.

Peter Atkins Morningstar

(*HarperCollins*, 13/9/93, 287pp, £4.99)
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Call me old fashioned, but I reckon any book should have a beginning, middle and end, preferably one of each, although not necessarily in that order. Peter Atkins gives us at least five beginnings, including one where the middle might normally be found, not much of a middle and an end... Well, by the end you know that Stephen King he ain't. He ain't even his mentor Clive Barker. The plain truth is that this novel probably began life as a great idea, but ended up an incoherent (look up the proper meaning) shambles (that too).

Morningstar is a grand scale serial killer, but he only kills vampires, so that's okay. He decides to tell his story to this third rate, gay journalist. Why? 'Cos he feels misunderstood. Well, most serial killers are, aren't they? By this time, we've witnessed several killings, including, as a blow-by-blow, the only interesting character in the entire book... Moon witnesses **Morningstar** get his comeuppance and makes his fortune out of the book, although how he manages to convince even Californians of the direct involvement of an Egyptian Goddess I cannot imagine anymore than I care. Which is the problem. I didn't care about anyone in this book — they aren't characters, just auctorial devices and you can always see the strings. Mr Atkins is a screenwriter, but this isn't a screenplay in print and the problem isn't his writing style. There is some good writing here, once he gets into his stride. No, the problem is the plot, which I guess was jotted down on the back of a beermat. Readers who lay down their hard won cash deserve better than this slapdash effort. I, for one, won't be coming back for more from this table.

Stephen Baxter Timelike Infinity

(*HarperCollins*, 29/11/93, 253pp, £4.99)
Reviewed by Mat Coward

The distant future: Earth is occupied by the Qax, who use this planet as a factory. A time tunnel, manufactured by humans in the pre-Qax era, appears, and a group of rebels escape through it. Their intention, however, is not to warn their ancestors about the coming invasion; they have something far more cosmic in mind.

This is hard SF, exciting, full of big ideas and good, old-fashioned space adventure; heroes leaping aboard moving shuttles while people shoot at them with laser guns, for instance, and "Xeelee craft — cup-shaped freighters the size of moons, and fighters with nightdark wings hundreds of miles long."

But, like most hard SF, it suffers from one big problem: every chapter is studded up with huge, wholemeal slabs of explanation. Pointless, surely, because ignorant readers, like me, don't really need to know all this stuff — we're not going to understand it anyway — and presumably those who do understand it don't need it explaining.

Sometimes the characters get bored

with talking like textbooks and temporarily retire, leaving it to the narrator to insert great lumps of info into the conversation, without even the benefit of inverted commas. Get past that, though, and it's a good read; besides which, *Timeless Infinity* deserves a Hugo for Best Use of Stonehenge in a Non-Fantasy SF Novel.

Stephen Briggs & Terry Pratchett The Streets of Ankh-Morpork

Corgi, 1993, (map), £4.99

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Everyone knows that real fantasies can easily be distinguished from fakes — the real fantasies have a map, a glossary and songs. So here is the map of Ankh-Morpork, City of One Thousand Surprises and over a dozen discworld novels. If you want to know how to get from Unseen University to the Patriarch's Palace, or where Cut-My-Own-Throat Dibbler's cellar is in relation to the Klatchian Take-away, here is your handy reference guide, complete with coats of arms (including Latin mottoes) of various famous guilds, and nomenclature demonstrating the wit and humour for which the city is famous.

I now eagerly await the glossary (Excuse my Klatchian) and the songbook ('The Hedgehog Can Never Be Bugged At All' and other traditional songs).

Ramsey Campbell (Ed.) Uncanny Banquet

Warner, 25/11/93, 338pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Chris Amies

Once again, dangerous visions... but this is no splashshot full of viscera, this volume compiled by Ramsey Campbell and containing one of his stories, the strange and amusing 'McGonagall in the Head'. These are stories designed to cause shudders, not vomiting. Here is Donald Wandrei's Lovecraftian and psychosexually loaded 'The Lady In Gray', Russell Kirk's Faulkneresque 'Behind the Stumps', and much that does not resemble anything seen outside nightmare. Longest and rarest piece of the book is 'The Hole of the Pit', by early-20th-century British librettist and lyricist Adrian Ross. It is a dark story of haunting and violent obsession among the dispossessed of the English Revolution. Those eldritch and glabrous tentacles date from 1914: Ross got there before Lovecraft. Robert Aickman's 'Ravissante' achieves the distinction of being both perfectly horrible and extremely funny. Here is Walter de la Mare's 'A Mote', which illustrates the cover of this edition and which begins with the memorable line 'I awoke from a dream of a gruesome fight with a giant geranium.' De la Mare and Saki could have collaborated on 'Dangerous Aunts'; maybe it's fortunate they didn't. Read it and gibber.

Diane Carey & Star Trek:

The Great Starship Race

Titan, 20/10/93, 305pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Stephen Payne

It's not the winning; it's the taking part that counts. Here we have Captain Kirk entering

an emasculated U.S.S Enterprise to compete in The Great Starship Race against a motley collection of deep space Captain Birds Eye's and intergalactic Jaws rejects. But it's not that simple. Into the fray appear (1) an alien species called The Rey, who act as sort of emotion amplifiers, and (2) a Romulan Warbird called Red Talon. Note that (1) and (2) are not entirely unconnected. Various narrow margins follow, like a nasty scrap with a gravity well, until, at the climax, it all goes up in fireworks — literally.

What do we expect from a *Star Trek* book? It's not great literature nor is it that bad, but like the films and the TV repeats, it's familiar. We know the characters, the props; we can guess the story. Maybe we know them too well, maybe they are a little too predictable. And therein lies the rub: it's a long five years

Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling (Eds) Snow White, Blood Red *Avonova, 12/1993, 413pp, \$4.99* Reviewed by Barbara Davies

The editors 'asked the writers... to take the theme of a classic fairy tale and fashion a new, adult story from it'. This collection of 19 short stories and 1 poem is the result.

So what is a fairy tale? Windling believes: 'A proper fairy tale... goes to the very hearts of men and women and speaks of the things it finds there: fear, courage, greed, compassion, loyalty, betrayal, despair and wonder.' The stories here address many uncomfortable truths — child abuse and oppression, misogyny, lust and cruelty — but are far from depressing. There are too many to discuss each in depth, so I'll just pick out a few which caught my attention.

In Gahan Wilson's 'The Frog Prince', the poor frog is in therapy because of a recurring dream. He always awakes just before the princess kisses him.

What if one of the rats in Hamelin were unaffected by the Pied Piper's music? 'A Sound Like Angels Singing' by Leonard Rysdyk successfully explores this from the rat's gory viewpoint.

'Like A Red, Red Rose' by Susan Wade, uses motifs from several fairy tales. A mother tries to prevent her daughter making the same mistake she made and falls with disastrous consequences. This feels like the authentic fairy tale, even down to the prose style. I was particularly struck by the symbolic use of Love-Lies-Bleeding.

Two stories use Red Riding Hood — 'Little Red' by Wendy Wheeler and 'I Shall Do The Mischief In The Wood' by Kathe Koja. Wheeler's 20th century Chicago tale features a protagonist who sexually pursues both a mother and her daughter. In Koja's rural story the protagonist escorts a simpleton home through the dark wood in return for sex, only to discover the girl was bait for a trap.

Rapunzel gets two stories too. In 'The Root of the Matter' by Gregory Frost, a woman tries to prevent her own daughter from meeting men but the girl disobeys and becomes pregnant. It all ends happily, though blinding a man and making him wander for years seems a strange way to make him face up to his responsibilities! 'The Princess in the Tower' by

Elizabeth A. Lynn set in modern day Italy, amusingly acknowledges that beauty is in the eye of the beholder but it can be affected by prevailing customs. One man's normal weight is another man's skinny!

I particularly enjoyed 'Troll Bridge' by Neil Gaiman, based on The Three Billy Goats Gruff. Set in England, it's an elegy to the days of stream trains and unattained love.

There's a brilliantly glacial, end of the world, atmosphere to 'The Snow Queen' by Patricia A McKillip, which personifies the phrase 'you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone'. And 'Snow-Drop' by Tanith Lee is a memorable variation, from the step-mother's point of view, of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.

The remaining stories are: 'Stalking Beans' by Nancy Kress (a lascivious retelling of Jack and the Bean Stalk); 'The Moon is Drowning While I Sleep' by Charles de Lint (The Dead Moon); 'Persimmon' by Harvey Jacobs (an SF Thumelina); 'Little Poucet' by Steve Ruscic Tern (blackly comic); 'The Springfield Swans' by Caroline Stevermer and Ryan Edmonds ('The Wild Swans meets baseball'); 'Puss' by Esther M. Friesner (a shapechanging Puss in Boots); 'The Glass Casket' by Jack Dann (The Glass Coffin in 15th century Italy); 'The Changelings' by Melanie Tem (based on diverse Scandinavian tales); and 'Breadcrumbs and Stones' by Lisa Goldstein (Hansel and Gretel). Finally, Jane Yolen's poem 'Knives' is Cinderella's sharp reflection on her sister's fate.

Verdict: fascinating reading.

Alan Dean Foster The Complete Alien Omnibus *Warner, 14/10/93, 649pp, £8.99* Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

The main interest in any film novelization must lie in seeing how closely the author can translate the cinematic experience to the printed page and, conversely, what new spin they can impart to already familiar material.

Given the constraints of its format *The Complete Alien Omnibus* offers predictably few surprises, but, by sticking closely to the scripts of each film, Foster does a better than average job of capturing the tension and excitement of the *Alien* trilogy, rendering their events in spare, no nonsense prose. Part of the pleasure of the book is to be had in vicariously reliving the experience of the movies through the medium of the printed word. Inevitably a little is lost in translation. The chest-burster scene in *Alien*, for instance, doesn't quite have the impact in the novel as it does on the screen. In general, however, the action sequences are handled with aplomb and Foster competently conveys the mood and atmosphere of each film, fleshing out the sometimes minimal original dialogue and incorporating additional plot material that got left on the cutting room floor (e.g. Ripley's encounter with Burke in the *Alien* films in *Aliens*).

The plots of the films must be familiar to most people. *Alien* is a nerve-shredding cat-and-mouse chase with one of the fearsome xenomorphs, while *Aliens* ups the ante with a whole host of the creatures, swapping the claustrophobic horror of the original for a non-

stop rollercoaster of action and carefully choreographed violence. Inevitably the lone alien of **Alien** comes as something of an anticlimax; the novelisation as unsatisfying and curiously stilted as the cinema version (not surprising given the development hell the script went through before and during production). Even Foster's professional expertise is insufficient to redeem the film's bathetic denouement. That's a minor gripe, though; if nothing else this collection will make you want to see the films again.

Alan Dean Foster
Son of Spellsinger

Orbit, 25/11/93, 376, £4.99
Reviewed by Carol Ann Green

This was the first Alan Dean Foster novel I'd read in quite a few years and I was, initially, looking forward to it.

Sixth in the Spellsinger series, it follows the adventures of Buncam, son of Jon Tom the Spellsinger, who along with his friends, the other siblings Neena and Squill, join in with the sloth Gragelouth on his search for the Grand Veritable.

The four follow the usual quest pattern, dispelling Hounds, petty thieves and the real villains of the novel: hares. The evil the poor villagers of Nooselooow fear, emanates from the monastery of Kilagurri, where the inmates determine to fulfil their 'corporate' plan. Buncam and his mates go up against the hares, turned evil because they resented "being thought of as cute and harmless".

Whereas Buncam's father Jon Tom used old rock lyrics in his spellings; Buncam himself, with the aid of the others, uses — rap. If you are an aficionado of rap, avoid the lyrics.

If you've followed the previous Spellsinger novels, you'll likely enjoy this 'son follows in father's footsteps' novel. If, however, like me you enjoyed the old Alan Dean Foster of **Mission to Mouloukin** and **The Tar-Aiyem Krang** novels, don't bother; that Alan Dean Foster seems to have disappeared, which I think is a shame.

Anne Gay

Dancing on The Volcano
Orbit, 9/12/93, 410pp, £5.99
Reviewed by Steven Tew

Irona works for the Synod, using computerised Eyes to seek out rebels. She becomes infatuated with a young rebel, Twiss. They are caught by the authorities and sent on a 20 year deep space voyage to a colony on Harith. Cheated out of their supplies by the First Wave of settlers, denied their promised land, the Second Wave declare war, with Twiss as their leader. Twiss becomes obsessive in his hatred of the First Wavers, committing acts of inhuman cruelty. Whilst scornfully rejecting Irona as a lover, Twiss is dependant upon her for her wisdom and compassion to guide his rule of Harith; this becomes an eternal bond as the atmosphere of the planet makes humans immortal. Dancing on the Volcano is the only way they can court death.

Dancing on The Volcano is a despairing discourse on humanity's inevitable involvement in war; there are obvious historical parallels to the conflicts over land rights

between the old and the new settlers of Harith. For me, though, the most effective part of the book is its opening chapters describing the society ruled by the Synod in a "Post-Conflict Earth" engineered by politicians in a desperate, and ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to end war forever.

David Gemmell

Waylander II:
In The Land of The Wolf
Legend, 7/10/93, 323pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This is the sequel to **Waylander** and continues some of the storyline and characters from the earlier book. Several years have passed and Mireli, Waylander's adopted daughter, has now grown up. Part of the book deals with the decisions she will make about her life, against a background of violence ignited by a price put on her father's head and his own wish for revenge, which turns him away from the peaceful life.

I always think of David Gemmell as an intelligent exponent of genre fantasy. He never fudges the issue; he is fully aware of the potential cruelty of the world he has created. He writes with honesty and a touch of sardonic humour. While warrior females are thick on the ground these days, Gemmell manages to make Mireli an individual rather than a stereotype. The undoubted violence is never indulged in for its own sake.

Although the plot of **Waylander II** is independent of its predecessor, a knowledge of the first book is helpful in understanding the characters and their relationships. If you haven't read **Waylander**, this would be a good excuse to read both.

Peter James

Prophecy
Signet, 7/10/93, 368pp, £4.99
Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

After a historical episode of Cavaliers and Roundheads involving a red-hot poker, all of the gore in Peter James' novel explodes in the present day, but, as heroine Francesca Monsanto discovers, it's all her fault, because a few years earlier she let her student mates hold a ouija session in the basement of her mum's cafe, and as we all know ouija sessions let out demons which can be expelled only by angelic exorcists at great risk to themselves. If there is an exorcist shouldn't there be a child?

Frannie met Oliver Halkin and his son, Edward, on a train to the north, and then re-met through a small ad in **Private Eye**. Down in his stately mansion, Edward does unpleasant things to dogs, beetles and his cousin, all through the unwilling use of his mind. Can Edward be saved? Do Frannie and Oliver really have a future? What actually happened in that basement? Where have all the students gone and what did Edward consume along with his chocolate milkshake? You won't really care.

Halkin is an actuary, (though the book calls him mathematician and statistician), who believes in the numerical laws of probability. In contrast, there is the inheritance of horror. What there is not in this book is any sort of

prophecy. The title is supposed to be ironic, but it isn't, and the gore will not take you by surprise.

Chris Kubasik

Earth Dawn: The Longing Ring
ROC, 25/11/93, 314pp, £3.99
Reviewed by Mat Coward

In a long-ago time of swords and sorcery, when the earth is yet young and privatisation of the elements is still some way off, humanity is rediscovering freedom, after generations spent sheltering behind spell barriers from the Horrors that once roamed the planet being horrible.

Young J'role, who pretends to be mute to hide the surviving Horror which taunts his thoughts, yearns for adventure; he's had a deprived childhood, what with his father being a drunk and his mother being stoned to death during the Scourge. He gets his chance to go a-questin' in this first book of, inevitably, "a new series", when into his village there comes a one-eyed ork, a thief-adapt named Garthik One-Eye (on account of he's only got the one eye), who's on the lam from a powerful magician from whom he stole, guess what? A ring.

Unfortunately, as you'll have noticed, J'role has an apostrophe in his name, so he and I are unlikely ever to come really close. Still, **The Longing Ring** is a promising start, written in a seductively rich style and contains a valuable addition to every bibliophile's collection of unusual dedications: to a sympathetic clerk in the Hollywood unemployment office. I'm sure she'll enjoy it.

Ursula K Le Guin

Tehanu:
The Last Book of Earthsea
ROC, 25/11/93, 204pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Susan Badham

This short novel, written after several years as a sequel to the **Earthsea** trilogy, features two of the major characters from the earlier story. One is Ged, the Archmage of Earthsea and once the most powerful sorcerer in the world, and the other, Tenar, a girl he rescued from the life of a sacred priestess, locked away in a temple until she died.

With these two characters and the setting, however, resemblance to the earlier books ends. This novel is set after the events of the trilogy. It shows a world changed by the actions and quests of Ged (for example, there is now a King for the first time in living memory), and reflects changes in the attitudes of Le Guin herself. She has returned to the fantasy she created many years ago, has asked different questions of her imagination, and is giving different answers to the reader. Whereas the earlier books were about magic and heroes, quests and dragons, and the dangers of true names, this book is about what happens after the quests have finished, about finding a balance to live by, about the virtues and pleasures of ordinary life and the skills it requires. The characters face great dangers, but they are the dangers and evils generated by human beings living together, not by supernatural villains. And when magic comes, as it must in this magical world, it illuminates and rewards the strengths of this

ordinary way of life and shows the way forward to a new balance.

I'd recommend this book, both for the quality of its writing and its strength of characterisation. But I'd caution you not to expect another instalment of the Earthsea trilogy — be prepared to read the book on its own merits.

Tanith Lee Elephantasm

Headline, 11/11/93, 310 pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Elephantasm is one of those novels that prompt me to play the odious Comparison Game. This time, **Oliver Twist** and **Jane Eyre** spring most quickly to mind. Then Kipling and/or **The Moonstone** I could also cite **The Ghoul** (Tyburn Films, 1976) — but that would be most unhelpful.

The above paragraph was a waste of your time and mine: Tanith Lee has woven all these influences — and more — into a seamless, deeply personal unity.

Annie Ember is the sad, put-upon heroine. (Alternative title: **Forever Ember...**) She lives in a Thameside slum (reminiscent of Offal court, from **The Prince and The Pauper**), with her sister Rose and her brother-in-law Innocent. Rose is an exploited Nancy-girl, while the inaptly named Innocent makes Bill Sykes look like Dudley Doright.

Just when things can't seem to get any worse, they do. Annie becomes even sadder and more put-upon when she Jane Eyres at the 'raja's palace' of Sir Hampton Smolte, who's had what what might be called a Misspent Youth:

'In England, Smolte had not had prospects. The army had been a chance to get away from the earliest mishaps. He had then found he could trick the army quite a lot, in India. But it would have been different at home.' (p. 115).

India takes Smolte by surprise. No — storm would be more like it. I feel constrained to draw a veil over such subcontinental goings-on. However, the word 'spung' might titillate anyone enamoured of second-puberty Heinlein. Sir leaves India for Blighty, a sadder-if-not-wiser man.

Brave (Little Orphan) Annie comes of age in the Smolte household. Sir's kinky offspring, Rupert, is an even bigger dad than Dad. Along the way, we are regaled with Lee's version of the Monkey Trial, a ghost-elephant-at-the-funeral-pyre (see front cover), and the mouse-which-wasn't. The climax should burn itself into your memory.

Elephantasm is Tanith Lee's magnum opus, but she'll probably have topped it before the head goes off my Guinness. I wouldn't put it past her — the minx.

Megan Lindholm Cloven Hooves

HarperCollins, 15/11/93, 360pp, £5.99
Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Megan Lindholm has lived most of her life in Alaska, where this book is set. The heroine, Evelyn, grows up in Fairbanks which has one of the harshest climates in the state. Evelyn is a solitary child, preferring to wander in the

woods in all weathers rather than socialise. Her secret is a fantastic companion: a faun with whom she plays in the woods, and who frequently entertains her on his pipes.

The adult Evelyn finds happiness as a wife and mother, but life turns sour when the family move to Tacoma when her husband is asked to fill in at his father's business. Unfortunately, her relationship with her in-laws is disastrous. Evelyn's husband's wish for them to stay permanently with his family causes them to become estranged, and the situation is made impossible by a terrible tragedy.

Evelyn's life in Tacoma had been bearable because of the reappearance of Pan, now an adult satyr, who had become a secret friend to her and her son, and eventually her lover. Pan leads Evelyn on an odyssey out of her failed marriage to fulfilment in the woods of Alaska.

Cloven Hooves appears to have elements of autobiography, as it's about being a woman, and Alaska. Ms Lindholm gives us a vivid account of what it means to be female physically and mentally. Her main character is also a true Alaskan, in love with her state in all its seasons. Her Alaska is lovingly described, with its landscape and seasons playing as important a part in the story as any character.

Cloven Hooves is described as "a fantasy in everyday life", but for me the role of Pan is the least convincing part — even though he came from woodlands and mountains, I'm not sure a Greek satyr fits well into Northwest America. **Cloven Hooves** might have been more successful under a different title as a mainstream rite-of-passage novel with Pan replaced by a Native American. Nevertheless, I found it a fascinating book, and recommend it to **Vector** readers.

Bentley Little The Revelation

Headline, 28/10/93, 406pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Simon Lake

The Revelation is a horror-by-numbers tale with all the appropriate elements present. Desecrated churches, apocalyptic warnings written in goat's blood, a mysterious preacher with a neat line in biblical quotations. Perm any two from three or in Little's case, blend the whole lot together and add a dash of that ever popular small town ambience and you have the basis for a reasonable pot-boiler.

Starting with the mysterious disappearance of a local minister, the story rambles its way pleasantly (or should that be unpleasantly?) through several murders, the odd ritualistic killing and various other bizarre acts, as the force of evil mass on the outskirts of a small Arizona town. It's all predictable stuff, helped along by some engaging prose and a cast of characters that generally rise above being simple stereotypes. Unfortunately, the horror elements are less convincing and only the wired-up preacher Brother Elias, manages to convey any real menace.

The Revelation actually won the Bram Stoker award for best first novel when it was published in the US, but I suspect that says more about the opposition it was up against than anything else. It's a passable page-turner, but surely the genre has more to offer than this.

Anne McCaffrey Crystal Line

Corgi, 6/10/93, 352pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Jan Malique

Crystal Line completes the trilogy featuring Killshandra Lee, legendary Crystal Singer from Ballybran. Killshandra and her partner Lars Dahl are sent by the Guild to investigate a mysterious, perhaps sentient jewel seam on the planet Opal. The manifestation has been responsible for numerous deaths, and the Crystal Singer and her partner are chosen because of their unique immune systems. The investigation raises complex questions which are unanswered for many years and enmeshed in the mystery of the 'jewel junk' is the ultimate fate of the Crystal Singers.

Theirs is a world solidly resistant to change, but change is coming as the power of the Hephte Guild is on the decline.

This decline is mirrored in the forces at war within Killshandra, as she struggles to cope with personal and professional crises. Of course it all comes to a head once more on Opal, as the jewel junk beckons years later promising enlightenment, and she answers its call. Her healing precipitates a new chapter in the lives of the Crystal Singers and ends in reconciliation and hope for the future.

I found the book difficult to settle into, it left me feeling emotionally cold. That is no reflection on the artistry of the writer, the scenes where Killshandra communes with the crystals were powerful in their intensity. There is a lack of warmth and fire to this tale, the moods are dark and deep, rather like the natural habitat of the crystal.

Jeff Noon Vurt

Ringpull Press, 20/10/93, 370pp, £5.99
Reviewed by Benedict S. Cullum

Don't be put off by the garish cover or the somewhat awkward internal design of this book. Some of the tropes of modern SF are to found here: fleeting mentions of nanotechnology; virtual reality; drug-induced alternate realities. With the introduction of the Game Cat and the bureaucratic Sniffing General you might feel that you have strayed into Games Workshop territory but that would be to miss the point.

Our protagonist, Scribbler, recounts the tale of his quest for Desdemona, a sister with whom he was perhaps a little too friendly. In some ways he is also searching for a home and in both respects he is largely successful.

The darkly comic novel is set a decade or two in the future. As well as a visible hastening in the collapse of society one also notices other kinds of "human" being: robotic, canine, shadow etc. Scribbler and his hedonistic doltie friends are users of Vurt, a reality-altering substance manufactured in the form of feathers of different colours; the colours representing the category of dream that will result when the feather is placed in the mouth. It's not straightforward, though, because substance can be exchanged between "real" and "Vurt-ual" worlds, hence the missing sister.

What makes this novel is not so much the story, but the telling of it. Noon's narrative interweaves past and present and, through

Scribbler, his language might best be compared with that of Hoban's **Riddley Walker** or Burgess's **Clockwork Orange**, although **Vurt** is probably easier to follow than either of these works. He draws from many sources to create his compelling images and readers of Philip K. Dick's **Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch** might find themselves at home here, particularly in a scene where a character who has just come to Scribbler's aid peels back a section of his flesh to show wet plastic and synthetic bones below. If you liked the works cited above chances are you'll like this.

Terry Pratchett
Lords and Ladies
Corgi, 4/11/93, 382pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Julie Atkin

Lords and Ladies sees the return of Pratchett's three witches: Granny Weather-wax; Nanny Ogg and Magrat Garlick. In this thirteenth book in the Discworld series, they find themselves pitted against evil Elves — the Lord and Ladies of the title.

Preparations are underway for Magrat's wedding to the King on Midsummer day. Meanwhile, crop circles are appearing, indicating that all the parallel dimensions are close together, especially at places of power, such as the ring of standing stones known as the Dancers. It is here that the Elves break through, unwittingly encouraged by a group of teenage wannabe witches. The Elves are malicious creatures who delight in torturing humans, and a good, old fashioned good versus evil battle ensues.

This novel features Pratchett's first truly malevolent villain, the Queen of the Elves, who is completely humourless and genuinely chilling. However, this is a very funny book, including morris dancers acting out **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, the Archchancellor and Librarian travelling to the wedding, and Casanunda the dwarf, who carries a step-ladder to aid him in his romantic activities. I have never been fond of Pratchett's witches, but in this volume they come into their own. Terry Pratchett keeps getting better and better.

Peter Rawnsley
Bright Hair About the Bone
Coronet, 28/10/93, 274pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Benedict S. Cullum

This psychological thriller charts two years in the life of Ann Devenish, adolescent problem child, after she views the corpse of a battered victim in one of a recent string of burglaries. Whilst the title comes from Donne's **The Relic** it also echoes the horror of what she saw and by which she is haunted.

After an initial flurry of aberrant activity the traumatic episodes appear to have sobered this delinquent-in-the-making into becoming a star pupil. Ann's behaviour improves markedly following the interest in her creative writing shown by her teacher John Miles who, it seems, suffers his own tragedy at this time.

The police investigation into the burglaries and murders is initially unsuccessful, although the reader is afforded an insight into both the personal life of the hunter, Chief Inspector Gates, and the warped motivation of the

burglar/murderer himself.

Without revealing too much, the main thrust of the tale is the cumulative effect of these local crises on Ann, they being significantly less benign than initially suggested. Rawnsley shows an eye for detail, perhaps evidence of his screenwriting background, and his narration is tense and compulsive.

Leah Rewolinski
Star Wreck V:
The Undiscovered Nursing Home
Boxtree, 4/11/93, 149pp, £3.99
Reviewed by Colin Bird

There is nothing so sad as a witless parody and, believe me, the funniest thing about this book is the title. The problem is that **Star Trek** has generous helpings of humour, much of it self-effacing, which make any attempt to poke fun at the series onto a loser from the start.

The author at least manages to bring together the casts of all the **Trek** spinoffs, including **The Next Generation** and **Deep Space Nine**. There are no sly referential gags about poor special effects or backstage ego problems which means this book must be aimed at non **Trek**kies. I'm sure real fans could, and probably already do, come up with something funnier without resorting to the juvenile sniggering humour present in this series of books. On the other hand if the thought of Captain James T. Smirk locking phasers with Captain Jean-Luc Ricardo has you guffawing, this is definitely for you. It's humour, Jim, but not as we know it!

Anne Rice
The Tale of The Body Thief
Penguin, 7/10/93, 607pp, £5.99
Reviewed by Steven Tew

Fourth in Rice's Vampire Chronicles **The Tale of The Body Thief** takes up a new theme in her exploration of vampirism: body swapping.

The Vampire Lestat has grown weary of his immortal life as a vampire; after an abortive suicide attempt, he longs to be human again and experience food, drink, sex and mortality. He meets Raglan James, an adept at personality switching, and agrees to his proposal that they swap bodies for two days. Lestat is bitterly disappointed with his new human form; the body of a fit 25 year old male is, to him, woefully lacking in power and sensation: food and drink are tasteless, his attempts at sex with a waitress leads to a clumsy rape. When James fails to return his body he is crushed and powerless. He contracts pneumonia and nearly dies after failing to heed the limits of his new body. He is rescued from his despair by an affair with Gretchen, a nun who breaks her vow of chastity only to leave Lestat for her mission in a South American jungle. Lestat and his mortal friend David Talbot then set out to find James, who has embarked upon a bloody series of killings and robberies.

The Body Thief is both an exciting adventure tale and an enthralling exploration of the nature of Good and Evil, and the existence of God and the Devil. Although a little too long and slow to get off the ground, I highly recommend it, even if you are not a fan of the genre.

Phil Rickman
Crybbe
Pan, 8/10/93, 664pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

Max Goff, music impresario and New Age convert, comes to Crybbe, an insular and moribund town in the Welsh Marches, intent on turning the community into a New Age Mecca. Inadvertently, however, his plans unleash a centuries-old supernatural vengeance on the hapless populace. Among the outsiders caught up in the mounting crescendo of terror are Fay Morrison, a freelance radio reporter, and Joe Powys, a once-celebrated occult writer, who, together with the beleaguered inhabitants of Crybbe, must do battle against the forces of darkness threatening the town.

To reveal anymore of the plot would spoil the enjoyment of the unfolding. Suffice it to say that, although supernatural shenanigans in an isolated community has been done many times before, in Rickman's capable hands it all becomes superior entertainment, as well as discomfitingly accurate dissection of a town at war with itself and the modern world. His writing is spiced with ironic humour and observation, skilfully building a claustrophobic atmosphere of menace which draws the reader effortlessly through the novel's six hundred-odd pages. Above all, the story is blessed with both a powerfully realized sense of place and a colourful cast of credible characters who, in the course of the novel, became much more than mere ciphers. For those of you who have become disillusioned with splatter and other gorier excesses of the horror genre, **Crybbe** may be just the thing for your jaded pallet.

Nicholas Royle (ed)
Darklands
NEL, 21/10/93, 201pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Chris Hart

This has been a long time coming — a mass market edition of a small press classic. **Darklands** was originally published in 1991 by Nicholas Royle himself because the horror anthology was bounced hither and thither (from NEL too). The shower of rejections advised him that there was no market for short story anthologies, particularly since this was an original anthology without a theme. Thankfully, the small press edition proved them wrong when it sold so quickly, it was difficult to keep up the supply. It was acclaimed by the critics, won several awards for the individual authors and won the 1992 British Fantasy Society award for Best Anthology.

The publishers must be red-faced to acknowledge their inability to recognise a collection that offers the best introduction to contemporary horror writing in Britain. It manages to avoid featuring hand-picked big names; the stories are original in every sense of the word as many of the authors were published here for the first time. Stephen Gallagher is a recognisable name, but his inclusion is more than justified by his skill at manipulating the uncanny from seemingly small details; he manages to extract a great deal of mileage from the missing page in a visitors book. The story opens the anthology and gives a foundation for the tone of the

collection, these are stories of implicit rather than explicit horror, but the authors do not balk at bloody scenes of true horror, such as Julie Akhurst's disturbing, 'Small Pieces of Alice', which like 'Vanishing Point', exposes the menacing mores of the modern office environment. The styles are diverse, from a blunt morality tale by Mark Morris to an eloquent "mood" piece by Joel Lane. The latter is a personal favourite, mainly due to the evocation of brumie bohemians surviving in the inner city (despite their severe catarh problems).

Those people who rather appreciate the exclusiveness of the small press publication should not be disheartened by the tawdry cover of the NEL edition; a small village has been swallowed by a large city — it's just a chance for the **Darklands** to cast longer shadows.

Fay Sampson Star Dancer

Headline, 28/10/93, 754pp, £5.99
Reviewed by Colin Bird

A fantasy author that I am not familiar with but with a huge list of other works, principally the **Daughter of Tintagel** sequence. **Star Dancer** is a mammoth saga taken from the legends forming Sumerian mythology. The ancient land of Sumer (now part of Iraq) was the spawning ground both for one of the first agrarian civilisations and for a fully formed pantheon of religious figures. A number of fragments of Sumerian writing have survived and the author has utilised such texts to build her own mythopoeia. Using legends in this way is an established sub-genre of fantasy today and you either love it or hate it.

The book follows the story of Inanna from Princess of Morning to Ruler of Uruk and her struggle against Ereshkigal, Queen of the Netherworld. Earlier tales of her family are blended into the narrative. This is a long book and the short chapters and early cross-cutting storylines made it hard for me to get into the story. Add the central character's many annoying features (she keeps saying, 'I am not a child anymore'), and the lack of any effective descriptive writing and the result is a novel devoid of atmosphere. The book is more successful at translating Inanna's sexual potency into a more modern sensibility, though Fay Sampson admits to filtering out some of the more sexist aspects of the original myths. An ambitious novel but painfully slow going.

Michael A Stackpole Battletech 12:

Assumption of Risk
Roc, 25/11/93, 370pp, £3.99
Reviewed by Andy Mills

The accompanying publicity to this book reads:

"To be released in conjunction with the fast and furious video game Mech Warrior..."

Assumption of Risk is the apocalyptic battle and grudge slug test between two armies determined to annihilate each other."

Enough to make your heart sink, right? Well, the blurb has it totally wrong. I kid you not, for most of this novel nothing happens. And it doesn't happen at length. We are given pages and pages of the histories of, and inter-

minable political manoeuvrings between, the nobility of 3055 AD. When something does occur (and I'm not joking: p. 139 is the first time anything does) it is crass melodrama. There is little sense of the 'future' about the book (for instance, a couple are referred to as "an item") and I found its underlying sexism and conservatism unpleasant. Even a die-hard monarchist would blush at lines such as: "This is what I was born to do... Each citizen who dies takes a piece of my heart with him."

One of the worst books I have ever read. Why are Penguin publishing this garbage?

Roger Taylor
Valderen (Nightfall Part Two)
Headline, 28/10/93, 343pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Norman Beswick

This follows on from **Farnor** (which I haven't read) and begins with Farnor himself desperately fleeing on horseback from some frightful creature of evil, which is rapidly overtaking him. Then he realises it has gone; and in his head he "hears" the voices of his mysterious rescuers as he crashes into the great forest. In due course, he is found, lying unconscious, by the great Valderen, whose dwellings are high in the branches and who are counselled by hearers who communicate with the trees.

Evil, in the person of Rannick with his minion Nilsson, has conquered Farnor's village and butchered his parents. A few remaining villagers meet secretly to plan continued resistance. Meanwhile Farnor must come to terms with his own unsuspecting powers (which the trees have detected) and the dark lust for vengeance that consumes him and warps his judgement.

At first I quite enjoyed the Valderen, who don't know what to make of Farnor, and the trees, who find movers of any kind rather bewildering. But a great many pages are taken up by Farnor's repeated resolutions to leave them, go home for vengeance and then being talked out of it; my interest began to flag. In the final chapters, several independent groups of people are moving in on the evil Rannick, building up a fortuitous and uncoordinated conclusion I couldn't quite believe in. And surely there is book three still to come, although nothing in the blurb actually says so.

So: average heroic fantasy, with reasonable characterisation and occasional touches to relieve the repetitious familiarity of the whole overworked genre. If you are hooked on this sort of thing, it's for you. But couldn't it all be truly different?

Dragonlance

Margaret Weiss & Tracey Hickman
Dragonlance Chronicles: Dragons
of Autumn Twilight;
Dragons of Winter Night; Dragons
of Spring Dawning

Penguin, 4/11/93, 1030pp, £13.00
Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

This omnibus Collector's Edition that have spawned so large a family of shared author/

world series has an Introduction in which Weiss and Hickman emphasise the importance for them of their character-creations. "Strange fantasy worlds," they say, "are interesting but, without people that we care about, they have no life." Fair enough, but what remains with me are not so much the characters, as the landscapes and city-scapes: **Autumn**

Twilight, the cataclysm-ruined Yak Tsaroth and the fabled elven city of Qualinost; with its aspen groves and spiralling edifices; the tree-shrouded River of Death in **Winter Night**; the geometric battlemented city of Palanthas in **Spring Dawning**. The interactions of characters — the giant/magician brothers; the elven-human Tanis and his opposed human and elven loves; the empathy between the kender Tasslehoff and the dwarf Flint — these assuredly keep the drama moving, but in dialogue and detail are prone to the clichés of fantasy and sentimentality. However, the ways in which characters cope with so many bizarre and unpredictable environments occasion the liveliest writing. The trilogy poses, for the companions who set out from Solace's Inn of the Last Home, quite after quest and trial after trial, magic discs crystal staff, crown of command, all variously involved. Pervading themes are the contest between good and evil and the principle of balance. An imaginative play is that of the missing constellations which, at endeavour's end, again appear in the sky, gods and archetypal beings assuming their heavenly places — a touch of Classical myth-making interlarded with the gothic.

While some of the writing descriptive of places — of the trading city of Tarsis, for example, convinces, some of the description of action is dodgy. Examples (both from **Spring Dawning**): "Swallowing his tears, Tanis staggered to his feet"; and "Instantly the chaos in the Hall degenerated into terror-stricken panic". Michael Williams's verse, playing an integral part, is essentially pastiche of balladry and of the high-flown romantic epic, effective when metrically simple, less so when over-ambitious. The chapter-heading drawings (Denis Beauvais and Jeffrey Butler) are a delight: they encourage rather than distract the reader's imagination. All this goes, for addicts of high fantasy, to make up an attractive package — which I have now managed to review without once mentioning Tolkien in the same or any other breath!

Margaret Weiss & Tracy Hickman
(eds)

Dragonlance Tales

Penguin, 4/11/93, 698pp, £10.99
Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

In order to read the short stories in this Collector's Edition of **Dragonlance Tales** (originally published in three separate volumes as **The Magic of Krynn**, **Kender, Gully Dwarves and Gnomes**, and **Love and War**) without cringing, it is necessary to be a typical D & D type player, i.e. twelve to fifteen years old and (probably) male. A representative of our local D & D group revealed that Weiss & Hickman are amongst the few authors that this adolescent tribe read by choice. Anyone else should avoid this book.

Given their target and audience, it was an idiosyncratic decision of the editors to open

Dragonlance Tales with a narrative poem. The stories are variations on tired S & S / Fantasy themes and offer no evidence of the originality needed to revitalise formulaic situations featuring stock characters — how many times have we read of magicians seeking to prolong life by killing someone young as in 'Harvests' and 'The Exiles', or quests for magic objects as in 'Finding the Fault' and 'Wanna Bet'. The tales take place in the taverns and towers of an all-purpose mock-medieval world, Krynn, populated by humans, dwarves, elves, half-elves and dragons. The villains are evil mages, Dragon Highlords and "draconians" or dragon-men. Humour is provided by gnomes whose inventions never work and "kender" who are sort of mini-elves with added whimsy. They may be intended to be amusing, but I sympathise with the innkeepers in these stories that want to ban them — they should be banned, particularly from the pages of future fantasies. Otherwise, the humour in the stories is of the "things can't get any worse — oh, yes they can" variety: "It wasn't enough that he had to contend with the blizzards and promises to people who haven't the sense to come in out of a storm, with brainless kender and wolves. No. On top of all that had to be laid a 'magic' pipe."

Careless writing does not help. One author tells us that "Golden light slanted down" in the "gloomy" woods, and no smirking the rest of you, she wasn't the only one. Many stories feature a group of Companions who fought together in other volumes in the **Dragonlance** saga. These characters just about make it into two dimensions, but three dimensions are beyond them. They remain the Grumpy Dwarf or the Noble Knight without real depth. However, I warmed to the wizard Raistlin whose ambition nearly destroyed the world — if only he had succeeded.

Graphics

Jim Baikie

Skizz II: Alien Cultures

Mandarin, 28/10/93, 64pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

Interpreter Zchhex, a.k.a. Skizz, a kangaroo like alien representative of the Tau Cet Imperium finds himself held in quarantine on the ice world of Garp. On a previous (unplanned) visit to Earth he was forced to subsist on a diet of low-fat yoghurt — a food regarded by the Cetians as a potential plague hazard.

Meanwhile, it comes to the attention of the Cetian authorities that the flight recorder of Skizz's former starship has fallen into the hands of the inhabitants of Earth. To prevent their technology from being exploited by us barbaric humans they, rather unspontaneously, dispatch a "snuffer" ship to quietly destroy the sun. On Earth Roxy, Loz and Cornelius, old friends of Skizz, together with Australian rock star Bazzer Norman, band together in order to outwit the forces of Government secrecy and bureaucracy and (in best skiffy tradition) prevent the Earth from being destroyed.

Baikie turns all this into an exuberant romp through a host of SF clichés, juggling playfully with a multitude of familiar genre concepts, and even finding time to speculate (amongst other things) on the intricacies on alien reproduction. The artwork is colourful and bold and you'll have fun spotting the genre in-jokes and references to SF films. Altogether an undemanding read for all of you prepared to put your prejudices about graphic novel aside.

Pat Mills & Simon Bisley

Sláine: The Horned God

Mandarin, 28/10/93, £12.99

Stan Nicholls & Fangorn

David Gemmell's

"Legend": A Graphic Novel

Legend, 7/10/93, £9.99

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer.

Sláine and **Legend** both feature heroes with bloodstained axes, but are different poles of heroic fantasy: both good, but different in aims and execution.

Sláine: The Horned God was first available in book form in three separate volumes and earlier as a series in **2000AD**. This omnibus edition, which has sharper colour reproduction than the previous Fleetway books, allows Bisley to offer an explosive interpretation of Mills's deeply researched version of Celtic hero-tale. I prefer the more restrained style of Glen Fabry's art from the earlier **Sláine The King**, but that is in no way meant to decry Bisley's violently effective counterpoint to Mills's sardonic-to-the-point-of-slapstick scripting. "Kiss my axe," indeed! Wonderful stuff!

The Horned God is a conflict between patriarchy and matriarchy, between the heroism of the Sun-god and the earth magic of the trine Goddess with Sláine caught ambiguously between the two. Is he to be a macho hero or the Goddess's consort? And will he defeat the old Horned God, Slough Feg, who has clung to a prolonged, if sterile, life instead of embracing ritual death? Mills re-creates imagery from Celtic legend, offering to his audience of adolescent males a heady mixture of symbolic feminism mixed with sly references to modern ultra violence. Sláine is a paradoxical combination of New man and hacker-and-slayer, and the story itself is mediated through the narration of the lecherous and grotesque dwarf, Ukko. The result: a

powerful saga which goes over the top in precisely those areas in which those early tales of warp-spasming berserkers were hardly models of restrained good taste. A classic.

Although **Legend** is itself a violent tale of last stands and ruthless hordes, compared to **The Horned God** it is restrained. Fangorn's art is more formal, realistic, lacking Bisley's straining at the boundaries of anatomy and colour (though hardly devoid of energy in its own right: both the art and Nicholl's script are held deliberately under control by the dictates of sticking to Gemmell's story). In truth, the tale is "the Alamo" redrafted as heroic fantasy. The massed ranks of the all-conquering Nadir are held off by the smaller, demoralised army licked into shape by Druss, an ageing, but inspiring, hero whose confederates have joined him for reasons of their own. The only difference is that, unlike the Alamo, Dros Delnoch remains intact at the end. You've read it before, and as long as you want good, familiar romantic adventure stories, you'll read it again. The adaptor's restraint gives you space to feel for the characters. Mills take us into myth and symbolism; Gemmell's figures, though frequently two-dimensional, are types who fight, love, hurt and fear, like normal human beings. Nicholl's and Fangorn's achievement is precisely that they've given us this impression. **Legend** is Fangorn's first graphic novel; on this evidence he should be signed up for many more.

If you're looking for a well produced adventure in the fantasy mood, **Legend** is well-nigh perfect, with the authentic touch of sweeping epic brought tightly to focus upon the fate of a small group of people. If you want something more ambitious, you'd be better opting for **The Horned God**. I like them both.

Terry Pratchett

The Light Fantastic:

The Graphic Novel

(Adapted by Scott Rockwell, Steven Ross & Joe Bennet)

Corgi, 4/11/93, £7.99

Reviewed by Andy Mills

In case you've forgotten, this is the one which introduces that plucky octogenarian, Cohen the Barbarian, and continues the adventures of Rincewind and Twoflower from **The Colour of Magic**.

I was a trifle wary of this book before starting reading; surely much of Pratchett's humour would be lost in translation. I was presently surprised. Rockwell has made a fine job of the adaptation and this graphic version leaves much of the original novel's dialogue intact. My only (minor) gripe lies in the discontinuous artwork: originally this was published in four parts, the Moebius-like illustrations of Ross et al serving for the first two and the looser, less colourful ones of Bennet for the latter parts. But illustrating any novel is a tricky business, as every reader visualises the characters differently. Ross and Bennet have done well but I particularly like Bennet's trolls, who are very... rocky.

Pratchett collectors may have already rushed out and bought this. The cover price is a bit steep, mind, so for the rest of you I'd advise trying to borrow someone else's copy...

