Vector

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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Magic and Realism

The Films of Terry Gilliam

Derek Jarman's SF

1996: SF on Film and TV

Vector 190

THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

Contents

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EDITORIAL

Awards: What are they good for...?

At the time of writing I have no idea who will win the BSFA Award. But should it matter to anyone but the winner? I ask this because the now numerous awards which exist in every sphere seem to be more a source of controversy than of guidance. In this issue a letter by Sarah Goldner questions the judgement of the Clarke Award. I have long tended to think that awards are either meaningless or misleading, and that the former or the latter depends upon who is learning the result and how they act upon it. However, shortly after receiving Sarah Goldner's letter, my copy of *Matrix* 121 arrived. Inside was a feature on ten years of the Arthur C. Clarke Award. Having read the article, it is obvious that awards can mean a lot to a writer in terms of gaining recognition for his or her work, and so they certainly have some value. Unhappily, what also struck me as obvious, blindingly so, outrageously so in several cases, is that the masterful have been passed over to favour the mediocre, and that virtually every year the award had been given to quite the wrong book.

The problem is that the awards are based upon a false premise. In the case of the Clarke or the BSFA Awards, that of all the sf books published in one year, one of them can somehow be "better" than all the rest, and that this "betterness" can in some way be agreed upon. Yet all of the virtues that a work of fiction may have, it is unreasonable to expect to find them all equally and fully represented in a single work. Surely every book will have, if not weaknesses as well as strengths, than at least some things it does not do, or even attempt to do, as well as some other book. That one reader will prefer a certain flawed book over another is always going to be a matter of personal taste, interest and temperament. The very idea that any group of people can choose the "best" work of the year is really not tenable. The result becomes "best" by consensus, and as long as we are all aware of that and it does the winner's career some good then no one should really have grounds to complain.

It is when awards are taken as an objective standard that they become a problem. They can be used to manipulate the unwary into parting with their cash. I first became aware of the potential of awards to mislead when I went to see the film *Rocky* (1976), entirely on the strength that it had won Oscars for Best Film and Best Direction. It became obvious that what I was watching was an average film, and even then I was probably giving it the benefit of the doubt, looking for quality which did not exist, influenced by spurious acclaim. Soon afterwards I discovered that *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) had failed even to be nominated for Best Film (its only nominations were for Screenplay and Production Design) in the year in which *Oliver!* won.

Now *Oliver!* is a finely crafted, lavishly entertaining musical. It is also an entirely backwards-looking, traditional film. That it could win over the most ground-breaking, innovative, imaginative and visually extraordinary movie made (up to that date) in the history of cinema, revealed how utterly misleading the entire process of awards could become.

Now I am aware that by suggesting that *2001* is a better film than *Oliver* and *Rocky*, I lay myself open to the very charge that I am setting against awards: that of choosing one work over another as the "best". However, I am doing so only as my own personal opinion, to prove how entirely subjective the entire subject of "best" really is. My argument is that awards tend to make such value judgements "official" and therefore provide a seeming cultural seal of absolute quality. The "experts" have decided that so and so is so, and so it must be so.

People can be misled into thinking that books and films which win awards are better than those that don't. There is a danger of creating a canonical culture of "great" books or films, and of a sort of work which is almost automatically "great", either because of its subject or because of who wrote or made it. Yet the very fact that there are now so many awards, and that the sf awards all contradict each other should give warning of the subjectivity of the business.

Perhaps the sensible answer would be to come up with a short list of books or films selected as Of Outstanding Merit. Choose as many titles as the Membership, Selection Committee or whatever feel are worthy, and let each individual decide for themselves how much they like each one. Meanwhile, don't let anyone tell you something must be good just because it won an award. Perhaps they've been watching too many Stallone films.

by Gary Dalkin

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LETTERS TO VECTOR

From Sarah Goldner, Aberystwyth.

I have just been re-reading old copies of *Vector* (OK, so I'm sad and have no life) and I was shocked to be reminded of something which the magazine once boasted and now ignores: letters.

Generally I consider that the various editors are doing a rather good job of editing the magazine. I particularly enjoyed Stephen Baxter on the history of *The Time Machine*. However, a vital part of any publication such as *Vector* is a lively, controversial and engaging debate between interested parties, i.e. the readers, writers and critics. As recently as *Vector* 169 [*October/November 1992, four years ago – Eds*] there were eight letters occupying a full three pages of small print. Contrast *Vector* 188 (one) and 187 (two, concerned more with PC than sf and which managed to fill a single page by the judicious use of an oversized typeface and an extended editorial reply).

I cannot believe that Gary Dalkin and Andrew Butler have been consigning the letters they receive to the bin, any more than I can accept that there has been nothing worth responding to in the issues of *Vector* which they have edited. (As a first time letter-writer to *Vector* I am perhaps not in a strong position myself, but I'm doing something about it).

Finally, to get the ball rolling, I'm going to express an opinion. *Fairyland* should not have won the Clarke Award. The book is an almost unreadable bore, with characters mere ciphers for a plot recounted with all the excitement of a newspaper report. Certainly the book has ideas, but nothing else. That this won when Greg Egan's *Distress* failed even to be nominated brought the Award into more disrepute than the great *Body of Glass* spat ever did. It might have been the wrong book to win, but at least it was a good one.

[*We're divided over the merits of* Fairyland, *with one of us hating it and the other feeling it is a book that would repay a reread rather than a read. The Clarke Award panel will have re-read it. Until your letter we had received one since 187, hardly enough to constitute a column. Again this was on PC not sf:*]

From David Curl, Archway, London, N19

Most of what Jim England has to say on the subject of political correctness holds water [*Front Line Despatches, Vector* 187]

But his statement that any person capable of independent thought uses the term PC ironically to denote whatever is currently fashionable is factually incorrect.

With the caveat – which applies to everyone – that I have been shaped by my upbringing, circumstances, etc. *I* am capable of independent thought, and I do not (always) use the term PC in the way described. Rather, I often use it to refer to an admirable set of principles, such as a commitment to equality of opportunity, an active and self-critical determination to be as non-discriminatory (in the currently dominant negative sense of the word 'discrimination') as possible, and so on. It is difficult to approach this high plateau, and, moreover, some of those who fix their sights upon it end up by being other than courteous and fully humane. There are other who use their own supposed self-righteousness dishonestly, or as a stick to beat others with, but this generally true, rather than applying exclusively to the adherents of political correctness.

[*We fear that this has got beyond sf – and we know we've upset people more recently than Catie Cary has. Gary's editorial invective has caused some comment and some of it was written down:*]

From Mike Mason

Don't stop thinking about tomorrow...
Yesterday's gone, oh-h yesterday's gone.

And very sad it is, too, because yesterday was a great day for science fiction. Proper science fiction – sf that meant something. It was a time when sf had ideas, stayed up late arguing about them, promised to change the world and wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. That lean, square-jawed sf is harder to find these days. Today, sf loafs around and winges about itself. The constant round of dirty nappies and school plays is what it expected the future to hold. Where's the single pill to replace all meals? The Moonbase? The dolphin embassy? Life's really bummed out.

But has it? We constantly hear criticism of today's sf: watered-down tech, sequels-upon-prequels-upon-spinoffs; the book of the Hollywood lunch; the book of a synopsis of a story by someone now too dead to complain. All these things are truly hideous, but, just like the nappies, all these non-pure forms are things that we could have predicted. No, dammit, should've predicted.

Like Sherlock Holmes and the case of the positronic brain, sf itself is a bastard child of other literary genres. And, just as sf was born out of wedlock, so we should equally own up to the fact that much of today's so-called fantasy owes its parenthood to sf's own sword-wielding faction. Corum's followers, not Gandalf's, are today's publishing house editors.

It isn't anyone's fault that our writers strayed from the path of righteousness to suck at the tit of evil. We should be brave enough to acknowledge that these non-generics are our children – not quite like us, but still family. And, like all families, we should welcome diversity in our tribe, safe in the knowledge that – one day soon – those hybrid offspring will grow up and SOD OFF.

That's why I'm fairly laid back about the mutants within us. Remember yesterday, when we were young and footloose, and we gambolled through the park with Clarke and Asimov and Heinlein and every bookshop was a joy? Well, tomorrow, the happy days of proper sf will be here again.

But the future isn't safe yet. Keeping hold of the sf dream, and continuing to buy its finest proponents, are our only ways to a fulfilled life when we finally end these long child-minding years. If we don't stay true, there will be no tomorrow and we will forever be held hostage by our retarded offspring, anxious for our market share.

Trantor didn't fall in a day. It decayed and crumbled over time because there was no one left with any vision of the way ahead. We must learn that lesson and constantly safeguard our future. After all, sf readers, of all people, should know the value of thinking about tomorrow.

From Chris Hill, email hillc@oup.co.uk

I am writing in response to your editorial in *Vector* 188, particularly your comments on the value (or lack thereof) of Fantasy and 'spinoffery'.

I read a lot of Fantasy between the ages of about 12 and 20, after reading *Lord of the Rings* for the first time. Since then I have hardly read any at all and I am know of others in the same position.

My personal theory, for what it is worth, is that this has as much to do with the saturation of the market place as anything else. There are so many identikit fantasy novels on the market at the moment that it is extremely difficult to separate the good ones from the dross. Even reviews do not always help. I bought recently Gil Alderman's *The Memory Palace* as the result of an extremely positive review in *Vector* and was extremely disappointed. I kept worrying that I had missed the point somehow...

For me to enjoy it a fantasy should be original and consistent within it's own rules (I hate internal inconsistency). The only two fantasy writers whose books I would buy without hesitation are Patricia McKillip and Diana Wynne Jones.

However, the original question was whether *Vector* should cover fantasy at all. Well, my own opinion is yes, it should. Like it or not, fantasy and SF are, as genres, joined at the hip. And let's face it, despite my comment about *The Memory Palace* above, how are we going to have any idea what is good or bad if *Vector* and others of its ilk do not review the books?

Okay then, what about spinoffery? Personally I feel that that is a different matter.

I would like to make it clear that do not have a problem with non-

written SF in its own right. I have a fairly large collection of SF videos at home. I also have read my fair share of spinoffery, quite a large amount in the past. But I have never read it exclusively and I have never pretended that it formed anything other than 'light' reading when that has been what I wanted.

To be honest, I find this a difficult subject to discuss without feeling a bit hypocritical. I was one of the people who came to 'real' SF through t.v. and film tie-ins. *The Tomorrow People* and *Doctor Who* books led to *Star Wars* which in turn led to E. E. Smith and Asimov and so on. However, when I was younger there was a limited amount of this sort of tie-in. Virtually nobody wrote novels based on the t.v. series or whatever. All you had was novelisations. So if you wanted to read more in the same vein you had to go outside of the tie-in market. However, now a person's entire book-buying habit can be catered to from the spinoffery racks.

This has two main disadvantages:

Firstly, 'real' SF is losing almost an entire generation of readers and losing them, what is more, to books with little literary value. Virtually all spin-off books have to end up where they began. No character development is possible because the status quo has to be re-established by the end. The books are written quickly (some authors contributing three of four books to a series in one year) and often badly edited. I will acknowledge that there are, of course, exceptions to this.

Secondly, they take up an inordinate amount of shelf space. In that excellent establishment and bane of my salary, the Blackwell's Paperback book shop in Oxford, fully three floor-to-ceiling shelf sets are taken up with *Star Trek* books alone!

Of course both of these problems also have an impact on the sales of other SF, which must be a particular concern for many British writers who do not sell in the same numbers that some of the big names do.

So, do I think that *Vector* should cover spinoffery? Frankly, no, not really. There are about half a dozen magazines available in your local newsagents that cover this subject in detail. What can *Vector* bring to the party apart from a general sardonic tone on the subject (judging by some of the reviews I have read)?

Right, I have gone on for long enough. Feel free to contact me if you violently disagree (or agree even, I am not proud!).

[*We actually rather enjoyed* The Memory Palace, *having read the same review. One exception might be Martin Millar's* Tank Girl: The Movie: The Novel, *which struck us as being pure Millar and wondered how any of it could have been in the film. Jeter's* Blade Runner 2 *obviously will pay the bills, but it is also a stunning critique of Dick's original novel. Meanwhile, a pedant, er, eagle-eyed reader writes:*]

From Jack Hughes, Somerset.

What on earth are the "poplar pagan rites" referred to by Stableford? Surely pagan rites involve oaks and holly and ivy, not poplars. We've had battles around here, defending ancient woodlands: we fought them on the beeches. I think you need to spruce up your proofreading before we're sycamore mistakes.

[*We see the editorial as a platform* ~~to abuse~~ *from which to suggest personal positions – but one reader doubts our – my? – position*]

From Alan K. Coogan, Manchester

To the editor (singular)

Who the hell does Gary Dalkin think he is? Or, rather, to the point, who the hell does Andrew Butler think he is. Allow me to explain. I have a theory that we have all been the victim of an extended practical joke which has now run for a year and shows no sign of coming to a conclusion. Stated bluntly, Gary Dalkin does not exist.

No one that I have spoken to has ever met him, or spoken to him, or even seen a photograph of him. He has never been seen at any sf convention, but appeared suddenly, out of nowhere, first reviewing books in *Vector* then within months was elevated to editorial status. It simply isn't credible. We've been subjected to a photo of Andrew Butler, and so the conclusion is that he is the sole editor of the *Vector* features section and he must take responsibility for its typo ridden appearance and its obsession with hard sf to the exclusion of fantasy.

Consider the interview with Butler in Matrix: "I'd gone to Iconoclasm under a pseudonym... I'm always moving in several circles at once, often under a different name". Consider the ludicrous 'Invective' in *Vector*, effectively banishing fantasy from the magazine, and 'Dalkin's' demand that we send abusive responses in 'his' direction. Consider 'his' offensive comments in response to the letters in issue 187.

No, 'Dalkin' is a device by which certain smug, pseudo-intellectuals within the BSFA can voice absurd opinions that no one else has the nerve or good sense to openly declare. It is the equivalent of running up to a doorbell, ringing it and running away.

I would love to see *Vector* return to the high standards it once set itself, but I suspect that both it and the BSFA in general are now in terminal, postmodern-obsessed, decadent decline. As a dedicated fantasy fan who also enjoys sf, horror (and indeed cookery and crime) I find the current prejudice within the BSFA quite unfathomable, and bitterly disappointing. I find the fact that it has been considered necessary to invent a fictitious editor insulting. I have yet to decide whether or not I shall renew my membership.

[*There's no answer to that, is there Gary? Gary?*]

A Kim Stanley Robinson Select Bibliography of individual First Edition US and GB volumes

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1996: A Year of Futures Past by John Ashbrook

Looking out of my bedroom window one morning, I watched the browning leaves scuttling down the path and sighed; winter was on its way back around to this side of the world. Padding down to my 'Cross This Line Of Death' doormat, I leafed through the usual assortment of junk mail, and found a padded manila envelope. It wasn't addressed or stamped.

With a feeling of inevitable dread crawling like a spider up my spine, I tore it open and a CD-ROM dropped into my waiting palm. It bore the secret logo of the BSFA Committee. It had been inevitable really, more a matter of 'when' than 'if'. A sour taste in my mouth and a craving for nicotine scratching at my throat (which is unusual since I don't smoke), I fired up Hal, inserted the disc and pressed return.

The logo popped onto my screen, rotating slowly. The voice had been synthesised, slowed down, warped towards its dark side – but its message was clear:

"Good morning, Mr. Ashbrook,

"This much is known: the season of good cheer will soon be upon us, laughter will fill the air and your words will fill the Yuletide edition of *Vector*.

"Your mission, John, should you choose to accept it, is to compose an over-view of the media events of the last year. It's a risky job, but no one else is as gulli... is as qualified as yourself to complete it.

"Needless to say, if you miss your deadline, the Editor will disavow any knowledge of your activities.

"Good luck, John. This CD-ROM will self-destruct in five seconds."

I had hardly manoeuvred the cursor over the 'eject' icon when there was a crackle and a whiff of sickly grey smoke puffed out of my drive. The heat melted the mother board and, not with a bang, but with a fizzle, Hal bit the big one.

So. Where to begin? Go and buy a notepad and biro, I suppose.

The movie world has had a peculiar centenary (not least because the rest of it celebrated in '95, leaving England an uncharacteristic last). Despite Hollywood's determination to keep on making the same film over and again *ad infinitum*, and the public's willingness to keep on shelling out to watch it, there have actually been some really interesting steps forward. The range of science-fiction flavours available to the discerning palette, has been heartening and entertaining enough to make up for the bad taste left by the creeping tide of sci-fi.

Babylon 5 and *The X-Files* continue their reign as the most interesting drama shows to be produced by the American television networks in a decade, but everyone else is talking about them, so I won't here. *Independence Day* broke *Industrial Light and Magic*'s CGI stranglehold on big effects movies, but we've all talked that one to death also.

What else could I possibly find to be so ebullient about? Well, having knocked together a quick list in preparing to write this piece, I found it to be surprisingly long:

If we look first to the small screen – the BBC, ever quick on the uptake, noticed that *Doctor Who* has turned into its biggest franchise, so re-vamped the show. Not entirely successfully, but at least it was worth the try. Of course, all the anoraks bemoaned that it had been made for the Americans. My response to them is – which would you prefer: an American style *Doctor Who*, or no *Doctor Who*?

For those of us foolish enough to have splashed out on satellite or cable TV, the gutters have been running with programmes worth sampling:

Paean of seventies re-runs, *Bravo*, brought back Nigel Kneale's final (and best) *Quatermass* story, starring a noble John Mills, citizen of a crumbling police-state Britain, railing against a planet dying of apathy. I seem to recall that this terrifying vision of a dystopian future was first aired the year the Tories swept into power. Hmm...

This same station, and *UK Gold*, have been happily churning out *Space 1999*, *UFO*, *Thunderbirds*, *The New* (and Old) *Avengers*, *Sapphire and Steel*, *Dr Who*, *Blake's Seven*, *The Survivors*, *The Tomorrow People*, *Roald Dahl's Tales of the Bleedin' Obvious* and any number of shows which aren't as good now as they seemed then. Nostalgia was never so current, and a second childhood never so easily within reach.

Sky One (and now *Two*) have likewise been pumping out the slightly newer outpourings of the American networks: *Space: Above and Beyond*, after a promising start, rapidly dissolved into a war/cop show with lasers and a few special effects which persistent viewers were treated to again and again and again... *Sliders* proved itself to be nothing more promising than an alternative-universe version of *Quantum Leap/Time Tunnel*; which fresh hell will our intrepid travellers arrive in this week? Oh, a world exactly like ours, except underpants are worn on the head!

VR5 attempted an ambitious and labyrinthine continuous tale, woven around a girl and her all-singing, all-dancing mind-reading computer. Or something. Although it lost its way occasionally, the writing, directing and acting were stylish enough to make it a contender. It was axed before its first series was through. Similarly, *Earth 2* was ripped from the schedules scarce half made-up. It patiently, methodically told of a group of settlers, trying to make ends meet on a newly populated planet, while the planet's very alien natives (if you'll permit the contradiction) attempted to understand and integrate the newcomers. Sort of *Red Mars*, without the technical bits. I was sad to see this one go, as it was the only new show this year to rise from sci-fi into sf.

Peeking out of the nooks and crannies of the terrestrial TV schedules you might have found *Reboot*, which is an entirely computer-generated cartoon, and pre-dates *Toy Story*. All the characters are programs inside a computer, and this season featured a couple of very amusing cameos – from police investigators Data Nully and Fax Modem. (Think about it). *Reboot* is a delight to the eye and a massage for the mind.

'Delight' is not an appellation one can point at *Space Precinct*. In fact, the less said about *Space Precinct*, the better... the only thing I will concede is that it was more enjoyable than *Bugs*. But then so is dental surgery.

The dual highlights of the TV year, however, were the knee-wobblingly wonderful *Gulliver's Travels*, which, at long last, adapted the whole book – and did it right; and Dennis Potter's swan song *Cold Lazarus* which, because it wasn't trying to be science fiction, nor trying to emulate any already-successful formulas, sparkled with a conviction and imagination that few TV shows can manage. I'm told that, upon second viewing, the series suffers and rather falls apart. I'm hesitant to find out, just in case they're right.

And so, to the big screen, and don't spare the horses:

I could evaluate every sf film released this year, but other magazines will do that, whilst I have neither the

will nor the wordage. So I'll highlight a few threads:

Cyberpunk arrived. It's only 14 years since *Blade Runner* redefined filmic sf, it's about bloody time someone else cottoned on. In quick succession we were treated to *Strange Days*, a white-knuckle ride into the next century that was too-realistic for comfort. *Hackers*, the exuberant sort-of film version of Bruce Sterling's excellent *The Hacker Crackdown*, and the only film since *Tron* (1982) to come up with a new way of visualising the interior of a computer. Last and, sadly, least, we had *Johnny Mnemonic*. It's great when a rookie scores a goal, it's such a waste when one drops the ball.

1996 was the year when *Industrial Light and Magic* dreamed it for us, wholesale: their computers generated some of the slickest, but ultimately most soulless special effects ever to grace a screen. The magic animals in *Jumanji* were supposed to be startlingly real, instead they were alarmingly false. The same is true of Draco in the, admittedly much better, *Dragonheart*. He took two years and, allegedly, half of the film's fifty million dollar budget. There's no denying he's impressive to look at, but he is so obviously a cartoon. Twenty years ago he was *Pete's Dragon* (1977). Fifteen years ago he was Vermithrax Pejorative in *Dragonslayer* (1981). The technology improves, but the audience still thinks 'great special effect' rather than 'great dragon', so where's the benefit?

Animation had a rich year of it, *Toy Story* trumpeted its CGI origins from the highest steeple, but when you came to watch it, that fact faded and it became just another great Disney cartoon. Funny how the humans looked much phonier than the toys. *Hunchback of Notre Dame* followed nicely from the same team as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) as the company's stateliest and most electrifying movie ever. Which rather left *James and the Giant Peach* out in the cold. A worthy attempt at model animation, with some delightful moments, *James*, unfortunately, isn't fit to warm the toilet seat of its immediate predecessor *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993).

John Travolta (who is still planning to produce a movie version of *Battlefield Earth*) snuck Scientology in through the back door in *Phenomenon*. It's about a man who develops (not very impressive) magical powers and eventually preaches believing in yourself and your own potential and that usual stateside hogwash that only politicians and movie characters actually believe in. Infinitely better, and very similar, is *Powder*, a film released in the States but which the distributors in this country have been sitting on. It also concerns human decency and magic, but it doesn't preach, and is all the fresher for it.

Two 'comedies' to pop out of the Hollywood cloning machines were *Multiplicity* and the unnecessary remake of *The Nutty Professor*. The former concentrates on using state of the art technology to have four Michael Keatons interacting. This film is diverting, but nothing like as sharp or as well thought-through as the maker's previous outing, *Groundhog Day* (1993). Their thunder was also rather stolen by, of all people, Eddie Murphy who, merely as an aside to keep himself occupied, played up to five different roles at a time in the re-hash of Jerry Lewis's sixties morality tale. Again, it preaches believing in yourself. Again, it rings kinda untrue when a millionaire movie star with a well-paid personal trainer and his own make-up artist tells us that it ain't how you look, it's who you are that counts.

The Summer was owned by three movies: *Mission:Impossible*, *Twister* and, of course, *id4*. All have made more than 400 million dollars. For three films to do that in one year is unprecedented. For any of them to be good is shocking. This bounty will prove a double-edged sword, because there will be more sf and fantasy on show next year, but the impulse to earn more, and therefore experiment less, will be even keener.

The temptation is to look wistfully at the bad old days, to bemoan that *id4* isn't as good as *Star Wars* (1977), that *Voyager* isn't a patch on *Star Trek*. But the truth is that good work, which will stand the test of time, is being done. Thanks to *The X-Files* (and now *id4*) sf is once again in vogue. This means that a lot of bad rip-offs will be churned out, but, if you look at the glass as half-full for a moment, this also means a lot of excellent work will get produced which, in a period of sf drought, would never see the light of day.

The future is bright. The more money there is swilling around Hollywood, the more films get made and the more producers get to make the mistake of financing something of the quality of *Twelve Monkeys* – which managed to combine star-power with a big budget and cutting edge special-effects whilst, incredibly, being well written, directed and acted. And for such a major motion-picture to get through the committee stage with that particular chillingly unhappy ending still intact, is a miracle.

If I had to fish just one apple out of this year's barrel, *Twelve Monkeys* would be it. If I had the luxury of picking a few more I'd choose *Hunchback* and *id4* and *Hackers* and *Gulliver's Travels*. An eclectic bunch, to be sure, and, as such, demonstrative of the sheer range of tastes and textures available to satiate the most ravenous of science fiction fans.

Films of 1996 – Sf, fantasy and related genres

The Kingdom	*Se7en**
Johnny Mnemonic	*Loch Ness**
Jumanji	*The Pebble and the Penguin*
Strange Days	*Toy Story*
Underground	*Lawnmower Man 2: Beyond Cyberspace*
Nadja	*Mighty Aphrodite*
*Twelve Monkeys***	*Mary Reilly*
Richard III	*Rough Magic*
The Grotesque	*The Passion of Darkly Noon*
Barb Wire	*Hackers***
Muppet Treasure Island	*Vampire in Brooklyn*
*Fargo**	*From Dawn Till Dusk*
*Screamers**	*Mission: Impossible**
*Twister**	*The Hunchback of Notre Dame***
Rainbow	*James and the Giant Peach**
*Independence Day***	*The Secret of Roan Irish**
The Stupids	*The Secret Agent Club*
Eraser	*Phenomenon*
*Escape from L.A.**	*Multiplicity**
The Nutty Professor	*The Adventures of Pinnochio*
Dragonheart	*Dracula: Dead and Loving It*
A Goofy Movie	*The Wind in the Willows*
Tromeo and Juliet	

*** Worth a look** ** *Vector* recommends

The Shape of Films to Come

The Craft	*Powder*
Kazaam	*Mars Attacks*
The Frighteners	*Joe's Apartment*
The Phantom	*The Relic*
Matilda	*Tales From the Crypt: Bordello of Blood*
Crash	

(Listing compiled by Gary Dalkin: opinions those of JA, AMB & GD, but not unanimously!)

Magic & Realism

Terry Gilliam's new film, *Twelve Monkeys*, released in America at the start of 1996 and in this country in April, appears to be his most commercially successful film since *Time Bandits*. It has been more than four years since Gilliam's previous film appeared. Always an interesting film-maker, this is a good time to reflect on his work to date.

Born in 1940 in Minneapolis, Gilliam was first noticed by the public for the grotesque animated films which provided much of the linking structure on *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969 – 74). These started life on the LWT programme *We Have Ways of Making You Laugh* (1968), with Gilliam making the shift from cartoonist to animator more or less by accident. He was on the show largely as a quick sketch artist, doing cartoons of guests in the studio. Someone had made a collection of Jimmy Young's most awful links from his radio show, but the producers were unsure how to present them. Gilliam suggested they make a short animated film, and they said "Fine, make one". They assumed he knew how to do it, and he assumed that they knew he didn't. So he made one, they liked it and said "do another", and lo!, an award-winning animator was born.

Gilliam's knowledge of animation was, at this time purely theoretical, being gleaned from text-books. Having a very short time scale and small budget he settled for the use of paper cut-outs because it was quick and cheap. It also gives an interesting surreal feel to the movement of the characters which adds to the strangeness of the cartoons.

There are several elements to these short films which combine to create something unique. The cartoons drawn by Gilliam are all grotesques, these are mixed in with clippings from various sources (frequently using parts of classical paintings and sales catalogues from the 'thirties and 'forties). The structure is usually stream-of-consciousness, which came into its own with *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, where it provided the framework for the whole programme; prior to this, on *We Have Ways of Making You Laugh* (1968), *Marty* (1968) and *Do Not Adjust Your Set* (1967 – 69), they were presented as complete in themselves. The films were also very dark and brutal in content, which contrasted strongly with the bright colouring that Gilliam tended to use. Firmly in the tradition of Warner Bros. cartoons, bodies are ripped apart and graphic cartoon deaths are done with both a high level of glee and frequency.

When considering Gilliam's films it is important to remember that he was, prior to being a director, both a cartoonist and an animator. Both disciplines put a great degree of importance on the entire content of the frame. This becomes apparent in the way his films are framed. The playing of a scene is determined not as much by the dialogue, as by the way the image is presented, the way that it looks.

Terry Gilliam's first experience as a director was with *Monty Python and The Holy Grail* (1975), in which he shared the directing with Terry Jones. His first film with full directing honours came with *Jabberwocky* (1977), and never was a film so full of smoke, dirt and filth and so damn, well, medieval. Which was fine because it was intended to be medieval. It relates the story of a cooper's son, heavily into stock-taking, and his vain attempts to make his way in the city after his father disowns him on his deathbed. The city will afford protection only to a fortunate few and the Jabberwocky stalks the woods outside the wall, killing those who cross its path. Finally the cooper's son, more by luck than judgement, ends up killing the beast and marrying the princess.

This film is notable for a number of things, not least the fact it only had a budget of £500,000. The most obvious thing is the remarkable (and believable) recreation of the medieval period. Stanley Kubrick even rang Gilliam to tell him that he had recreated the film's period even more successfully than Kubrick had the 18th Century in his own *Barry Lyndon*.

The film also feels like it still has a strong link to *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. For example, selecting the King's Champion by playing Hide-and-Seek, on the not unreasonable premise that the more usual combat to the death was leaving a shortage of fully functioning knights. Much of the comedy is direct and has the feel of being grafted onto the film rather than arising from the situation. When the humour is allowed to arise from the scenario it can be very funny indeed, such as the merchants racing through the streets on carriages carried by servants while straightforwardly discussing the current water-to-wine ratios. The funniest moments tend to be due to the acting, particularly Max Wall's toothless performance as King Bruno the Questionable.

Gilliam spent a lot of time denying that *Jabberwocky* was a *Python* film. The only directing he has done with *Python*, apart from *The Holy Grail*, was a short segment intended to be a part of *Monty Python's The Meaning Of Life* (1983). This never fitted comfortably within the film, and was released as the theatrical support to the film under the title *The Crimson Permanent Assurance*. This was an entirely fantastic world of mutiny and piracy on the "wide accountant sea". It follows the adventures of a small oppressed English accountancy firm, under the vicious yoke of American Corporations, which rebels with astonishing success. If anything is a live-action version of the animated films, then it has to be this film.

Terry Gilliam's most significant work consists of his conceptual trilogy concerning the three ages of man and the subordination of imagination and fantasy to realism. This consists of *Time Bandits* (1981), which deals with childhood, *Brazil* (1985) concerning the working years, and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, (1989) regarding old age and dying. In each film the central character does not fit with the expected norm for someone of their age and position, and finds escape in the realms of the fantastic. This escape works with an increasing level of success with each of the three films.

In *Time Bandits* Kevin lives in world of high-technology, television and kitchens which can produce full meals from frozen in under ten seconds. He longs for a simpler and more personalised world. A group of dwarfs come through his wardrobe, and with them he leaves through the wall. These beings have stolen a map from the Supreme Being which locates all the faults in the universe. Using this they travel through time and space, including the realm of the imagination. The beings are trying to get very rich, and Kevin is attempting to appreciate the (to him) new worlds of history, previously only experienced in books.

This journey culminates in a battle with Evil, and finally a meeting with a somewhat apathetic Supreme Being. It comes as something of a shock to discover that the Supreme Being regards his creation with a distanced intellectual interest (he created Evil as an experiment) rather than with an emotional regard that western religious teaching would lead us to expect. Kevin has the imaginative ground pulled from beneath him, and he returns with something of a bang to the real world.

Brazil sees Sam Lowry, a junior executive, son of a very politically powerful (now deceased) father and interfering mother in a world of a tyrannical Bureaucracy. All he wants to do is keep his head down, do a job he is good at, and get through life without making waves. His own dreams of freedom start to encroach on his real life when he spots the woman that he has been seeing in his dreams. When he starts to chase his dream, his life changes irrevocably, as he accepts promotions that he previously turned down, and his actions start to be interpreted by the government as subversive and criminal. Ultimately he totally loses control of the real world and his actions are solely driven by his attempts to integrate a dream into the oppressive regime of life in the real world. Lowry recedes further and further into his fantasies until, at the end of the film, he escapes the real world completely by escaping into his fantasy world. He is clearly not coming back.

The Adventures of Baron Munchausen takes this a stage further. Set in a city under siege by the Turk, in a bomb-scarred theatre, a theatrical company is performing an adaptation of *The Tales of Baron Munchausen*. This is interrupted by the real, and very elderly, Baron. He claims that only he can raise the seige as he was the cause of it, and then proceeds to tell the tale of how he and his companions took all the Sultan's gold in a

The Films of Terry Gilliam *by Dave M. Roberts*

bet. The result of this was that the city has been under seige ever since by the Sultan, attempting to get back at the Baron. The tale is treated as just a story and the Baron as an eccentric old man. He chooses to die rather than live in a world of reason "with no room for three legged cyclops... and oceans of wine". Only Sally Salt, an eight year old girl, wants to believe, and as a result of this faith the Baron sets off to locate his former companions and raise the seige.

The journey to find them is through a fantastical world, where the adventure rejuvenates the Baron. When he locates his companions, they are of course old men without their special powers, and not interested in anything except living out the remainder of their lives with as little fuss as possible. With this disillusionment, the Baron decides to join them. Sally, with the enthusiasm of youth, has to provide the faith and belief in the Baron to enable him to continue. This 'desire for a quiet life' takes different forms through the different ages. In youth both Sally Salt and Kevin in *Time Bandits* have dreams and desperately want to chase them. By the grind of the working years Sam Lowry in *Brazil* still has his dreams but chooses to ignore them until forced to do otherwise, and by old age Baron Munchausen and his companions have lived their dreams and have quite simply had enough.

The fantasy world of the adventures always intrudes into the real world in Gilliam's work, only in *Baron Munchausen* it is far stronger. The imagination wins out and allows the group to defeat the enemy. In this case the enemy is just as much rationalism as it is the Turk. The greatest victory is as the Baron is able to use the fantastic world of his stories to overcome death in the real world. The Turk is shown to be no more than a creation of the rational world to keep the people in check, a danger that doesn't really exist.

A curious footnote is that the greater the success of the imaginative world over the real world, the less commercially successful the film was on its initial release.

Following this trilogy came *The Fisher King* (1991). While Gilliam had no hand in the script, which was by Richard LeGravenese, it still contains the key theme of fantasy as a form of escape from the real world. After apparent encouragement from a radio talk show host, a disturbed listener carries out a murderous gun attack on an upmarket bar. Amongst those killed is the wife of a history professor. He responds by dropping out of society and joining the homeless with a new identity. As Pari, his grief and fears manifest themselves in his imagination as a huge red knight. He therefore has a physical interpretation of his own psychological fears that prevent him from confronting and overcoming them. Prior to *The Fisher King*, all the films created new worlds in which to tell the story. The fantasy in *The Fisher King* extends only to Pari's visions of the red knight and the choreographed commuters at Grand Central Station.

Bodies are ripped apart and graphic cartoon deaths are done with both a high level of glee and frequency

But ***Twelve Monkeys*** sees a return to the visual flair that seemed to be lacking from ***The Fisher King***. The film is set in two worlds: present day Baltimore and the same city in 2035. In the future, the human race has been decimated by a virus, and the remnants of humanity live underground. Above ground, Baltimore is an empty shell, the city being reclaimed by nature. This future world is genuinely dislocating with a nightmarish quality that leads the viewer to question its reality; in other words, it has Terry Gilliam's name stamped all over it.

James Cole (Bruce Willis) is a prisoner in the future world, sent back to 1996 to find more about the advent of the plague. The mysterious 'Army of the Twelve Monkeys' is believed to be responsible, so his mission to gain information about them. Time travel is clearly a far from perfect science; he initially ends up 1990 and gets locked up in a mental hospital. Here he meets Jeffrey Goines (a decidedly manic Brad Pitt). After an attempted escape Cole is locked and bound in a secure room from which he disappears. After briefly appearing in a First World War trench, he finally makes it to 1996.

Cole's first action in 1996 is to track down Dr. Railly, his psychiatrist from the days in the mental hospital (Madeleine Stowe). Jeffrey turns out to be the son of an eminent virologist and probably has more than a little to do with 'The Army of the Twelve Monkeys'. As the relationship between Cole and Dr. Railly develops, Cole wants to believe that he is actually insane, and that the future world to which he keeps being dragged back is a product of his own imagination. Whilst he becomes more convinced of this, Railly is finding more and more evidence that his story is true (the First World War bullet in Cole's leg is rather hard to explain). There is a constant re-evaluation on the part of the viewer as to the truth of the situation. This is compounded by the strange and vaguely dream-like appearance of the future world.

Twelve Monkeys takes the theme of Gilliam's previous films of fantasy as an escape from reality and bends it around. With *Brazil*, what was real and what was fantasy was clear; in *Twelve Monkeys* we don't know. The suspicion that Cole is dreaming the future is strengthened by the use of television in the film. There is a TV in a large number of the shots, and the screen is always showing an old cartoon or film that relates directly to plot at the time; the implication is that an overactive imagination is using the source of television to generate the fantasies. There also strong evidence the other way, Cole's frequent disappearances can never be quite explained away, nor can his foreknowledge of events and the disturbing fact that Jeffrey Goines appears at the same stages of pre-1996 history as Cole, including a memory of an airport shooting Cole witnessed as a child. The position of the psychiatrist is also called into question when the doctor starts to believe the delusions of the person who is supposed to be insane.

Twelve Monkeys is Gilliam's darkest and most complex film to date, largely due to a very strong script by Janet and David Peoples. This is greatly enhanced both by strong performances from the leading players and Gilliam's astonishing visuals. This look is due in part to the efforts of his cinematographer, Roger Pratt, whose credits include *Batman*, *The Fisher King* and *Brazil* and who was a camera assistant on *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The underground world of the future is sufficiently real for it to be believable, but strange enough to be doubtable. When Cole goes to the surface, the dead and empty Baltimore he creates is straight out of a Ballard novel.

A significant part of the creation of Gilliam's worlds takes us back to the animator's eye view. The screen is frequently very busy, with distractions from the main action by apparently inconsequential action. In *Brazil*, when Jill Layton tries to report the disappearance of her neighbour, the scene is dominated by a large remote spying machine. Also, in this scene, much of the action is shown through the monitors watched by the controllers of the remote unit. This relates to the way in which Gilliam frequently plays with the viewpoint. In *Jabberwocky*, the beast is the most frightening at the start of the film when the viewpoint is switched to that of the creature itself, and then, at the end when watched through the dead knight's helmet when worn by the cooper's son. The claustrophobia this creates by using only a small part of the screen is generated again in the interrogation scene in *Brazil*. Sam Lowry is in prison wearing a straitjacket and with a sack over his head. The interrogation is shown from Sam's viewpoint, each interrogator is sitting at a desk mumbling, and is only visible through a small eyehole in the cloth.

A variation on this is used to great effect in *Twelve Monkeys*, particularly where Cole is being interviewed about his work when travelling to the past: a globe of monitors and cameras is the only visual means of communication between him and the interviewers, adding to his confusion. When Cole is hospitalised in the future world, after he has decided that world is a delusion, the scene takes on a dream-like quality. When Cole is in the mental hospital, the camera sways violently, mimicking his disorientation. Frequently, although not actually seeing the world through Cole's eyes, the camera seems to use his mind as a filter, making us view the world in his way.

Terry Gilliam is not a prolific film-maker, making on average a film every three years. This is not a situation that he is happy with, and he has a long list of projects that have fallen by the wayside in recent years, including *A Tale Of Two Cities* (which was to have starred Mel Gibson) and an adaptation of Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. In spite of this, he has consistently created interesting and highly entertaining films. After a wait of four years he has produced, in *Twelve Monkeys*, what I believe to be the best science fiction film of the 1990s so far.

[Chris Terran reviewed **Twelve Monkeys** *in* **Matrix** *119 - AMB]*

Queer New World?

Derek Jarman's SF

by Bob Ford

Growing up in a small northern town, it was difficult to combine my three passions in life into one: the nearest cinema was half a dale away, along with the nearest bookshop, and I dared not express my own sexual confusions and fumbling with anyone else. A chance find of a battered and stained copy of *Dhalgren* saved me from total despair, although a reading of Adams's Horseclans series put me back on my quest to selfhood by eighteen months. And if I had read the entry in the *Cassell's Queer Companion*, as our esteemed (and not at all druggy) Joint Features Editor suggested, I would have found my only rôle model to be HAL 9000, with his "possible crush" for Dave, and would have looked at the ZX81 my father brought me with a new kind of affection. (*Independence Day* lost all interest for me after Harvey Fierstein was killed off)

The release of *Up in the Air: Collected Film Scripts* means that I can imagine an alternate world where these three passions unify. And I also realise that the unity was there to be found all along. *Jubilee* (1977) offered a near-future dystopia, ruled by media baron Borgia Ginz, played maniacally by the actor Orlando (who later played Caliban to Heathcote Williams's Prospero and Toyah's Miranda in Jarman's *The Tempest* [1980]). "As long as the music's loud enough" he cackles, "we won't hear the world falling apart". This vision of decay on the Thames, Buckingham Palace as a recording studio (soon to be replaced by car park) and the county of Dorset as Ginz's fenced-off retreat is framed by the figures of Elizabeth I (Jenny Runacre) and John Dee (played by *Rocky Horror auteur* Richard O'Brien) visiting this vision of a future Albion. Like the best science fiction, it is very much about 1977 – where patriotism and punk clashed in the real world over "God Save the Queen" and on film over a thrashed-out version of 'Rule Britannia'. Indeed, one scene in the script is labelled "HEALEY's BUDGET STRATEGY IN RUINS". But it felt dated when I saw it in the mid-1980s, and has embarrassing moments now when viewed in the context of Jarman's other works.

The breakdown of society is seen most clearly elsewhere in *The Last of England* (1987), when a naked man breakfasts in the ruins on raw cauliflower, where the huddled masses sit on the banks of the Thames (awaiting deportation or exile or escape?) and where a young man has sex with a painting and an ex-public school type has sex with a masked soldier. (Jarman claims this last as a con trick: the soldier is actually played by an actress, under-cutting our expectations. This for me robs the act of its political power). The faceless firing squads – queers rounded up? or anyone if the soldier *was* a woman – terrified me then as now. And the same horrors seem to lurk in the shadows of Dungeness power station in his reworking of the Gospel (according to St Derek of Dungeness of the Order of Celluloid Knights?). *The Garden* (1990), a work whose flaws result from his illnesses at the time of the film's editing, and which dissipate on repeated viewings.

His other sf tinges seem to come in the touches of creative anachronisms – say, calculators and tanks in his biopic of Renaissance painter *Carravagio* (1986) or riot gear in his masterpiece *Edward II* (1991). And all of this is should not be allowed to pass without the mention of Nabil Shaban's Martian in *Wittgenstein* (1993), a touch which apparently raised the hackles of *über*-Marxist Terry Eagleton (Tel wanted something more Merchant Ivory than Del gave him), but which is authentically Wittgensteinian.

Up in the Air offers both the script for *Jubilee* and a planned sequel, *B-Movie/Little England/A Time of Hope*, co-written with actor Julian Sands in about 1979. As Borgia Ginz lies dying, his brain hooked up to record his thoughts (*Cold Lazarus*, anyone?), the country is auctioned off to the highest bidder (C. T. Slicker). It is almost as if Jarman had invented Thatcher, or that he had mapped out the horrors of the next dishonest decade. One parcel of land remains out of the hands of Slicker, the Isle of Dogs ("the last of England [...] Alcatraz has nothing on it") which is bought up by pop musician Adam. There follows a battle for land, and horror gives way to bleak farce.

What is missing from *B-Movie* is the framing Elizabethan setting, but this is there in abundance in Jarman's vitriolic *Sod 'Em*. Part a denunciation of all things heterosoc, part a queer defiance and reappropriation of Sodom, the film is the most tantalising work in the book, and the most impossible to film. With the royal family reduced to a soap opera (how it is, how true!), Prince Edward is conflated with Queer Edward II, and faces the horrors of the prejudices against a love which rants its name.

Those iconic queers, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Newton, Byron, Wilde petition for God's intervention, but her intervention can only be too late. Edward can only have Johnny in the afterlife, away from heterosoc. Heterosoc can only kill Edward, and the one he loves. And yet, as Jarman was to in his later 'straightforward' adaptation of *Edward II*, he has his cake and eats it. Edward wakes up in the squat with Johnny, and they kiss. All is right with the world.

Jarman's notes tell us that this film was swallowed up by preparation for *The Garden* - and bits clearly survive, such as his reworking of religion and his attack on authority. Prime Minister Thatcher/Reaper prefigures Tilda Swinton's astounding portrayal of beautiful evil incarnate - Isabella from *Edward II*.

Two other scripts are of vaguely generic interest - *Akenaten*, a reworking of Egyptian myth which was to have featured Bowie, and *Bob-Up-a-Down*, a medieval fable which might have starred Swinton and Vanessa Redgrave. But the most overtly sf film in the book, and the one that came closest to being made, is *Neutron*.

This, as Michael O'Pray informs us in the book's otherwise spot-on introduction, is reminiscent of Scott Ridley's *Bladerunner* [sic]. Lovers Aeon and Sophia (one an echo of a Jungian term, the other an echo of gnostic knowledge) are split apart by a nuclear catastrophe. Aeon is rescued from being hung, by feral children, thanks to the intervention of Topaz, a mysterious and handsome stranger. After a while longer scavenging in the ruins, Aeon turns himself in to the oppressive authorities in the bunkers, only to find that Topaz is their leader. (Whilst Topaz and Aeon's relationship is unconsummated, this twist has the kick of that odd betrayed entanglement of soldier and public school type in *Last of England*).

Whilst the ends of *Edward II* and *Sod 'Em* offered an escape into community, and the Last of England some hope of escape, *Neutron* offers a happy ending of the death of the tyrant, and the apotheosis of the hero. At the same time the victory signals a retreat: Aeon disappears into medieval history. At his most radical, Jarman draws on the messianic muse.

And yet, would it have done Jarman any good to join the ranks of "Scott Ridley" and Terry Gilliam as one of Hollywood visionaries? Whilst the underfunding of Jarman's career no doubt caused artistic compromise, it also enforced creativity. Who needs a budget for recreating Wittgenstein's Oxford when, as Andrew M. Butler has insistently reminded me, a green deckchair can stand in for all of Ireland? And who needs even that, when an astonishing, bravura, pretentious, inspired choice of a single blue screen can allow us to superimpose on all of Jarman's thoughts of life and death? Into the air goes this baseless set of visions, and we are the richer for them.

[Derek Jarman, *Up in the Air: Collected Film Scripts*, London: Vintage, 1996, £8.99. Vintage have also published several volumes of Jarman's diaries, and *Kicking The Pricks*, an account of *The Last of England* - AMB]

Cognitive Mapping 5: Space

by Paul Kincaid

More than forty years separates these two extracts. In science fiction terms that is a matter of generations: the New Wave has come and gone, cyberpunk has flourished and faded. Clarke was one of the greats of science fiction's golden age, Banks is one of the most upstart of the young turks - yet these passages could have come from the same sensitivity, the same outward urge. Oh, there are words here and there that can be used to tell them apart: 'warping', 'singularity', perhaps even 'hyperspace' mark out the second extract as more recent. But in everything that counts, the two writers approach their subject in exactly the same way. Space, as Douglas Adams put it, is big: and both Clarke and Banks are doing what science fiction writers have always done when they venture out beyond the thin mantle of our atmosphere, they are celebrating the vastness, they marvelling at the superlative.

The glowing gas shells were all around us, banishing the normal night of interstellar space. we were flying into the center of a cosmic bomb that had detonated millenia ago and whose incandescent fragments were still hurtling apart. The immense scale of the explosion, and the fact that the debris already covered a volume of space many billions of miles across, robbed the scene of any visible movement. It would take decades before the unaided eye could detect any movement in these tortured wisps and eddies of gas, yet the sense of turbulent expansion was over whelming.

"The Star" (1955) Arthur C. Clarke

Space is made up of incredible distance, immense size, astonishing speed. It may not be literally unimaginable, but it certainly stretches the very borders of our imagination. Space, in other words, is the embodiment (If that is the appropriate term in the circumstances) of that 'sense of wonder' which is the spirit of science fiction.

Which is why, of all the features that define science fiction in the popular imagination, space travel is probably the most vivid. Graceful vessels and wheel-shaped space stations perform a stately waltz in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), insect-like ships dart and stab at the vast lumbering Death Star in *Star Wars* (1977), the USS *Enterprise* boldly goes where no-one has gone before. From the confines of our busy, crowded, workaday world, space is the magic of our time, and it is the business of science fiction to take us there.

Since earliest humanity looked up from their campfires into a starry sky, it has been the place where we have found heaven, the home of wonders and mystery. Gods sit unreachable above the clouds, heroes are taken up in glory to the heavens: in humanity there is an imaginative yearning for space which science fiction now rides.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when travellers tales combined with utopian fiction and satire to form their own distinctive type of fantastic fiction, it became commonplace for writers like Kepler (*Dream* [1634]) and Cyrano de Bergerac (*Selenarchia* [1657]) to send their voyagers to the sun or to the moon; though what they found there was not unlike the world they left behind. However, these fantastic journeys soon faded from the literature, and by the time science fiction began to assume the form we know today, space travel played little part in it. Beyond the curious exceptions of Verne (*From the Earth to the Moon* [1865]) and Wells (*First Men in the Moon* [1901]), most early science fiction was resolutely Earth-bound.

Over the years, decades, centuries and millenia that followed, Phage had journeyed through the galaxy, wandering from system to system, concentrating on trading and manufacturing at first ... It had been successively fitted with ever-more efficient and powerful drives and engines, until eventually it was able to maintain a perfectly respectable velocity either warping along the fabric of space-time or creating its own induced-singularity pathway through hyperspace beneath or above it.

Excession (1996) Iain M. Banks

Only with the pulp sf adventures of Hugo Gernsback's magazines in the 1920s did space flight become one of the central subjects of science fiction. In part, this was an extension of the American frontier into space, the 'manifest destiny' that guided nineteenth-century man into the wide open space of the American West would guide twenty-first century into the wide open spaces of... space. Many of the stories that resulted repeated the moral simplicity, the mythic grandeur, and even the structure of the original pulp adventures, the dime novel cowboy stories of the end of the nineteenth century. This notion of space as being a transplanted American frontier is still common in many space adventure stories, and is specifically recognised in the opening voiceover of *Star Trek*: "Space, the Final Frontier...".

But if the plots were old, the settings were new. And one thing space provided was a vision of the infinite possibilities of our technological future... With such a vast canvas, almost anything was possible, from life in a puddle in James Blish's 'Surface Tension' (1952) to entire cities threading the galaxies in the same author's 'Cities in Flight' sequence, beginning with *Earthmen, Come Home* (1958). And from the weird environments of Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* (1954) to those of Larry Niven's *Ringworld* (1970). Whatever the curious situation available through space, it was an excuse for the competent man – the abiding symbolic figure who bestrides (particularly American) science fiction – to succeed through ingenuity and invention. In so far as the science fiction engendered by Gernsback was a didactic celebration of Yankee competence and the possibilities of science, space provided the perfect backcloth against which it could be shown off.

Of course, even during the outward-bound 'Golden Age' of science fiction (which, for the sake of argument, we'll consider as co-extant with John W. Campbell Jr's reign at *Astounding/Analog* [1937-1964]) most of these 'space operas' paid as much attention to space as the average commuter pays to the road or railway track. It was to be crossed on the way from one planet to another where the main adventure would occur, or, if the story was set in space, it would be enclosed within a hermetically-sealed generation starship. Some writers did attempt to show the scale of space. E. E. "Doc" Smith opened the first volume of his 'Lensman' series (*Triplanetary* [1948]) with the archetypal space-operatic image of two galaxies colliding. But, for most, it was too big, too empty, to provide genuine dramatic possibilities. For a while it was only those writers – such as Arthur C. Clarke in 'The Star' and *2001: A Space Odyssey* or Poul Anderson in 'Kyrie' (1969) – who were attempting to convey a religious, or at least a mystical image, who used space itself as a setting.

Others used it to provide aliens of such a scale that they could be both incomprehensible *to* and uncomprehending *of* humanity. These writers – whether the aliens take the form of Fred Hoyle's nebulous *The Black Cloud* (1957) or the interstellar being of James Tiptree Jr's *Up the Walls of the World* (1978) – use the gigantic scale of their creation (only possible in the vastness of space) to emphasise the tiny scale of humanity. Again this is an almost religious impulse: the heavens once more house god-like beings whose very vastness renders them mysterious to humanity.

Against this sort of background, Iain M. Banks's science fiction, which can seem so conventional in setting, is actually quite radical. His novels, most notable *Excession*, are full of space opera paraphernalia. E. E. "Doc" Smith found he had to go for bigger and bigger effects in each volume of his 'Lensman' series, simply in order to continue the spectacular character; Banks's novels too are filled with ever bigger effects. The descriptions harp constantly on the size, the speed, the extent of his General Service Vehicles, his galaxy-hopping planetoids. Here, the scale of space is placed at centre stage - yet the intent is never to reduce the human, or to marvel at the majesty of the infinite. Though the descriptions are bigger, faster, further reaching, the guiding characteristic is always the human intellect. Though we could not comfortably take in the size of a GDV, we could talk to it person to person. What abides in Banks's novels is humanity: although we may have been dwarfed, it is our patterns of thought and behaviour that guide every massive artefact through ever vaster regions of space. In this he is perhaps closer to the impulse of the Gernsbackian writers extolling the competent man, come what may - but for Banks the competent man may not be a man, but a planet, or a planet-sized ship, a being adjusted to the scale of space itself.

First Impressions

Reviews of Hardback and Paperback Originals

Edited by Paul Kincaid

Roger MacBride Allen *Isaac Asimov's Utopia*
Orion, 1996, 320pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

"There are times when the Three Laws have a hell of a lot to answer for," says Fredda Leving towards the end of this, the final book in Allen's trilogy of sequels – previous volumes were *Caliban* and *Inferno* – to Asimov's Robot Stories. That idea seems to have served, at least in part, as the genesis for this work: the realisation that the Three Laws, which have become almost a given in much robot fiction, may be excessively limiting; that maybe they need a re-write. Apparently Asimov proposed such an idea to Roger MacBride Allen back in 1990 and this trilogy, written with Asimov's approval, is the result.

So we find ourselves on the planet Inferno, 'one of the smallest, weakest, most fragile of the Spacer world', amongst the traditional Three Law robots we know so well and a new kind, the New Law robots. These have (seemingly only subtly) different operating parameters which continue to prevent them from killing humans while not obliging them to prevent a human from coming to harm. The colonisation and terraforming of the planet is proceeding with difficulty and seems doomed to ultimate failure when a scientist, Davlo Lentrall, proposes a somewhat drastic solution to the problem: crashing a comet onto the planet's surface. It's a daring scheme and not without risk to the planet's inhabitants, something which the Three Laws robots find unacceptable and contrary to their conditioning. From here we proceed through a series of political intrigues, espionage and kidnapping plans, and those good old Three Laws conflicts which typified most of the original Asimovian Robot stories. Rival political factions pursue their own agendas and plenty of grief is caused for the New Law robots who, as well as having to cope with human insecurities about the threat they may or may not pose, are (unsurprisingly) unhappy with a scheme that involves crash-landing a comet on top of their city.

The book highlights the limitations of the original Three Laws as the humans frequently find themselves working against their 'servants', the robots. The computers that control the terraforming process, for example, have to be tricked into believing that they're actually running a simulation so they can make decisions that could result in some small harm being done to the settlers to achieve a greater good. But are the New Laws any better? With the removal of the original injunction, that a robot should not 'through inaction allow a human being to come to harm', are the resulting New Law robots safe or do they now pose a serious threat to humanity? And on top of all this, we have the wild card, Caliban, a robot built without any constraining laws: a No Law robot.

'Asimov would have been proud,' says the cover, quoting from *The Times*. Indeed Allen does appear to have stayed true to the spirit of the original Robot stories and enthusiasts will doubtless be pleased with this addition to the body of work. Setting aside all the robot dilemmas, the underlying story – the imminent comet collision – is entertaining enough, even if the conclusion hardly comes as a surprise. However, the book has little to offer to those people who believe that the whole Three Laws of Robotics issue was worked out decades ago.

Iain M. Banks *Excession* *Orbit, 1996, 455pp, £15.99*

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

The 'Culture' novels neatly expose the timidity and unimaginativeness of the US models from which they descend. Faced with the galaxy as a canvas, US authors have retreated into replays of the American Revolution or celebrations of so-called pioneering virtues rather than acknowledge the obvious: that a civilisation which can roam the galaxy would have solved its resource problems and therefore could do anything it wants. From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs – a literal communist utopia from which Robert Heinlein and Jerry Pournelle would run in terror. And just to show how hedonistic utopia can be, Banks's characters rarely give freely anything to the society of which they're part, they have to be coerced and flattered into doing just about anything.

But the problem with vast canvases is that, to do them justice, the stories they tell have to be equally vast. In the first 'Culture' novel, *Consider Phlebas*, the Idiran War in the background was as prominent as the various human dramas played out in the foreground (while they in turn were implicitly merely a selection of the many such dramas available). In the two subsequent 'Culture' novels, however, the narrative focussed more on the human element, so that in the final chapters of the third, *The Use of Weapons*, we were confronted with a crisis whose resolution had little to do with the Culture *per se*: it simply provided a known context for a story which could have taken place in any galactic civilisation. However, with *Excession*, the fourth 'Culture' novel, we're back to the narrative scale of the first. The focus is as much on the Minds which control the Culture's tens-of-kilometres-long spacecraft as the humans.

The Minds are confronted by what they call an Out of Context Problem: a black-body sphere, labelled the Excession, has irrupted into their universe. It may offer a means of access to other universes, but it refuses all attempts at interrogation and could be hostile. The only intellect which may be able to assist is a space captain who encountered a similar artefact two-and-a-half millenia previously; but she is in suspended animation aboard the GSV *Sleeper Service*, which is currently classified as Eccentric and so cannot be relied on to co-operate. Instead, Special Circumstances has to persuade a philandering diplomat, Byr Genar-Hofoen, to leave his current assignment to the Affront, a non-Culture species which may join it in the future, and be sent to access her memories in person. Barely has Genar-Hofoen's journey commenced, however, than we discover that another part of Special Circumstances wishes to stop him, and so is sending a vain, air-headed young girl, Ulver Seich, to seduce him. Meanwhile a conspiracy of Minds called the Interesting Times Gang, which may not be aware of Special Circumstances's plots, is itself plotting to turn the Excession to unspecified ends. In yet a further conspiracy, a traitor Mind, which may possibly be assisted by others, is provoking the Affront to declare war on the Culture, in order to force the Culture to deal with their known rapacity and cruelty.

Things move smartly along, with the various participants gradually closing in on the Excession. As the novel progresses, however, so the relative importance of Genar-Hofoen's and the Minds' stories begin to diverge. In part this is because the Minds' response to the Excession as an all-encompassing threat ups the narrative stakes, and because the Minds appear to begin dropping subtle clues as to who or what may actually run the Culture, both of which will necessarily intrigue any space opera fan with a taste for the vast. But the other part is that the reasons for Genar-Hofoen's involvement become less and less convincing, and are eventually revealed as a ruse by the GSV *Sleeper Service* to reunite him with a lover he abandoned forty years before and who has been living out a delayed pregnancy aboard the ship ever since. The ship, having been the instrument which first brought them together, now wishes to see a definitive resolution to their affair, the human couple naturally want nothing of the kind. Meanwhile the Affront are forced to surrender, the traitor Mind commits suicide, the Interesting Times Gang gains full control of the situation, the Excession disappears, and Special Circumstances's contradictory actions remain unexplained.

Ho-hum, is the first – disappointed – response. All this action and at the end everything just evaporates? But what some may see as a narrative failure is, I think, deliberate. Banks's intention is to confirm the inherent and irresolvable mismatch between our small-scale human concerns and space opera's galaxy-quaking thud-and-blunder. As the Mind which brings Genar-Hofoen and his lover together concedes, human life isn't orderly: it has no narrative pattern or proper conclusion, but just goes on until it stops. In addition – as it doesn't say but as we can deduce for ourselves – in real life, individual humans rarely concern themselves with the larger matters which history eventually judges to have been important. Our focus is on the immediate and the everyday. Confronted with a threat outside our usual expectations our natural tendency is not to start wondering how to become heroes, but rather to worry about trivia over which we have some control and hope that someone else will deal with the problem. For every ten politicians who claim the mantle of leadership and to be acting from altruism, there are tens of thousands of us for whom the news is just another television programme.

As many critics have charged: science fiction habitually overstates the rôle of the individual as an agent of change, and just as habitually ignores broad social and historical processes involving people in the mass. We've all lost count of the number of stories we've read in which the fate of the galaxy hangs on the actions of a single person. Banks has probably read them too, and knows like us that they are false because they do not engage with the real world. His response, riskily courting having it labelled disappointing, has been to write a novel in which, although humans feature, they are not vital to the resolution of the plot. As hedonists, they would much rather concentrate on the pursuit of transient pleasures than worry about saving their Culture. That's what the Minds are for. Even utopia, Banks suggests, needs overseers.

Clive Barker *Sacrament*
HarperCollins, 1996, 434pp, £15.99
Phillip Mann *The Burning Forest*
Gollancz, 1996, 255pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Anyone who has ever had good and bad news at the same time will know how I felt when I received these two books to review. While Clive Barker has produced more consistantly superlative fantasy fiction than any other British writer, Phillip Mann wrote *The Dragon Wakes*, the previous volume of the quartet under consideration, and a work which I was unfortunate enough to read previously for *Vector*. Call it synchronicity, or the zeigiest, but both novels concern themselves with the threat of environmental catastrophy and spiritual transformation, and despite otherwise being very different, each have the failing of being decidedly underplotted.

Inevitably the same fundamental absurdities underlie *The Burning Forest* as did the preceding novel in *A Land Fit for Heroes* (see my comments in *Vector* 186). We are still in 20th century Roman Britannia, and the Romans are still preparing to incinerate our every last tree and turn scorched earth into a giant sheep farm. Believable plotting does not appear to be one of Phillip Mann's strengths. For those who missed last year's unexciting episode, the rationale is that only British Sheep is safe to eat because all the mainland ruminants have gone down with a very nasty disease.

And, err, that's it...

In lieu of a proper story we get a sequence of massacres, the Romans relentlessly razing indigenous villages and rebel groups. After a very long wait a few trees do burn – as if the Towering Inferno had been a broom cupboard fire in the last ten minutes of the film – but Mann reneges upon the promised conflagration, prefering to let everything degenerate into arbitary mystical symbolism.

Thus he introduces the black egg – abraxis, or an anti-life force – from the 'time before time' (sic) and the goddess of creation/destuction. The mere titular threat of an environmental catastrophy causes the enbodiment of nature – Miranda of the previous volume, until she walked into a pool at night and bathed in the reflection of the moon! – to cause an environmental apocalypse which kills almost all the characters who have survived thus far. This *deus ex machina* ending is not dissimilar to the climax of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which comparison aptly sums up the level of imagination on offer here.

Even the details irritate. Mann tells us that people are 'cremated to statues', and has characters refer to 'gremlins', a concept and word which arose from specific circumstances in World War II on our own earth: the word could not exist in Mann's parallel world. But much more important than these matters is the fact that the book does not seem to know what it is, resulting in long sections of dry political intrigue interwoven with action and adventure in the style of a juvenile, and some very sub-Holdstock nature mysticism. Actually, everything from the title onwards is very sub-Holdstock: Coll can turn into his spirit animal and enter other worlds of the spirit, while far too many forms of magic are included to suspend any disbelief. However, several passages, particularly one dealing with the death of one of the central characters, do maintain the simple poetic grandeur of a folk tale.

The most interesting section comes when the Emperor explains his understanding of his own insanity. His plan is an indication of the fact that he believes in nothing, that he has reduced life and the universe to a meaningless mechanism, and so has adopted the existentialist position of attempting to find meaning through extremes of experience – in his case, destruction. He dreams of destroying the entire world to 'prove' meaninglessness. It is the ultimate solipsistic viewpoint, rather than the corruption of absolute power.

Sacrament also features a character, Jacob Steep, who has the ambition to destroy all life and so more clearly hear the voice of God, though when we first meet him he is still overseeing the extinction of the final pairs of individual species. Steep is the surrogate father/nemesis of Will Rabjohns, a character who is surely Barker's most autobiographical hero to date.

Barker's writings have shown enormous diversity, and a marked development from intense horror to visionary fantasy (with a side-step to produce, with *The Thief of Always*, the finest children's novel of recent years), while retaining key concerns for those on the margins of society and their spiritual and physical quests.

Here Rabjohns is a middle-aged Englishman living in San Francisco. He is at the top of his profession – environmental photography so dark and disturbing as to make his work as controvertial as it is lauded – and the only thing which makes him an outsider is his homosexuality. While there have been homosexual characters in previous Barker novels, *Imajica* and *Everville*, they have been very much in the supporting cast. Now it would appear that Barker has had enough of catering to his heterosexual audience and has decided they should follow his inclination. This is a brave move for a bestselling writer, and one which probably caused some consternation at HarperCollins.

The explanation for Barker's forthrightness may lie in what we learn of Will's disillusionment with his career. He has done everything, professionally and personally, and feels there is nothing left to aim for. At the beginning of *Sacrament* he is considering making his latest book his last. If this is a reflection of Barker's thoughts, this may indeed be his final novel, though the ending does give hope for a new direction.

In a prologue Will is attacked by a polar bear. We next meet him in hospital in a coma and are plunged into Banksian territory reminiscent of *The Bridge* as, for the first third of the book, Rabjohn relives the significant events of his adolescence. He has moved to a Yorkshire village with parents who are grieving the death of his older and preferred brother. Unable ever to live up to the image of dead Nathaniel, the disaffected Will becomes friends with Frannie and her mildly mentally handicapped brother, Sherwood. While exploring the countryside, Will meets Jacob Steep, and immediately a psychic bond forms.

Steep is one of those fabulous creations who seem as if they should always have existed in folk tales, yet he is a uniquely 20th century character, an archetype for an age of environmental hell, an anti-Noah. He is the man or, rather, something akin to a fallen angel, who supervises the end of creatures, two by two. With Steep is Rosa McGee. Together they have travelled the world for centuries, passionately bound together by love and hate, and forces more powerful than even they remember.

The first section ends with inconclusive violence, and then the book reveals it major weakness. Will recovers consciousness and returns to San Francisco to recuperate. Despite his visions of Lord Fox, a complex symbolic figure which appears to move from dreams to the waking world, and a growing awareness that Steep is still in the world and presents a greater danger than ever, far too many pages are

devoted to Will rekindling an old romance and visiting various friends. The relentless narrative pull of *Imagica* and *Weaveworld* are sadly missing.

At too great a length, Will returns to England to confront Steep and face the riddle of the ancient *Domus Mundi*, the enigmatic House of the World, in which may lie the destruction of all life on earth. The pace accelerates, but the novel remains curiously low key. Barker repeatedly writes himself into the position of having to deflate what otherwise would be one of his vast set-pieces of wonder and destruction, for if he allowed events to run their course the book would be over long before it extended page count.

Eventually, via the the enigma of a centuries-dead mystical artist, we reach a pantheistic vision of the heart of nature, one which is a cousin of those found in the stories of Arthur Machen (Barker has previously referred to Machen in the singing roses in *Everville*). Opposites are joined, blood is spilled, and an ambigious redemption atained.

This is a book full of couples, revolving around a theme of the fercundity of nature. A central irony is the failure of almost all of the characters to satisfactorily reproduce. Will, while half of various couples, never has a child due to his sexuality. Frannie sacrifices any chances she may have had for motherhood to look after her brother. All of Rosa's children die at birth. Will's brother dies and he can never find the same place in his parents' affections. Implied in humanity's failure to produce the next generation is the species' almost gleeful destruction of the natural world – Barker paints humanity as half-mad from alienation from a vague, new-agish, conception of God.

Especially fine in this respect is the creation of Hugo, Will's father. A university philosopher who could once compete with Sartre, his materialistic, nihilistic view of life has only brought him bitterness and a cold heart. Egotistical, vain and cantankerous, he shows no redeeming qualities. His confrontations with his son are among the most moving scenes in the book.

If *Sacrament* lacks the scale of event and imagination we have come to expect from Barker, and if some elements do, in passing, recall his previous books a little too closely, then at least the writing is as fine as we expect, and the characterisations are superb. There is something here of the feel of approaching middle-age, of a man coming to terms with the end of the first half of his life, preparing to meet the second. There is also a very real sense of loss. This is, unlike most fantasy fiction, a book unafraid to confront the real world, and the silence presence of AIDS is so strong as to become almost a character itself. If much of the old Barker has gone, what remains are the moments of wonder, the glorious epiphanies, the metaphysical enquiry mixed with love, sex, death and transfiguration. Though this fine novel ultimately disappoints, it does so only because we are painfully aware that at his best Barker is incomparable.

Storm Constantine *Scenting Hallowed Blood* *Signet, 1996, 357pp, £5.99*
Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

In this, the second volume of a 'Grigori' trilogy, ancient myth set in a contemporary framing, Storm Constantine has chosen locales which, more than those in *Stalking Tender Prey*, lend themselves to that imaginal blending of the natural, the magical and the supernatural which is her special talent. These are the decayed Assembly Rooms in Black Lion Square which provide shelter for refugee Grigori, and the Cornish coast around the Lizard which is the haunt of rival Grigori factions and of a meddlingly participatory coven of witches. Her 'imaginal blending' is well illustrated in the observation of the debris from the climactic tidal wave: broken bodies 'that looked like seals but were not', weed 'that might have been the shorn hair of giant mermaids'.

The tidal wave is a 'millenial' happening, a symptom of the earth's recycling of a catastrophic past as archetypal characters re-enact, transform and transcend long-past deeds. The central figure is Shem, an embodiment of the fallen angel Shemyaza who had, in *Stalking Tender Prey*, been incarnated in the bivalently good/evil, but predominantly evil and now dissolved person of Othman. To a greater extent than in earlier fantasies, Storm Constantine has hitched her story to a specific body of myth – myth which has roots in the very early history of Middle Eastern cultures, according to the investigations of Andrew Collins (*From the Ashes of Angels*) and other interpreters of Akkadian and Hebraic legends of the 'Sons of God'. In myth, and in Constantine's story, the prince, or 'angel', Shemyaza was executed by his peers in 'paradise' for giving knowledge to and mingling his genes with a 'lower' humankind, but he has existed in spirit through millenia of starry exile while the descendants of that prehistoric miscegenation have, as Grigori, continued to frequent the earth. In this volume the Grigori characters from *Stalking Tender Prey*, in their 'good' and 'evil' divisions, expect a god-like return of Shemyaza and are working to gain possession of his person and his power. But, after the chaos and trauma at the end of *Prey*, Shem is a listless husk in hiding. Abducted, he is taken to one Grigori stronghold in Cornwall while some of his followers are taken to the stronghold of rival Grigori. A kind of war persists, punctuated and energised by a variety of rituals and sexual encounters and practices. It culminates with Shem/Shemyaza, as Azazeal, Angel of Light, experiencing a series of confrontations deep in the cliff caves of Cornwall. First there is the vision of the Earthmother/Eve figure, Ishtahar, then the temptress of the negative path, Sofia, and finally the ophidian Shamir, the dark serpent of the Earth, with whom he conjoins apocalyptically to burst forth into the primal ocean the the accompaniment of solar eclipse, tidal wave, earthquake and manifestations throughout Albion's many 'omphali' – stone circles, cathedrals and centres of supernatural potency.

After all that, things sober down somewhat as the factions come together in feasting while the scene is set for the trilogy's conclusion. Shemyaza, though a Solar Messiah, has not yet pierced the cosmically liberating 'stargate', has not completed the 'return to the source'. What in the first volume seemed to start as a containable fantasy has, by the end of the second volume, assumed epic stature. To combine the natural and the uncanny on this scale is a matter of novelistic skill, and Constantine succeeds well. Take, for example, the Cornish coven,

the Pelleth: when we first meet its leaders, the sisters Meg and Betsy, by turn serving cream teas from their cottage and performing cavernous rites, one can't help projecting a whiff of Weatherwax and Ogg, but when they finally stand to face the wave mountain their image is noble and tragic. Similarly the Moses Assembly Rooms in their commonplace Bloomsbury location initially seem just dingy and Victorian, but they are soon expertly invested with Gothic horror. Thus the reader's imagination is at full sympathetic stretch when it comes to the big set pieces of supernatural and/or erotic fantasy, such as the underwater episode in Lyonesse or Shemyaza's visionary recapitulation of his past.

These, and other sequences, while not being specifically allusive, are vibrantly reflective of those deep-rooted areas of myth out of which so much poetic literature and metaphysical imagery has sprung. The chapter 'Waking of the Serpent' has affinities with Kundalini yoga; a partially analagous drama is Byron'stragedy of Azazeal, *Heaven and Earth*; and a kindred fantasy is H.G. Wells's 'The Apple', which gives a modern setting to the aftermath of the legend of the Tree of Knowledge, guarded by angels in the mountains of Kurdistan where, Storm Constantine has said in a recent interview, her third volume will take its readers. Actually the Trees of Life and of Knowledge, with all their Cabbalistic associations, are central to the evolution of Constantine's Shemyaza: his entry into the abyssal Sphere of Da'ath signifying his uniting of them and his command of their negative and positive aspects. It is archetypal resonances of this kind that make reading *Scenting Hallowed Blood* so imaginally rewarding, though at times the action may certainly be melodramatic.

Robin Cook ***Contagion***

Macmillan, 1996, 434pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Since publishing *Coma* (1977), which became a successful film starring Genevieve Bujold and Michael Douglas, Robin Cook has produced a steady stream of hospital-based thrillers. Such works are the horror genre's equivalent of the romance genre's nurse novels and TV's crisis centre dramas, productively mining the yukk factor and life-or-death melodrama which are intrinsic to medical emergencies. A few of Cook's works in this vein – most notably *Mutation* (1989) – have ventured into the borderlands of sf but even these crossovers are content with formularized plots and conventional story-structures.

Contagion is a mystery in which a Medical Examiner – seemingly based on the abrasively nosey Quincy of TV fame (but better looking, at least until he starts getting beaten up by gangstas) – tries to figure out why a New York hospital has suddenly started turning out groups of stiffs killed by very rare and exceedingly nasty diseases which appear to have been contracted in house. The second protagonist is a female advertising executive desperate to advance her career who begins to wonder whether there might be some mileage in playing on public anxieties about nosocomial infections.

(Nosocomial infections are the ones people pick up in hospital, far more frequently than hospitals care to admit. One of the benefits of reading Robin Cook is that you get to find out what words like nosocomial mean. In *Contagion* he also explains how to order lethal pathogens by mail on your VISA card, in case you're interested.)

On the plus side, *Contagion* is genuinely gripping. Once it has become clear that someone is deliberately infecting hospital patients with nasty diseases, beginning with the plague and moving on through tularemia and Rocky Mountain spotted fever to the Spanish flu, with the apparent motive if starting a major epidemic, the reader is inevitably hooked by three questions, two of them trivial and one vital. The trivial questions are, of course, *who?* and *how?*; the vital one is *why?* This is what distinguishes medical mysteries from commonplace detective stories; in ordinary mysteries the challenge is usually a matter of figuring out which of the characters did the dirty deed but in medical mysteries the deeds tend to be so bizarrely and excruciatingly dirty as to make the problem of identity pale into insignificance before the question of motive. Why on earth would *anybody* start slaughtering innocent persons wholesale in the nastiest manner imaginable, in the apparent hope (or at least with the attendant risk) of unleashing an epidemic which might kill millions more?

As it happens, I can think of two or three reasons why someone might want to do that, all of which have already been featured in medical thrillers of some note (cf, for instance, Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys*). While I read the first three hundred pages of *Contagion* I tried hard think of a new one that would be both plausible and interesting, and I suppose Robin Cook must have been thinking just as hard while he was writing them; I failed but not nearly as spectacularly as he did. That, alas, is the minus side of *Contagion*. It is an unfortunate truism the more gripping a story is, the greater is the disappointment, anger and frank disgust which ensues if it turns out that the answer to the enigma is moronically absurd.

Cook fights against these odds in a manner which might almost seem heroic were it not so patently futile. In order to offer rival suspects in the matter of *how?* he gives us an account of an unlucky patient's last hours which carefully includes three different ways she could have been given the lethal dose – but hey, if it had been the injection or the drip even the idiot straw men who are not permitted by the author to observe any commandment save 'Cover Thine Ass' would have figured it out. As for *who?*, it doesn't take a genius-level reader to deduce that if a book has a prologue which introduces three characters, two of whom are the story's main protagonists, then the third must be there for some other reason. In terms of real dramatic tension, alas, the story only has one authentic enigma with which to tempt and trouble it readers – and the simple fact is that poor Robin couldn't think of anything that would qualify as a sensible answer. If he could have, I dare say that he would have – but it is, after all, his job to do that, so it's difficult to substitute pity for contempt.

Mercifully, dear BSFA member, you'll never have to find out what an insultingly horrible mess the climax of this book is, because it isn't really science fiction. That's one of the few privileges of membership in this élite band of brothers (and, of course, sisters) we are proud to call fandom.

Mark Dery *Escape Velocity*
Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 376pp, £16.99
Reviewed by Steve Palmer

For once, here is a non-fiction book about cyberculture that actually lives up to the hype. Plastered with quotes from such luminaries as J.G. Ballard and Pat Cadigan, and coming with its own Website (`http://www.well.com/user/markdery/`), this is a work that delivers what it promises. A rare thing these days.

Cyberculture is becoming an environment. As J.G. Ballard wrote elsewhere, human beings are coming to a phase of existence where it is possible to replace actual reality with one created by the human mind. Our increasingly technological world – a world where the multiplication of computers is like bacteria, where the need for and use of computers is hardly ever questioned, where The Computer is a new deity – is losing its green colour and becoming grey.

What seems particularly scary – and this is confirmed by the fact that half of Mark Dery's book concerns the human body – is the way in which human beings are becoming ever more divorced from their physical selves. It seems that the earliest religious ideas of the mind, or spirit, being an entity inside a vehicle – the body – has been exaggerated by cyberculture. There exists this bizarre concept of human minds able to be set free from their bodies to roam the infinite ways of cyberspace. To me this is absurd. The mind and the body are one, inseparable; there is no such thing as soul or spirit, no afterlife. How strange and frightening, therefore, to see so many people actively trying to escape the reality of their bodies, and creating ethical and artistic mores that express really deep body loathing. *Escape Velocity* is particularly good at describing these cultures, as in the chapter on 'metal music' and 'obsolete bodies'.

And you don't have to be a psychoanalyst to see the equivalence between death, blackness and gothic imagination, and the concept of the machine, particularly the computerised machine. The obsession with material goods and computational progress, particularly in America but throughout the West and parts of the Far East, comes in part from a submersion in an environment of mathematics. Computers are based on mathematics: unemotional, statistical, quantifiable. One of the horrifying things about the new environment is how anything intuitive, sense-based, and particularly anything that cannot be measured, is ejected from mainstream society. The deadly black grip of a new culture is upon us, and its forerunner is cyberculture.

In rejecting the experience of our senses we are actually depriving ourselves of consciousness. Our minds are based on the input of our bodies. In *Escape Velocity* the new concepts of artificial realities, of ethics being economic in origin (ie. computational, since economic space is now equivalent to cyberspace), and of cyborgisation, are given special emphasis, and they serve to show what a nightmare lies before us. It's worse because there doesn't seem to be anything an individual can do about it. The only moral answer is to drop out, but that could be seen as a form of rejection. Do we try to change the course of the juggernaut, or do we give up?

(It is probably significant that a word used by Mark Dery to describe the typically cybercultural concept of static observation of data, the mind apparently divorced from the body, is DISCORPORATION.)

And as he notes:

> The antipathy between mind and body is implicit in the metaphysical riddle at the heart of the human condition – that we simultaneously have bodies and are bodies, that our flesh is both 'it' and 'I'.

Maybe the solution to this eternal problem is to live for the moment, in real time not cybertime, in real bodies not cyborgised bodies, immersed in a culture that is not based on mathematics and on materialism. But in the West this is difficult. We are used to opposions: love or hate, work or play, us or them. The concept of mind AND body is not one we are familiar with; we think of mind OR body. The statistical, quantifiable nature of late twentieth century Western society reinforces this dualistic approach and makes the happy, fuzzy, emotional paradox of mind AND body something that, regrettably, cannot be reached. (Unless you drop out).

So it is not unreasonable to be suspicious of cyber-hippies. The first chapter in Mark Dery's book concerns the Nouveau Underground of the nineties, and notes the excessive romanticism of this new breed, tripping out on fractals, designer drugs, embracing technology without thinking about it. Most nineties hippies are as self obsessed as their sixties counterparts. Not all, but most.

The New Age spirituality that is based on cyberculture is also based on science, and thus on computational mathematics. Too often supposedly spiritual folk resort to science to back up their arguments, again showing an inability to accept the unquantifiable. But is this metaphor really deeper? In pretending that there is a spiritual side to computational interaction are people just substituting computers for their own minds? Any cursory look at recent psychology books shows this worrying analogy. So does *Escape Velocity*, and the author doesn't much like it.

For anybody intersted in the future of humanity, both in the near and far futures, this book is essential.

Michael F. Flynn *Firestar* *TOR, 1996, 575pp, $27.95*
Reviewed by John Newsinger

Firestar is a huge novel about the redemption of America, about how the country and its citizens can be saved and restored to greatness. The way to achieve this objective: a revived space programme.

In the 1990s this is, of course, a privately financed space programme that is mounted in conditions of great secrecy by the American multinational, Van Huyten Industries (VHI). Somewhat predictably, the book consistently denigrates any state activity as inherently inferior to what can be provided by business: government is the plaything of special interests and at best only gets in the way of progress. While VHI is ostensibly interested in profit, in fact the space programme will, it is hoped, provide the American people with renewed purpose, with a challenge. It will also provide Earth with a defence against future catastrophe. This last is the secret obsession of the head of VHI, Mariesa van Huyten: the need to save the human race from random extinction by getting off planet and into space.

On one level this is just another right-wing sci-fi manifesto, very much what you would expect from

someone who collaborated with Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle on their appalling *Fallen Angels*. It would be easy to dismiss the novel as a fictional rendering of the world according to Newt Gingrich or our own John Redwood, but that would be a big mistake. First: Flynn can actually write (a skill which Pournelle has never possessed and which Niven seems to have lost). Second, and just as important, he takes ideas and their rôle in society seriously; views he doesn't agree with are actually given a hearing. The result is a significant novel that will surely be in among the awards.

For Flynn, America at the end of the century is a country without a purpose, paralysed by special interests more concerned to hold on to what they have than to take control of the future. This paralysis at the top has left the American people without hope, worn down by recession and urban blight, obsessed with their personal predicaments. What the country needs is a transcendent cause, something that can raise people's eyes from the gutter to the stars. The politicians have nothing to offer, only good old free enterprise offers a way out. Enter Mariesa van Huyten and her Prometheus team, visionary entrepreneurs who have the courage and the foresight to seize the time. They have a long view of history: their objective is not just to realise a quick profit but to renew America. They are engaged in a great experiment in social engineering that will carry humanity into space.

VHI has an educational division, Mentor Academies, that has bid for and taken over parts of a state education system that is in crisis. This is not as farfetched as it might seem: only recently, as part of the creeping privatisation that we have over here, Securicor and Group Four were allowed to put in bids for the inspection of teacher training! In Flynn's America, state education has failed altogether, it does not motivate young people but instead educates them in failure and low expectations. Mentor proposes to turn the situation round. The dead hand of rote learning will be replaced by the excitement of problem solving. They are, in fact, training people for the space programme, producing the engineers, scientists, computer specialists, pilots, skilled workers who will make the conquest of space possible.

Even leaving aside Flynn's rejection of the sort of 'Back to Basics' approach that characterises right-wing attitudes towards education in Britain, his handling of Mentor and its activities has considerable strengths. He does not rant, treats views that he disagrees with seriously and does not denigrate the motives of those characters who are shown as unsympathetic to Mentor's policies. This is fairly typical of his approach. He presents his agenda for renewing America in a reasonable civilised fashion, it might be complete tosh but Flynn, one feels, is someone worth talking to. The only time his restraint really lapses is his thankfully brief account of American intervention in the continuing Balkan wars. Here we get a graphic celebratory account of the sort of high tech massacre that seems to be an almost inescapable aspect of American culture at the present. This is, however, only a momentary lapse and hopefully we won't see too much of it in later volumes.

Another of Flynn's strengths as a writer is his skill at creating convincing sympathetic characters, Mariesa herself, Ned Dubois one of her space pilots, Barry Fast, a teacher and later Mariesa's husband; all these characters have flaws, weaknesses, failures. Somewhat predictably, the action man, Dubois, comes out best, but his macho personality is still subjected to the sort of critique that you would not expect from a writer of the Niven-Pournelle stable.

Despite all the obstacles and setbacks, VHI succeeds in getting America back into space: the way has been prepared for future volumes. It will be very interesting to see if Flynn can sustain his utopian expectations of the free enterprise system or whether the realities of today's triumphant capitalism (the increasing gap between rich and poor, ecological disaster, etc) will actually succeed in leaking into his fiction. Regardless of this, *Firestar* is definitely a book to read.

Neil Gaiman — *Neverwhere*
BBC, 1996, 287pp, £9.99

Neil Gaiman & Ed Kramer (Eds) — *The Sandman: Book of Dreams*
Voyager, 1996, 293pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

In the episode of *The Sandman* called 'The Books of Magic', Neil Gaiman has Queen Titania say:

> There are only two worlds – your world, which is the real world, and other worlds, the fantasy. Worlds like this are worlds of the human imagination: their reality, or lack of reality, is not important. What is important is that they are there. These worlds provide an alternative. Provide an escape. Provide a threat. Provide a dream, and power; provide refuge, and pain. They give your world meaning. They do not exist; and thus they are all that matters. Do you understand?

Gaiman certainly understands: the speaker could as easily have been him as any of his characters, for his work has always tended to bridge this gap between the worlds, to exercise the fantasy that underlies and gives substance to our reality. The same double existence is there in *Neverwhere* as it is throughout *The Sandman*, the parallel between reality and imagination, the need for a second realm that feeds us with threats and promises, hopes and despair. For most of us, that second realm is provided by story, consciously or not it is what we read for, it is why humankind has been drawn to fantasy throughout its existence; and Gaiman's stories are about 'story' far more than they are about anything that might happen in them. Robert Rodi, one of the contributors to this collection of *Sandman* stories expresses this precisely when he has one of his characters say:

> Stories are *important*. They're all that we've got, really. Growing up, I was spat on, ridiculed, beaten, ostracized – and the only thing that kep me going was stories. Stories are *hope*. They take you out of yourself for a bit, and when you get dropped back in, you're different – you're stronger, you've seen more, you've *felt* more. Stories are like spiritual *currency*.

Gaiman found the perfect medium of exchange for this spiritual currency in Dream. The Sandman, Morpheus,

Lord of Dream, the dark eternal who rules the ever-shifting landscape of our unconscious: in this one character Gaiman could embody all the variations and contradictions that constitute story. Between 1988 and 1996, in 75 issues, he explored the forms that story can take and the ways it shapes us and our creation of the world around us. It was a deep investigation into the human need for mythology, a postmodern drawing together of a vast strain of literary creation, and it was also clever, stylish, funny, entertaining storytelling. It was limitless – yet it had its limits. Whatever those limits were, Gaiman reached them and ended the series – but there is life yet in the idea and as a final flourish he has drawn together this collection of stories in which other writers make their own forays into the same imaginative territory.

There are one or two contributors here who have followed Gaiman's model too literally, taking episodes directly from the comic. Will Shetterly, for instance, simply revisits the serial killer's convention and adds nothing fresh to the notion. But these instances are, thankfully, rare. The Sandman has proven to be as vivid and exciting a spur to the imagination of these writers as he ever was to Gaiman. There are stories which directly address the relationship between fiction and reality – Tad Williams's 'The Writer's Child', for instance, or George Alec Effinger's wonderful recreation of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*: 'Seven Nights in Slumberland'. Dream's sister, Death, features nearly as much as Morpheus himself, mortality being as vital to our imagination as anything else, but Death and Dream work the same magic in Gene Wolfe's 'Ain't you 'most Done?' or Robert Rodi's 'An Extra Smidgen of Eternity'. Some writers – notably Barbara Hambly in the threatening little comedy 'Each Damp Thing' – have picked up on the humour in Gaiman's original, though to be honest Gaiman's playfulness is not always as evident as it might have been. That said, there are stories here as good as any you will see this year. John M. Ford proves yet again that he is a master of oblique journeys through a curious spiritual underworld in 'Chain Home, Low' which takes us from the trenches of the First World War to the Battle of Britain by way of a chilling medical phenomenon. Ford has a superb literary style, but in this volume he is matched by Susanna Clarke with a sparkling exploration of alchemy in 17th century London, 'Stopp't Clock Yard' – either of these two stories would have been worth the price of admission alone.

Curiously absent from this volume, apart from brief and unrevealing introductions, is Gaiman himself. But then, his first big post-Sandman project, the novel and TV series *Neverwhere*, could as easily have been a Sandman story. Everything that marks out *The Sandman* is there in equal measure in *Neverwhere*: the vital importance of imagination, the upsetting of normal perceptions, the secondary world which lies as both a trap and a promise beside our own. The origins of *Neverwhere* actually pre-date *The Sandman* – I can recall Gaiman playing with the personisation of London landmarks in the mid-1980s – but it clearly belongs within the same imaginative universe.

The novel is actually better than the TV series – there is room here for playfulness to work which doesn't translate comfortably or convincingly to the much more literal medium of the television – but the two share many of the same strengths. It is a familiar story: an unprepared innocent from our world is drawn into a parallel realm invisible to most of us where he overcomes threats to emerge more whole. It is the same message that runs throughout *The Sandman*: without the secondary world, without fantasy, without story, our lives are incomplete. We need to accept where the imagination takes us in order to be complete. Here that second world is the world of the poor, the discarded, the cast-offs of society who are all around us yet whom we mostly choose not to see. Yet see them and we also see London as a mythic place, a maze that can be followed to deep and dangerous and important self-revelations. Richard Mayhew – a typical Gaiman touch, that reference to the great chronicler of and campaigner for the underbelly of Victorian society – rescues Door who proves to be just that, an entry to a jumbled and confusing underworld in which Old Bailey and Hammersmith are people, 'Night's Bridge' belongs in the lands of one of Dream's kin, and Islington is another of Gaiman's favourite figures, a fallen angel. There are moments when the novel seems to require illustration for completion – but still pictures not the moving ones of television – but that doesn't stop this being another vivid and vivacious exploration of the realm of story.

Alan Garner ***Strandloper*** *Harvill, 1996, 200pp, £14.99*
Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

Welcome back to Alan Garner after a considerable absence from major novel writing. And a major novel this undoubtedly is. It is a departure from most of his previous fiction in that it could in no way be thought of as a children's book, and its action strays very far from his cherished Cheshire. Like previous works, it is a mixture of realism and fantasy, but unlike others its realism is rooted in a specific and documented historical episode. What it has in common with most every other Garner story is the presence of 'conductor' objects, objects which are noumenally invested or which act as focuses for projection of what is experienced subjectively and/or psychically. Such were the eponymous artefacts of *The Owl Service* and the Grail fragments of *Elidor*. In *Strandloper* there are several such 'focusing' objects which sustain continuities or merge temporalities, such as the 'swaddledidaff', a story-spanning, hallucinating, crystalline keepsake; also two inter-related images which have permeating symbolic significance: a hawk/eagle manifestation and the oak tree/Tree of Life archetype.

The narrative is divided into five parts, the title of each being the name and persona assumed in that part by William Buckley whose true story is the novel's foundation. In the first part (the time being the late 18th century) he, a young labouring man, is 'Shick-Shack', the fertility god surrogate in a pagan survival celebrated on the Cheshire village's Shick-Shack Day. Esther (Het) is his mate or 'Teaser', the swaddledidaff is a bond between them. The mood is as earthy as the dialect, the horseplay rough, but subtly interlaced are motifs and allusions which are to become continuing threads. Under the tuition of the local squire's son, William has learned to read and speak Edenic lines from *Paradise Lost*. To play his part he has blackened his face and taken

branches from the traditional oak tree, and it is while he and Het are within the hollow oak that William, climbing the tree's interior, sees above it the windhover (one of the folk-names for the kestrel, and one used by Gerard Manley Hopkins when identifying the bird as a Christ icon). The celebration moves to the church where, beneath the belfry – 'a frame of huge timbers, as big as the oak' – the vicar performs a mix of pagan fertility rite and Christian mass with 'cockle bread' and honey (bees being another continuing symbol), preaching Isaiah's renewing oak tree promise and the riverside fruiting tree of life of *Revelation*. The celebration is interrupted by the squire whose oak tree has been plundered and who senses sedition and blasphemy. In the violent upshot, William is arrested and deported for life, but he promises to return.

Expelled in chains from a fallen paradise, William becomes 'Crank Coffin' as he voyages in the perpetual darkness of a prison ship's hold. The convicts' gambling cards are a prayer book's torn-out pages. The chaplain attempts a mass in which the host is bread and cheese, the wine is brandy – on which they all get drunk. As they near shore, Crank Coffin is corpse bearer for a sea burial: when he comes from below the sun is blinding and hallucinating – 'shapes of golden men, standing at a gold bulwark'. As the corpse sinks the chaplain intones: '... who at His coming shall change our vile body that it may be like His glorious body...' From Sullivan's Bay camp Crank escapes into the desert where, as 'Young Cob', he endures a purgatory of thirst and hallucination, the episode ending with an encounter with leafy and fruiting trees beside a river (biblical images again) and, as death seems to overtake him, visions of 'Man of leaf and golden bird'. He is, however, revived by an aboriginal tribe. He drinks milk from a woman's breast, is inducted into rituals, lore and skills and, re-identified as 'Murrangurk', becomes a great singer and leader, experiencing a fusing of the Shick-Shack roots with those of the Dreamtime.

Thirty years on, just as Shick-Shack Day had been brutally attacked and destroyed by the poison that 'Came from Caesar's crown' (a constant refrain), so is this quasi-paradisal aboriginal world. Murrangurk, having been granted the King's Pardon, is intermediary between his People and the white colonisers, and proceeds from unintended betrayal toward a new Dreaming.

Having returned home, as promised, change and the rationalist dispensation of the new century leave him disillusioned, the swaddledidaff has lost its force; though he sees changes and the events of his life as steps in a destined dance. As 'Strandloper', a wandering bird, he goes to the oaken church (whose windows repeat aboriginal/archetypal patterns) throws off his clothing, blackens his face and dances there for his friends, for his People and for 'the Man in the Oak and the Crown of Glory'.

The psychological and historical symbolisms running through this story do not register precise equivalences, but there are certainly oppositions between, on the one hand, human custom rooted strongly in the earth where tradition and ritual yet grant latitude for freedom and spontaneity and, on the other hand, an ordering authoritarian rationalism, 'progressive' yet in practice fettering. Garner fabricates a cross-weaving of the icons of religious belief, myth, folklore, poetry and the stubborn dialectic of history. Amidst all this, William appears a figure akin to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner: both of them voyage to the earth's end and back, both experience a purgatory and, while remaining prophetic wanderers, both are sustained by culminating paradisal visions. The Mariner experiences his seraphic men of light when 'the silence sank / like music on my heart'; Strandloper, as he dances the Morning and Evening Star before the altar of the oaken church, has his revelation that 'the Silence and the Song were All and One'.

Anne Harris — *The Nature of Smoke*
TOR, 1996, 284pp, $21.95

Sage Walker — *Whiteout*
TOR, 1996, 352pp, $23.95

Reviewed by Helen Claire Gould

Both these books use voyeurism as a plot device. In *Whiteout* it comes in the form of 'skinthins', Virtual Reality suits wired with sensors, cameras and equipment that hook into the net; the plot hinges upon Jared who wears such a suit so that everything he sees, says, touches and does is recorded – then he disappears. In *The Nature of Smoke*, the one who tries to disappear is Magnolia, an actor in snuff movies who kills her exploiter in an attempt to escape, but who is observed doing so.

Sage Walker's novel is set early in the next century when the 30-year moratorium on exploiting Antarctica, the last unspoilt wilderness, is up for reconsideration. Tanaka, a Japanese company with fishing interests in the South Atlantic, wants to turn krill into food for the world's starving masses, and employs a small outfit called Edges to use its VR and subliminal sales message skills to lobby for this outcome. Jared is a member of Edges who is fact-finding in Antarctica when he disappears, and his lover Signy determines to find him.

At first, well-visualised detail gives the feeling of reality, but as the story progresses that impression is replaced by an unfocussed feel where the writing should have been tense and involving. The minimalist writing includes irrelevancies that obscure the storyline, while the choice of viewpoint character and the distancing effect of the VR angle remove any impact from the story. The characters command neither sympathy nor respect. Deliberate confusion over Tanaka's attitude to the conference provides a clumsy plot twist; and though quite a clever one comes later, by then the power of surprise has leeched from the story. Yes, there is a story enmeshed in all this, if you can wade through the irrelevant detail and ignore the gaps in vital information for the reader; the ecological setting should have made it interesting, but Walker too often drifts from the point so you are left wondering what it was all about.

In *The Nature of Smoke*, Magnolia's escape is observed by Rahul, a brilliant but corrupt inventor of organic robots, and by his chief of scurity, Kelira, whose sister was sold into prostitution when he was a sick child and for whom he has been searching ever since. Rahul tracks Magnolia down and offers her a sinecure, which she

accepts. But Kelira and Tumcari, Rahul's first creation and potentially the most interesting character in the book, guess Rahul's motives and hijack Magnolia before she can be used as the template for a new line of robots with initiative. In Polish Siberia, Magnolia also meets Cid, a lesbian biophysicist – Magnolia here undergoes a sudden and unheralded transformation from heterosexual to lesbian – with an interesting slant on chaos theory. But Rahul eventually discovers and deals with his employees' disloyalty.

Though the writing style is apparently borrowed from the crime genre, poor pacing slows the story down, and there's infodumping and inaccessible slang galore. However, Harris does, mostly, understand how to use viewpoint: the best writing comes when Cid explains to Magnolia that she's infected herself with some of Tumcari's mitochondria. The story kept me reading mainly because I thought I would find out more about Tumcari – I didn't: characterisation is sparse and neither credible nor particularly interesting. However, the interplay between even minor characters did work for me: everyone has some kind of axe to grind, usually on someone else.

If voyeurism is ultimately unsatisfying, perhaps this explains why these books were such unsatisfying reads. But I think the truth is that good ideas were spoilt by lazy or unfocussed writing. While Harris tells, relying heavily on chance, Walker shows everything, but has yet to learn to control the flow of information to the reader.

Frederick Lane *A Town Like Alfred*

The Book Guild, 1996, 175pp, £12.95

Reviewed by Andy Mills

Before receiving this book I had never come across either Frederick Lane or The Book Guild Ltd; this and the extract from the novel (complete with incorrect grammar) printed on the back cover made me suspicious that here was, in all probability, a vanity publishing venture. Having read *A Town Like Alfred* I am prepared to stake my life on it, this is one of the worst novels I have ever encountered.

It is meant to be a comedy, and it's fair to say there are already enough examples of unfunny comic sf lurking on bookshop shelves. Lane's novel is comic only in the sense that the author believes weak jokes and terrible puns are the acme of sophisticated wit. An example will follow, in case you think I may be too harsh on poor Mr Lane, but first let's provide the context. The plot (such as there is) concerns the creation of an autonomous state on Salisbury Plain. The Prime Minister has decided that the country is falling apart and that a new start is needed, so he elects to provide a tract of land and huge sums of money to a retired businessman, who has *carte blanche* to develop his own nation state in whatever way he likes. (Before you ask, this made no sense to me, either.)

The businessman, Alfred Mountnessing, forms a council to plan the form their new state will take. Each member of the council writes a paper on their vision for the future Renaissance (as they decide it will be known). These papers take up a third of the book and cover issues from taxation to law and order, prostitution and television. The state is brought into being. Nothing of interest happens throughout. Finis.

Presumably many of Mr Lane's views permeate the council members' papers (certainly his hobby, bowls, features throughout the novel) but alas we are not treated to an intellectual discourse. No City of the Sun here, folks. The ideas are trite, the humour unamusing and linguistic ability noticeable only by its absence. Judge for yourself, here's Lane on advertising:

> We suggest that our State's advertising standards should be much higher than those in the UK. A good example of what we would be unhappy about is an advertisement which has appeared regularly on television which actually states that cats would buy the advertised product. Now, even if cats had their own credit cards, Alice knows for a fact that her cat would buy Scotch salmon. To be fair, we decided to interview a random selection of the said felines, asking whether or not they would buy the said product, and the responses fell roughly into three cattygories. Some merely spat at the interviewer; others turned away disdainfully, ignoring the question; the remainder said 'Meow' or something similar.

The rest of the book is much the same. The only positive thing I can say about it is that it contains especially wide top margins, thus mercifully reducing the space available for text.

Kim Newman *The Bloody Red Baron*

Simon & Schuster, 1996, 358pp, £14.99

Reviewed by Chris Amies

This sequel to *Anno Dracula*, in which Newman continued the Dracula story into Victorian England, brings the action forward to the First World War. Three decades after the Vampire Count took the reins of Imperial power, vampires have become a second humanoid culture living openly by night alongside the people of the day. Newman's vampires do not really owe a lot to the current crop of vampire fiction typified by Anne Rice; he has gone back to the origins of the myth and to *Dracula* itself. They are stronger than the living, and heal more quickly, though they do not necessarily have the increased sexual magnetism that has become another cliché of vampire fiction. They are made by the bite of one who is already a vampire, though there is a reference to 'warms' (i.e. non-vampires) 'turning' each other, a process which does not seem to be logically possible.

As he has done before, Newman brings in references to other works of fiction and to the cinema; for example, in the atmospheric opening sequence protagonist Charles Beauregard arrives at a wintry RFC airfield in France where the pilots include one James Bigglesworth and his comrades Bertie and Ginger, and he meets an intelligence operative called Ashenden. Richthofen's castle employs an alienist called Dr Caligari, as well as the incomparable Dr Moreau, he of the Island. We meet a Captain Drummond who is described as 'A fine specimen of the bulldog breed, which is to say he was barking mad' – not the first time Newman has pisstaked Bulldog Drummond, as anyone who has read 'Pitbull Brittain' will know. And then there are Sadie Thompson of 'Rain', and Mata Hari herself, a historical person who so reinvented her own life as to belong more to fiction.

In Newman's alternative universe the 1914-18 war begins in much the same way as in ours, a bid for pan-European power by the Graf von Dracula, though it becomes a war between vampire and warm, too, a 'tide of war surging around the world, sweeping through

continents like a dreadful winter', year after year for no good reason other than that the politicians deem it a good idea. The world is recognisable but with suitable changes, which Newman portrays with a lot of attention to detail: it is not just a rewrite of the first decades of the century from a cinematic viewpoint but a considerable feat of worldbuilding in the great sf-nal tradition. Given the horrors of the trenches with their resultant thousands of deaths and disabilities, the horror of vampirism retreats into being little more than another form of life; an accommodation which many of the characters of this novel have made. Against this, Beauregard consistently refuses to be 'turned', claiming that the attractions of the vampire state are illusory, despite his long-time closeness to vampires, firstly Genevieve Dieudonne and now the Irish vampire journalist Kate Reed, an engaging and independent character who may well appear in later Newman novels. Kate – who is described as 'tiny' though her 5'4" would not have been small for a woman of that era – is after the real news, not the misinformation put out by Lord Ruthven's Government of National Unity. So she heads for the front line.

The Bloody Red Baron of the title is, of course, Manfred von Richthofen who is, as you might also expect, a vampire and bafflingly seems able to drain his victims in the air – shades of Arthur Conan Doyle's story *The Horror of the Heights*, where airmen flying at altitude over particular parts of the world are mysteriously and terribly killed by something living in the upper atmosphere... Edgar Allan Poe (for it is he), a strange and rather unappealing person, is called to Richthofen's base at the Castle of Malinbois to ghost-write the vampire baron's autobiography. Naturally, when he asks directions he is told darkly, 'You don't want to go there, sir!' Later, he begins to feel that was good advice. In this thread of the story weirdness and darkness gather pace equally, as Poe's discoveries become more and more bizarre.

Despite the joky references and name-dropping, there is clearly an agenda to the novel; and why not? The political points about the inevitability of war as a result of the system are not overstated, but they are definitely there. It begins – for there is likely to be more – a journey into the dark heart of the twentieth century, or at least *a* twentieth century, recognisably edge-on to our own.

Mickey Zucker Reichert — *Beyond Ragnarok*

Orion, 1996, 676pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Beyond Ragnarok begins a new series set in the same world as Reichert's successful Renshai series which began, strangely enough, with *The Last of the Renshai*. It is 300 years since Colbey Calistinsson fought with the Gods in the last battle, the Ragnarok of the title. Now a God himself, Colbey's task is to keep the balance of the world. Naturally, in order to create a book of this length, the balance of the world needs to be threatened, and it is, by the surviving Elves of Alfheim (which was destroyed during the Ragnarok) – all 238 of them!

The kingdom of Bearn is the hinge on which the balance of the world rests. The ruling monarch is specially selected by the magical Staff Test, and each monarch is charged with providing suitable heirs, one of whom will be chosen to succeed him by the Test, as well as keeping the balance. The current king, Kohleran, lies dying from a mysterious wasting disease, and when the many heirs start dying by accident, poisoning and other sundry occurrences the Chancellor, Baltraine, decides to Staff test all the survivors. Naturally, none of the heirs pass the test and the future of the world rests firmly on the shoulders of Griff, the one heir that none but a chosen few know to exist.

The repeated non-return of parties sent to bring back Griff brings together the necessary disparate bunch of young heroes who alone can succeed where adults fail: Matrinka, a princess of Bearn who has already failed the Test; Ra-khir, a young Knight of Erythane in training with an really long title and a code of honour guaranteed to make his life very short; Kevral, a young Renshai warrior whose only aim in life is to protect someone or something and die gloriously doing it; Darris, son of the bard of Bearn who is destined to be able to talk only through song; and Tai Khan, the mysterious grubby little Easterner whom nobody trusts or wants along in the first place, but who is naturally integral to the plot.

OK, you've heard it all before and the size of the book will put most of you off anyway, but there is one major redeeming feature about this tome: Reichert *can* write!

What hold this well-worn plot together is Reichert's ability to draw her characters well and keep them interesting throughout a veritable mountain of paper. Bonding abounds, and not without a few hiccups along the way. Kevral's discovery of men as something other than practice dummies in which to insert her deadly twin blades is a joy to follow, as is Tai's desperate need to belong to the group and to be accepted. Even back at the castle, Baltraine's often misguided attempts to keep the balance during Kohleran's long illness and eventual death evokes empathy for his plight. I can even empathise with the Elves who seek to destroy humankind.

Being a God, of course, as well as a legend amongst the Renshai, Colbey can only 'influence' events, not directly interfere in them. So for those who've not read the previous Renshai books and know little about the legend, the quotations at the head of each chapter aptly fill you in.

Matbe Reichert's writing isn't entirely original and is overlong, but I'd recommend this book to anyone with the stamina to stay its length.

J.D. Robb — *Naked in Death*

Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 306pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

'So what about this book, then?'

'Well, you're the science fiction fan.'

'But it isn't.'

'Sf? It must be, it's set in the 22nd century! It says so on the blurb.'

'But Roarke – our tall, dark hero – is only in his late thirties and he's supposed to have been born in 2023. That makes it 21st century, maybe 2060.'

'It's still the future.'

'No, it's *a* future. A lot of things have changed: the Urban Revolts around the time of Roarke's birth get mentioned a lot, though only in the vaguest terms. And guns have been banned, of course. That's why "feisty New York police lieutenant Eve Dallas" is called in when the first prostitute – I'm sorry, "licensed companion" – gets

shot. Nobody commits murders with guns in this brave new world.'

'Guns are banned in Britain too. It doesn't seem to stop people shooting one another. But what do they use in the future?'

'It doesn't say, though there is this sweet little old lady who doesn't kill her husband with a home-made cake.'

'*Doesn't*?'

'She told him not to eat it. But that's not important. Okay, it's the future, guns have been banned for sixty-odd years and Senator DeBlass is campaigning for the reintroduction of the right to bear arms. It's his granddaughter who becomes the first victim of the killer with the guns – she's a prostitute. Eve Dallas, feisty etcetera, is called in to solve the crime – you're the thriller fan, what do you make of her?'

'She had her moments.'

'Like when she goes off alone with the prime suspect just because he offers her a real cup of coffee?'

'Well, coffee is scarce, after all.'

'Yes, it makes a woman "almost moan". On the other hand, she thinks that someone's perfume smells of "expensive sex".'

'I think you're being unfair.'

'You're probably right, after all it's not really an sf novel, it's unfair to judge it on its dubious futurology.'

'It's in the sf section at the bookshop...'

'And Brian Stableford's *Sexual Chemistry* is filed under science.'

'She talks to the lights! And the shower!'

'You're referring to Eve's voice-activated apartment. It's an inconsistent future, you know; some things are definitely futuristic while others don't seem to have changed very much at all. She still looks at a monitor and the display still clicks its way through lists.'

'It's not a bad thriller, though.'

'So how long did it take you to spot the murderer?'

'About a hundred pages – the only person in the book with "hard eyes".'

'And the romantic element?'

'Not terribly romantic, but kind of sweet. Who is this J.D. Robb, anyway? Apparently it's the pseudonym for one of America's most successful crime writers. There's more mystery to this book than simply the plot.'

'Ah, that's where the publishers have been inadvertently helpful – take a look at the title page.'

'Oh. So you're saying it's not exactly sf?'

'No. And it's not an especially demanding thriller, either. It's not bad, though. Well, not *that* bad.'

S.P. Somtow *The Pavilion of Frozen Women*
Gollancz, 1996, 272pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Barbara Davies

S.P. Somtow, the working name of Thai author Somtow Sucharitkul, writes like an angel. A dark angel. Frequently in this collection of short stories his protagonists bear the scars of sexual abuse and their abusers, quoting glibly from the Bible, claim to have only their victim's best interests at heart. It could make for depressing reading. Fortunately, it doesn't.

Here are ten stories that blend reality with the fantastic, ranging from Ancient Rome to present day Japan. Here, also, are genre staples such as zombies, reworked fairy tales, Frankenstein's monster, Homeric myth and Arthurian legend. Somtow has a keen ear, a great sense of humour and, above all, a fresh perspective.

Take 'Chui Chai' (The Dance of Transformation) set in present-day, AIDS-riddled Bangkok: Frankenstein made his monster from the body- parts of several corpses, in Somtow's version the mad scientist uses the corpse of a young prostitute in the construction of several monsters. The protagonist comes to realise that death doesn't matter when his lover's body-parts are still available.

Three of the stories involve zombies. 'Hunting the Lion' is a PI romp set in Roman times, full of Vestal Virgins and sly jokes about 'three litter pile-ups'. Master of disguise, Publius Viridianus, discovers someone has convinced the Christian community that zombiism is the same as resurrection – this, happily, also cuts the cost of providing victims for the Emperor's amphitheatre... 'Darker Angels', set during the American Civil War, contains an unforgettable image: a black zombie army marching through America to the sea. It ends with redemption, unlike 'Though I Walk Through the Valley' which is a much bleaker story apparently based on the Grimm's fairy tale 'The Stubborn Child'. A father tries to control his unruly son by turning him into a zombie – it's 'for his own good', of course.

Two more stories also use folk or fairy tales for inspiration. 'Gingerbread' shows the terrible things that happen to a modern day Hansel and Gretel when Titania Midnight takes them under her wing in a sleazy Hollywood. In 'Mr Death's Blue-Eyed Boy' a man's phobia about children proves to be connected with the Pied Piper of Hamelin, a legend which turns out to be fact. Unfortunately the Piper – who was, if you remember, defrauded of his thirty guilders – has at last returned, demanding payment.

Bringing characters from myth and legend into different settings is a favourite device of Somtow's. In 'The Steel American' a bewildered Sir Perceval, clad in rusting armour and still searching for the Grail, turns up in a magically protected zone during the Vietnam War. And 'Fire from the Wine Dark Sea', the earliest story in the collection, sees Odysseus disrupting the life of a widower and his twin sons in contemporary America.

Not all the stories contain elements of the fantastic. The disturbing 'Fish are Jumping, and the Cotton is High' is told by the son of a psychopath: it slowly dawns on the appalled reader that the 'fish'the pair set out to catch and kill every summer are in fact prostitutes who look like the boy's mother.

My favourite story, which gives its name to this collection, was nominated for a World Fantasy Award, and it's not hard to see why. Native American and aboriginal Japanese (Ainu) cultures collide in this murder mystery about ice sculpture and were-bears on the island of Hokkaido. Somtow conveys the atmosphere vividly, as here, for instance, when the female protagonist eats 'dancing shrimp', the Japanese phrase for freshly decapitated but still wriggling seafood – the experience illuminates subsequent events:

> It had squirmed as it went down my throat. But the way all the tastes exploded at once, the soy sauce, the horseradish, the undead shrimp with its toothpaste-like texture and its exquisite flavour... there'd been something almost synaesthetic about it... something joyous... something obscene.
>
> 'It's a peculiarly Japanese thing,' said the Ainu snow sculptor, 'this almost erotic need to suck out a creature's life force...'

See what I mean about writing like an angel?

Bruce Sterling *Holy Fire* *Orion, 1996, 296pp, £16.99*

Reviewed by Andy Mills

I can still remember my delight upon reading, almost twenty years ago, *Involution Ocean*, Bruce Sterling's first novel. That was then, this is now, but I'm happy to report that *Holy Fire* is also a pleasure to read.

Sterling is of course a leading cyberpunk writer. John Moore ('Shifting Frontiers: Mapping Cyberpunk and the American South' in *Foundation* 66) contends that Sterling exemplifies a recognisably Southern version of cyberpunk:

> In this strand, the opportunist outlaw remains powerless to mount a sociopolitical challenge to corporate power, but this central figure's ability to survive and sustain personal development through technological self-transformation is regarded as a feat of heroic stature.

Thus it is with the hero of *Holy Fire*, Mia Ziemann. Not your archetypal cyberpunk hero, Mia is, after all, 94 years old... It is the end of the third millennium, the planet is dominated by the medical-industrial complex: 'The scope of gerontological research alone was bigger than agriculture... The prize was survival.' The populace aim to live as long as possible; the polity encourage and support those who help both themselves (by staying healthy) and the community. Power and wealth is held by the old, who are getting older.

Mia, one such citizen, is very, very careful. ('What's life without a drink?' she is asked. 'It was, thought Mia, life without cirrhosis, ulcers and cumulative neural damage.') When her first boyfriend is on his deathbed he calls her to discuss his bequest and say his farewells. Disturbed by his death, on her way back home Mia meets a frustrated young woman whom she befriends and encourages to go to Europe and seek adventure. The day has been a watershed for her; that night she realises that her very careful life is meaningless, that she is lacking any *joie de vivre*, any holy fire:

> No matter how carefully she guarded herself, life was too short. Life would always be too short. Mia heard her own voice in the silent air. When the sentence struck her ears, she felt the power of a terrible resolve. An instant decision, sudden, conscious, unsought, but irrevocable: 'I can't go on like this.'

She cashes in her investment and undergoes one of the more revolutionary life-extension treatments. (Those readers who, like myself, are not blessed with a strong stomach, are advised to skim through this part of the book). A new person emerges like a butterfly from a chrysalis, she now has the body of a young woman and the confused mind of... who?

This newly-born woman skips her medical care and flees to Frankfurt where, as Maya, she (re-)learns about herself and the world in a way which would have been an anathema to the old Mia: 'I like risks. I love risks. I live for risks' she tells her new boyfriend. He lives on the edges of society; henceforth, as she travels through Europe, this is the company that Maya keeps: radicals and criminals, artists and the intelligentsia. All are young and disempowered but all are, like Maya, filled with holy fire.

Perhaps this precis does not make *Holy Fire* sound like a cyberpunk novel, perhaps it isn't. The trappings are there: Maya's people live on the margins – not in poverty, certainly, but without influence – there are the usual technological advances, memory palaces and intelligent, talking dogs to name but two. But Maya isn't interested in killing anyone, and no-one is trying to kill her (seemingly a normal state of affairs with cyberpunk!). What this is, without doubt, is an important novel about posthumanity. Mia/Maya understands her condition, understands what she has become: the novel is about how that understanding is reached.

This is a mature book, cyberpunk or no. It's also very witty. From the droll observation to the sharply-observed retort, Sterling ensures that *Holy Fire* is, above all, a fun read.

> 'You're a religious girl?'
> 'Well, no, not actually. I'm always pretty careful about drugs.'
>
> 'Roman kids read?' Maya encouraged, sorting shoes. 'Gosh, how classical of them.'
> 'It's awful, a terrible habit! In virtuality at least you get to interact! Even with television you at least have to use visual processing centres and parse real dialogue with your ears! Really, reading is so bad for you, it destroys your eyes and hurts your posture and makes you fat.'

Risk a bad back and obesity. Read this book.

Postscript: This is a nicely produced hardback, with a handsome cover. I thus hope that someone at Orion is suitably embarrassed when they are informed that the author's name has been misspelt on the title page...

Ian Watson *Hard Questions*

Gollancz, 1996, 288pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

Dr Clare Conway, a researcher at Cambridge University, is invited to a Hard Questions conference in America. This particular hard question is *the* Hard Question: life, the universe and everything. We're talking quantum physics here. Meanwhile, the QX Corporation in America have built the world's first prototype quantum computer, Qua, and they have invited Clare to have a look at it while she's over. Now, the quantum computer is a Big Idea. The drawback with yer typical modern computer is that it is physically limited in the number of tasks it can carry out concurrently; with the quantum computer there is no such limitation, it will use each probable version of itself, to infinity, to complete the task. Thus a task that would require years of processing time, billions of iterations, can be completed in seconds – the possibilities are, literally, endless.

So Clare zooms off to America with her would-be lover, Jack Fox, in tow, to give a speech at the Hard Questions conference. Unfortunately, due to the spite of an ex-lover, she and Fox find themselves the target of unwanted attention from a loony Waco-type cult headed by a David Koresh-inspired figure called Gabriel Soul. Eventually they kidnap Clare,

though luckily Fox manages to escape. Soul wants her to join them, so he exposes her to a cruel variation on the Schrodinger's Cat experiment in an attempt to subjugate her. But the torture affects Clare in an unpredicted way and, rather like Watson's *Death Hunter* where he realised death as a physical entity, the purpose here is as much to illuminate the reader, as it is to motivate the character.

Clare is soon rescued by a SWAT team and events start to pile up with a randomness reminiscent of 'At The Rialto'. Having jumped out of one frying pan, she just happens to be outside the QX labs when Qua is stolen. 'Don't touch that dial', we all cry as she reaches forward to switch the thing on... But she does, and it is as the reader predicts – for we are all observers in this.

This is a thriller about quantum physics and the mooted possibilities of the quantum computer. Variations on this science have been done before, most notably by Greg Egan in *Quarantine*, but Watson is a storyteller at heart and that's what we have here. The plot's dogleg in the last few chapters was anticipated by this reader, and I suppose anything labelled 'quantum' nowadays could be used as an excuse for any old rag and bones, but Watson is not that sort of writer and I felt the book did not suffer as a result. His writing may be conventional, but his ideas are certainly not, it's all big fun and highly recommended. Crap cover, though.

Margaret Weis & Don Perrin *Robot Blues*

Gollancz, 1996, 382pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

This is mis-named *Knights of the Black Earth Volume II. Knights of the Black Earth* was the previous book in this series, but this volume is about a team of mercenaries called Mag Force 7. In the first book they encountered and defeated the Knights of the Black Earth, in this second volume the Knights don't even appear. So much for series names.

This series is actually a follow-up to the *Star of the Guardians* series written by Margaret Weis alone. Some of the characters appear to be common to both, but without having read the *Star of the Guardians* series, I can't be sure.

Mag Force 7, a typically macho and fairly senseless name, is a group of mercenaries. They are the usual suspects: the cyborg leader with the unpronounceable name of Xris, the telepathic alien called The Little One (???!!!) who's the only member of his primitive species to wander the stars, the extremely camp bi-sexual assassin (called Raoul deBeausoleil) who's obsessed with clothes and looks. Comic relief (as if it was needed) is provided by the pilot (Harry Luck) who can fly a spacecraft very well but is almost moronically stupid generally. Add in Darlene Mohini, a female computer wizard (who used to be male and a colleague of Xris in his Federal Agent pre-bionic life), Tycho, a chameleoid alien, and a Doctor-cum-mechanic called Quong, and that's the team.

This is a fairly standard pseudo-military space opera. A complex plot, with backstabbings and classic pieces of mis-direction, adds up to a bit of light entertainment. It's well enough written that it's not a chore to read, though there are some irritating touches, the worst of which is the sidearms: Lasguns. They come in four generally used power ranges: 44 decawatt, 38 decawatt (standard law enforcement issue) 23 decawatt and 22 decawatt (23 decawatt seems to be a common copy-editing mistake) and they really give the game away by referring to them sometimes as .44 decawatt. Did someone write these as non-sf to start with then add in sf trappings to turn it into space opera? It would appear not, since the few original ideas are actually science fiction, but it shows a lack of imagination when the author(s) can't even get away from standard bullet sizes for their laser guns.

On balance, this is neither the worst nor the best piece of military space opera I've ever read. The alien bad guys are suitably icky that you feel no sympathy for them whatsoever (their taste for human flesh sort of puts you off), but are not simply bad for the sake of it – there is some justification from their point of view. There are some nice touches and the violence isn't all sanitised away. It's not great, but it's not awful either.

Michael Williams *Arcady*

Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 486pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

The world of this novel is strange and enigmatic. It is unlocalised in space and time, though hints suggest that it might be our own world in the far future. There are suggestions that in the remote past it was more populous with a more advanced technology, but this is emphatically not the 'regression to a medieval style society' of much fantasy.

Williams's world is dominated by the Absences, areas of nothingness which it can be death to penetrate. Around the Absences are the Borders where reality fluctuates, unexpected changes take place and nothing is as it seems. The Borders advance and retreat like tides but the Absences are fixed; at least, so everyone believes.

The Arcady of the title is a house, large and rambling, which is in itself a tiny world to the family who occupy it. Built originally by Atreus Hawken to be his tomb, it now houses his descendents. Close to the Borders, the house and its surroundings have picked up some of their uncanny quality: people disappear, doors open into unknown rooms, statues come to life.

As the novel opens, Arcady is under threat from another incursion of the Borders. A child has disappeared and the family send for Solomon, believing that his priestly magic can dispel the danger. Only Solomon himself knows that his priesthood is a sham, his faith a matter of words and outward forms, and that he is powerless to save his home and family.

The story is played out against a background of war: one faction would like to redevelop a culture of machinery while the opposition believes this will turn the land into the kind of desolation found near the Absences. Active in this war, and on opposite sides, are Solomon's brother Diego and their cousin Artemis: Arcady itself is divided.

Important in both the background and the action of this book is the religion of the world, which is based on the mystical and prophetic poetry of William Blake. Blake's work itself is Holy Scripture, while the work of the Romantics and later poets, reaching down to the Victorian period, are thought of as Commentaries on it. Anyone who knows Blake will realise the potential for strangeness and wild vision. Williams handles this skilfully; it's never entirely clear – I imagine intentionally – whether this faith is truth or artefact, whether its angels are vision, hallucination or present in reality, but it is powerful, guiding the thinking even of characters to whom religion is not important. In the case of Solomon, it reshapes his life and the lives of those around him as he penetrates to the truth about his world and comes to understand what the Absences really are.

The style is complex and multi-layered, echoes of the poetry at its centre continually appear in direct quotation, in conversation, in phrases of the narrative and in the naming system. But it's not just arid quotation, the book is very visual, I'll be left for a long time with pictures of Arcady itself, of the whirling grey Absences, of the radiance of angels.

I'm not sure that I completely understood this book, but I found it very rich and satisfying. It will repay re-reading and I'd recommend it to anyone who wants something different, a challenge and a new and intriguing world.

PULP FICTION

Paperback Reviews edited by Tanya Brown

Brian Aldiss *Helliconia*
Voyager, 996, 1072pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

I read the *Helliconia* trilogy as it appeared in the early eighties, and was disappointed by the third book's turning away from the Helliconians' struggle to survive the onset of the next Great Winter. Instead, the novel summarised the history of the nuclear winter which had almost destroyed fortieth-century Earth, and then debated with the inhabitants of the seventy-sixth century what Helliconia meant to them. At the time, I thought Aldiss had undergone a change of mind, and was attempting to reinterpret Helliconia as a metaphor for the nuclear winter which then seemed to threaten us. This new one-volume edition, however, makes it plain that this judgement was superficial. Aldiss had been reading James Lovelock, not the TTAPS paper which advanced the nuclear winter scenario.

This one-volume edition contains several appendices on the cosmology, geography and biology of Helliconia: most importantly, there is an introduction in which Aldiss relates the impact of Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis on the creation of *Helliconia*. One's immediate response to this is unease – if the explanations have to be given in an introduction they must surely be absent from the story – but as one reads on, new understanding emerges: the Helliconians' attempts to break free from the phagors and the Great Winter are bound to fail because they would otherwise destroy the plant's self-regulating biomass. Thus one reason for the third book's introduction of far-future humans: because fifteen years ago the Gaia hypothesis was much less well-known, and without future humanity's comments the trilogy's debt to Lovelock might have been overlooked altogether. Now, the hypothesis has so penetrated our thinking that it no longer needs such explanation, and could even have been given concrete form in the current struggle between environmentalism's attempt to live in harmony with the world, and the technocracy which strives to dominate it. The argument that one shouldn't have to write a science fiction trilogy to dramatise such ideas would simply miss the point that all science fiction is a disguised commentary on the present.

These concerns aside, I still retain a sneaking fondness for the stories told in the first two books, rather than the opening-out to deeper philosophical matters that went into the third. "Who wants a passport to a nation of talking slugs?" had been Aldiss' response to those who wondered why his aliens weren't more alien; and the trilogy was notable for the space it devoted to the actions of ordinary Helliconians, and their ordinary Helliconian concerns, rather than the usual folderol of dictators and kings and territorial conquest found in such stories. Helliconia has a human dimension which other invented worlds lack, and is thus all the richer.

Kevin J. Anderson *Ground Zero*
Harper Collins, 1996, 292pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Kay Hancox

This book, an *X-Files* novel, was voted 'Best Science Fiction Book of the Year' by the readers of *SFX*. So what makes it stand out from other sf books of 1995?

Our heroes, Mulder and Scully, are called in to investigate the mysterious death of a scientist at the Teller Nuclear Research Facility in California. Within a week three seemingly related deaths occur, and Mulder and Scully are heading towards an atoll in the Pacific Ocean where an unauthorised nuclear test is to be carried out. At this point, towards the end of a hitherto gripping thriller, the plot becomes totally ludicrous and races towards an unconvincing ending.

Stylistically the book is odd. It is not clear whether it is a new story, or a write-up of an episode of the TV series. Something about the style of the book suggests that either the author was paid by the word, or had to write to a pre-ordained length. It also appears to have been written for people with the attention span of a gnat. Each death occurs after the receipt of a mysterious parcel. Each time it is described as if it is the first time that the reader has come across a strange parcel, thus denying the reader the *frisson* of thinking "It's the unmarked package, bet I know what happens next!". One of the characters, Ryan Kamida, is blind. This is mentioned every time he appears, or speaks; sometimes 3 or 4 times a page.

One of the strangest things about *Ground Zero* is the characterisation. Two subsidiary characters, Miriel Bremen – an ex-nuclear scientist, turned nuclear protester – and Ryan Kamida, who was injured (and blinded) during American nuclear tests during the 1950's, are quite well drawn. However, Mulder and Scully have no substance at all. Although Scully's family is mentioned, they remain very shadowy, and neither of them seem to have any friends or social life. Nor do they have any thoughts or feelings of more than the most banal kind. I imagine that the reader is meant to flesh out Mulder and Scully from their knowledge of the TV series. To the non-*X-Files* watcher they just seem insubstantial and shallow.

So, although it's probably not the best sf book of 1995, it is a good gripping read. I feel that Kevin Anderson is probably a better author than the constraints of *X-Files* novels allow him to be. I suppose this is the sf equivalent of a sex and shopping novel. Light and entertaining, but you wouldn't want it to make up the whole of your reading diet.

Robert T. Bakker *Raptor Red*
Bantam, 1996, 284pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Raptor: 'bantamweight dinosaurs, small and compact in the body but equipped with weapons of exceptional deadliness. They were kick-boxers. One claw on each hind foot was transformed into a big curved knife that could disembowel prey with a single stroke'. (from the Foreword).

Red: 'colour of blood'. (*Collins Dictionary*).

Put these definitions together and – *presto chango!* – we've got female dinosaur *Raptor Red*. Maverick palaeontologist Robert T. Bakker was an 'unofficial consultant' on the movie version of *Jurassic Park*. He is most famous, however, for claiming that the notoriously cold-blooded and asocial dinosaurs were, in fact, warm-blooded social activists (*The Dinosaur Heresies*). Football hooligans might take up this chant: "*We* are the dinosaurs now!"

Non-fiction authors who turn to fiction-writing usually produce dramatised essays – at least the first time out. Bakker is no exception...

> [all raptors insist] on a dung-document to prove the identity and status of strangers. It will always be this way with long-snouted predators. His distant cousins, the great tyrannosaurs of the later Cretaceous, will have huge snout chambers for their sense of smell. So will the bears and wolves and hyenas much further in the geological future. Of all the land animals who hunt big game, only one will come along who cannot read the dung-sign – *homo sapiens*.

Once I stopped eye-tripping over Bakker's odd second-person-didactic style, the story took on a Jack London-ish life of its own (*The Call of the Even Wilder*?) *Raptor Red* will probably sneak up on you, too...

Bill Bamm *The Mystery of Bill Bamm's Golfman from Mabbil*
Pentland, 1994, 79pp, £4.95

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

One is not sure what to expect from Pentland Press, as they advertise for authors. At the moment they are lucky because one of their recent titles has been the subject of a lot of attention – unfortunately, perhaps, that title which will find a huge readership is a biography of Anthony Chevenix-Trench, the spanking headmaster of Eton, and not Bill Bamm's *Golfman*, our subject here. Bamm's first page warns readers that this is not a 'How To' book; perhaps that warning will save many an unwary purchaser from something they would never normally keep so close at hand.

Bill Bamm describes his friend Tommy slipping off for a game of golf one Saturday morning and, as he scores a hole in one at the third hole, finding himself sucked down into a huge cavern beneath the ground where the Golfman – a figure constructed of spheres and with the heads of clubs as his hands and feet, and possibly golf balls – waits for him. The Golfman quickly informs Tommy that he is from the planet Mabbil, and here on Earth the Golfmen are intent in capturing the skills of players who sink under-par holes. The Golfmen have eliminated the idea of Golf-widows by banishing all women, and have now evolved the figure that Tommy finds so interesting. The third hole is a repeat of Alice's rabbit hole; but I'm afraid I got lost in the rough part of the story. Tommy is examined by the aliens, is asked some questions. and is then allowed to go, to go to the toilet.

And I wondered what he or I had learned. There are some puns – "Catch a cold; you mean you have to chase after a cold?" the naive Golfman, but a later question "What is this thing called love?" comes only as Tommy is being placed on the transporter home. So a lot of opportunities get missed.

Back in the clubhouse Tommy drops the Golfman's pills in the goldfish tank. Bill Bamm's *Golfman* could end the same way – make a splash or sink unnoticed. Unlike that spanking headmaster.

David Bowker *The Death Prayer*
Vista, 1996, 244pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

Oxford, Nottingham, Glasgow, and now York. Detective Superintendent Laverne is not your usual policemen. When a series of killings take place in violent and inexplicable circumstances (bodies flung like rag dolls around locked rooms for one thing), he is called in to track down the killer with the aid of his own peculiar brand of detection. He doesn't talk, behave or think like a policeman, yet he still manages to solve the crimes, so how does he do it? Well, he's psychic. And as we discover the nature of the unnatural forces that are causing the killings, so he discovers his own latent abilities and how he can use them to stop the murders continuing.

This is an odd book, a strange compromise between a supernatural thriller and a procedural crime story ('procedural' in the 'Inspector Morse' sense) and they make uneasy bed-fellows. The strict rules of the crime story are easily broken when the supernatural can be blamed (spooks can get in anywhere) and as always 'evil', 'greed' and 'power' seem to be the universal motives for bad behaviour, which made the ending rather flat for me. It's a B-movie of a book, it rolls by easily enough and the plot carries enough hooks to keep the reader going, but in the end I think it would work better on TV.

Stephen Briggs *Terry Pratchett's Mort: The Play*
Terry Pratchett's Wyrd Sisters: The Play
Corgi, 1996, 171pp/158pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Stephen Briggs, already well-known to Pratchett fans as a Discworld cartographer and encyclopaedist, is also a keen participant in amateur dramatics. Not surprisingly, he has adapted several Discworld books for the stage, and two of these adaptations have now been published by Corgi. (NB: as noted in both books, rights of performance are controlled by Terry Pratchett and Stephen Briggs, and the publication of each play "does not imply that it is necessarily available for performance by amateurs or professionals either in the British Isles or overseas." Anyone contemplating a performance must apply to Stephen Briggs for consent before starting rehearsals or booking a theatre or hall.)

So how do these texts stand up as plays? Obviously Briggs has had to leave out a great deal in adapting two episodic, detailed novels containing a profusion of non-realistic and/or magical scenes and events, for a two hour performance on a small stage by a small cast with a small budget. Death has been cut from *Wyrd Sisters*, and the Librarian from *Mort*. What's left is authentic Pratchett dialogue, but it reads very flat on the page. The words

delineate not characters, but shells of characters – we Pratchett fans already know what Granny Weatherwax is *really* like. The plays might work for an audience who didn't know Pratchett – but the cast had better know and love the canon, or they won't be able to start building their characters.

As I have little personal involvement with the theatre, I asked a professional stage-manager friend for her comments on the texts. She felt that *Wyrd Sisters* lacked shape and coherence (the novel gains a good deal of power and structure through its constant reference to *Macbeth*, but this has been de-emphasised in the play). Some of the stage directions boil down to 'hey, look: isn't this funny!', which should be redundant. Both texts occasionally lack needed directions (for instance, I couldn't work out when or how dead King Olerve gets offstage in *Mort*, Act 1, scene 4). And, necessarily, a lot of the depth of the novels has been lost. For example, *Wyrd Sisters*, the play, includes the novel's running gag about Duke Felmet's increasingly desperate and destructive attempts to get his hands clean. In the play, obsessive handwashing becomes scrubbing with a hanky, sandpaper, a rusty file, a cheese-grater... funny and stomach-turning, funny *because* stomach-turning. In the novel, this generates a certain compassion for the Bad Guy. Pratchett gently conducts us into empathising with his pain. It won't make us see Duke Felmet as anything more than a ridiculous villain, but it might make us a bit more sympathetic or understanding to the next person we meet with an obsessive compulsive personality disorder. This depth of empathy is one of the great strengths of the novels, and it's entirely missing from the plays.

To summarise: an amateur dramatic society who are Pratchett fans will have great fun with these plays. Their audiences (who are probably a tolerant bunch anyway) will have as good an evening out as they usually do. For the rest of us, it's a question of whether or not we want to support the Pratchett Industry. Completists will buy them, others probably won't.

Terry Brooks — *Witches' Brew*

Legend, 1996, 304pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This is the latest in Brooks' 'Magic Kingdom' series. It tells the story of how the witch Nightshade attempts to destroy Ben Holiday through his daughter Mistaya.

Though I know the Shannara novels, this is the first book in the 'Magic Kingdom' series that I've read. I was disappointed. The kingdom of Landover isn't fully realised. I never felt, as I do with some fantasy worlds, that it had a history and a geography independent of the books it appears in. It would be unfair to call the characters cardboard, but there's no real depth to them, and the events of the novel aren't character-driven. Magical dangers and magical help arise in a fairly arbitrary way, and the climax depends on a whacking great coincidence.

Witches' Brew is a pleasant read, and fans of the series will want to meet the characters again. In fact, this may be part of the problem. Brooks is so concerned to remind us of all that went before, and to lay the groundwork for future adventures, that he never focusses on the perils and wonders of the inescapable present. What he creates is by no means rubbish, but don't expect it to tug any heartstrings.

C. J. Cherryh — *Invader*

Legend, 1996, 426pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Jane Carnall

"Translator, traitor" is an Italian proverb, and it is the key to this novel. It is set in the same world described in *Foreigner*: an island of humans on a world of atevi, tall, dark, stronger-than-human aliens. C. J. Cherryh has a gift for creating peoples who are genuinely alien, even though she keeps to the sf convention (should we call it the Hainish Convention?) that they should always be humanoid in form. This novel continues the story told in *Foreigner*, but both novels are strong enough to read on their own.

Bren Cameron is the paidhi, the translator between atevi and human cultures. He lives among atevi, adapting to them. When a human ship visits their world, it is Bren Cameron who must speak for both humans and atevi – walking a knife-edge between two worlds. The claustrophobic feeling of living among an alien species is described so well, and so understatedly, that only when another human – the second paidhi – appears is the reader made aware of what Bren has become so used to enduring.

C. J. Cherryh describes the impact that two intelligent species have on each other better than any other writer I know of; she almost seems to write without human bias. An intense novel: I can't wait for the sequel.

Chris Claremont & John Bolton — *The Black Dragon*

Titan, 1996, 180pp, £10.99,180pp

Reviewed by Colin Bird

A mediaeval sword-and-sorcery graphic novel first published as six Marvel comics in 1985, it's obvious that this project has had more care and attention applied than the average comic. The black and white artwork by John Bolton is stark and realistic and Chris Claremont's complex plot is well served by believable dialogue.

The Black Dragon is set in the year 1193, England's awaits the return of its new king, Richard, who is leading the crusades and there is an air of political uncertainty in the air. James Dunreith returns to England to claim his family seat now that his enemy, King Henry, is dead. Dunreith is branded a sorcerer and recruited by Queen Eleanor to investigate rumours that an old friend is using the black arts to divest the throne of its power.

The story begins to sink under the weight of many fantasy elements introduced at the halfway mark. I would have preferred the more subliminal use of magic, especially as the narrative has such a powerfully realistic edge. However, fantasy fans should enjoy this intelligent tale. What a shame the graphic novel couldn't have included the original cover artwork.

Christopher Evans — *Mortal Remains, or Heirs of the Noösphere*

Vista, 1996, 319pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Liam Proven

Mortal Remains is a joyfully iconoclastic book. Occasionally, it defers to its elders, but more often, it cheerfully borrows their concepts and twists them 'til breaking point.

At heart, it's a chase across the Solar System, but with many excursions to other places and events. The time in which it's set isn't explicitly given, although it's mentioned that no-one has landed on Earth for centuries. Virtually the entire System has been settled and terraformed, from the hot inner planets out to icy Pluto, yet in all this time, it seems that no-one has managed to travel to other stars – or, at least, they haven't returned to tell the tale. This implicit acceptance of Einsteinian relativity seems to be a trend in some contemporary SF: since, given current knowledge, you can't go faster than light, if an author wishes to remain rigorous and not resort to magic, there can be no FTL, and therefore, no star travel. Presumably, slower-than-light travel via slow generation ships or immortal inorganic explorers, or travel by individuals thanks to time dilation, isn't good enough.

In any event, the people of the Solar System have used the long ages of their imprisonment well. High technology is everywhere, but here, rather than being indistinguishable from magic, it's hard to tell technology from biology. Most of the tools and machines of daily life, from houses to cars to spacecraft, are semi-sentient living creatures in their own right, and you must look hard to find inanimate mechanisms anywhere. Although they shun Earth itself, there are people everywhere else, from the asteroids up to the moons of Jupiter, and everywhere there are living machines to keep the environmental conditions hospitable to normal, unmodified humans. At some point in history, from the time of the novel, there was a pogrom against the Augmenters, those humans that used biotechnology to mould their bodies to their environment, rather than the reverse. The 'standard' humans won, and the remaining living Augmenters in the inner system were sent into exile on the Earth, whose wild and rampant artificially-tampered ecosystems are now the most dangerous place in the System. There are other renegade Augmenters still living in the outer reaches of the System, though, and reconciliation between them and the unaugmented is a major theme of the book.

The basic setup of an densely-populated System based around elaborate biotech, set some millennia hence, is strongly reminiscent of John C. McLoughlin's *The Helix and the Sword* [Futura, 1986], and the two share a theme in the reclamation and recolonisation of a long-shunned Earth which has now recovered from past ecological excesses. However, in *Mortal Remains*, there's a lot more going on.

The inhabitants of the System don't refer to it as such; to them, it is the Noöspace, the physical volume occupied by the Noösphere, Teilhard de Chardin's realm or domain of the mind. In a bold gesture towards conventional religion, Evans' humanity has abandoned the uncertain redemption of a immanent deity in favour of creating their own technological transcendence. Technology has banished old age and death; instead, at the end of an individual's appointed period, their mind is translated into the noösphere, apparently a gigantic computer which stores the myriad past lives: an intriguing take on the current idea of immortality through resurrection in a computer. The living can visit their dead ancestors by entering a shrine, which puts them in communication with those in the noösphere. This is the main way that this vast community keeps a sense of identity and cohesion, and allows the staff of the noösphere – the closest analogue to a government – to keep track of their charges. The nominal leaders of the noöspace are the two Advocates, but the current incumbents seem to be neglecting their duties, and plans are afoot to replace.

This gives a partial insight into the remarkably dense and complex universe of the novel, as conveyed through the viewpoints of its multiple first- and third-person narrators. Few novels contain such richness of setting; Dan Simmon's *Hyperion* is one of the most recent examples that spring to mind. There's a lot of ambiguity here also, some intentional, some (I would guess) not – for instance, it's hard to keep the noösphere and noöspace separate and distinct in one's mind. More deliberate is the ambiguity of narrator, observer and participant. Different scenes are recounted as seen by different people, with occasional, disconnected first-person interludes. Gradually, the two converge. It's a very effective structure, and since one side clearly dominates, it's less hard work than, say, the alternating storylines of Iain M. Banks' *Use of Weapons*.

Mortal Remains is a complex, deep and fulfilling novel, bursting with ideas, woven through with a compelling plot. It's also great fun.

Neil Gaiman *Sandman: The Kindly Ones*
Titan, 1996, £9.99

Reviewed by Liam Proven

For those who already read graphic novels, you should already know all about the Sandman, and you can skip the next couple of paragraphs. If you don't, shame on you! Read on...

Do you read comics? No? Think they're all about superheroes, and tend to be over-reliant on the word 'Pow!'? Then you are *very* wrong indeed. Go away and read Bryan Talbot's *The Tale of One Bad Rat* immediately.

Right. Good, wasn't it? It serves excellently as a gentle introduction to adult comics for those unfamiliar with the form. By 'adult', I don't mean sex-related, either, a lamentably common assumption today. Although some of the traditional tropes still permeate modern comics, there is a flourishing genre of graphical fiction written for grown-ups, exemplified by classics such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen*. Arguably greatest amongst these is Neil Gaiman's lengthy series of stories about the Sandman – yes, that one: Morpheus, bringer of dreams and nightmares.

The Sandman stories have been appearing as individual comics since 1988, and have been a showcase for many of the best artists in the field: Bryan Talbot, Charles Vess, and Steve Leialoha to name a few personal favourites. The different artists have illustrated many tales, all scripted in painstaking detail by Gaiman: despite the diverse styles, there is always a strong unifying theme, supported by Dave McKean's surreally haunting covers and frontispieces for each chapter. However, for me, they work best in the form of bound graphic novels, with the individual comics edited into coherent books.

Volume by volume, they chronicle the existence of Dream, younger brother to Death, eldest of the Endless: Desire, Destiny, Despair, Delirium (née Delight) and Destruction. The history starts with the capture and imprisonment of Dream by a sorcerer for over 70 years; in his absence, the Kingdom of Dream crumbles, and so begins the fall of its King. Over the next 69 issues, Gaiman's saga roams far and wide: there are many separate 'story arcs', some of which relate only peripherally to Dream himself.

Early on it's hinted that even the so-called Endless can die, and there's a growing sense that Dream must fall. *The Kindly Ones* is the climax of that fall, but – ever producing the unexpected – Gaiman's afterword reveals that it isn't the last Sandman book, and that volume nine, *The Wake*, will follow. In this book, a conspiracy is made against Dream, the agent of his doom being the Furies – who are so feared that it's bad luck to name them so, and are therefore called the Eumenides – the friendly, or kindly, ones. With delicious irony, the unknowing conspirators use the (apparent) death of the boy Daniel to fuel the Furies' rage…

As always, there's a lot left unsaid in Gaiman's writing, and to describe any more of the story would be to give the game away. Yet even knowing the broad outlines of what's to come – guessable by any avid reader – doesn't reveal all. To this reader at least, it's unclear how much Dream knows of his future, and although he certainly planned some of it, it's hard to tell how much. It's a small consolation that Death herself doesn't know either. No more do I know what's coming next, no matter how hard I wish that I did.

Tying together many of the threads from the earlier books, this penultimate eighth volume of the Sandman series is the biggest of all. For me, it was a particular pleasure to encounter the stylish designs of D'Israeli, the D'emon D'raughtsman, creator of 'Timulo' in *Deadline* magazine (of fond memory), and the crisp, sharp lines of Glyn Dillon. It's essential reading for any follower of the story so far, and though some might be ready to stop here, the beckoning of "just one more" is very strong. For a reader not already familiar with Sandman, though, it would be fearfully hard work, and most of the resonances would inevitably be missed. Tragically, soon it will all be over; Sandman book nine will be the last. I can hardly wait.

William Gibson & Bruce Sterling — *The Difference Engine*

Vista, 1996, 383pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

The 'steampunk' label that was placed upon this book was probably inevitable, given the track records of its authors and the conceit which lies at its heart: the supposition that Charles Babbage succeeded in developing a working version of his proto-computer which was taken up by, and changed, Victorian Capitalism. The fact that the ending is a neat rewrite of the similar epiphany in *Neuromancer* also underlies this, and further suggests a sense that the dynamic duo of the cyberpunk movement were having an awful lot of fun adding some different riffs to the basic mix.

Yet there's no way in which this is a *jeux d'esprit* while Gibson and Sterling amuse themselves with turning from the 21st to the 19th centuries. That's not to say that the book isn't fun. In many ways it's my favourite novel by either of these two writers, and Gibson himself has recalled in interviews his collaborator's detailed research for the minutiae of Victorian social history: research which has resulted in some wonderfully atmospheric forays among the low-life of this particular alternate-Victorian London. But it's possible to read *The Difference Engine* as something other than anything-punk, a supposition Nick Lowe points to in the same original review of the novel (in *Foundation 54*) from which I nicked the 'dynamic duo' phrase.

Lowe's review underlines the function of the book as alternate history, and the cleverness of the authors in allowing all the flashy stuff about steam-driven computers, Dickensian clerks as clacker-nerds and catastrophe theory to keep so much offstage and in shadow. It is not, for example, the Babbage 'engine' which transforms society so much as underlying social mechanism of the political victory of the Radical Party under Lord Byron (who in this timeline does not die in Greece) which sets the scene for the mathematical genius of his daughter Ada and Babbage's vision to have space in which to operate. Ada herself appears mostly as a gambling-addicted lush while most of the other 'High' characters are vaguely glimpsed – if at all – through the distorting lens of the three viewpoint figures, the savant Mallory, the journalist/spy Laurence Oliphant (based upon the real character) and the adventuress Sibyl Gerard. Shelley has been shuffled off to exile as part of a split among the revolutionaries, Karl Marx is running the Manhattan Commune in a fragmented USA, and Disraeli is writing trashy novels.

It's part of the novel's strength that much of this background is kept in shadow: after all, shadow is what allows us to perceive depth. At times, we do seem to be teetering over what may be a pit of vertiginous depths but just might be an artfully-designed illusion: the plot hinges on that most venerable of cyberpunk motifs, the very important bit of software which everyone is after, and despite the clever twists leading up to the final few pages we have read it, or something like it, many times before. But we are rarely if ever going to read it with such verve and humour, such attention to detail and invention. The Victorian period, with its expanding technology, increasing focus upon the implications of the new scientific discoveries, and highly visible stratifications of class and ideology, was the fertile cradle of the literature which deals with these questions. Gibson and Sterling (note those significantly Victorian initials!) highlight this by recasting many of today's computer-generated theories and cultures. They also do a pretty good line in pastiche Victorian porn which out-eroticises any of your later post-cyberpunk not-babes in leather-coated silicone, but that I am sure our readers are not interested in…

Sharon Green — *Game's End*

AvoNova, 1996, 262pp, $5.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

According to one character in this novel, "People find themselves in a position where they have to save the universe only in silly books, not in real life!" Well, quite.

Game's End is the third book in a sword and sorcery trilogy and, although it is virtually self-contained, for a reader new to the series it has all the problems of characters and scenario being already established in previous volumes. At least, this is presumably why there is so little attempt to bring the characters in this volume to life, and why there is so little sense of place.

The plot concerns King Bariden and Queen Chalaine, both sorcerers, who have recently defeated the evil rulers of a kingdom and now rule in their stead. Bariden and Charlaine find themselves threatened by a powerful, evil wizard who almost succeeds in turning them against each other. Fortunately they manage to resist the wizard's spells, and plan how they might best defeat him. Unfortunately this involves a *great* deal of talk about their own spells, all of which is pretty tiresome for a reader untrained in their system of magic, and who rapidly

begins to suspect that the pages and pages of meaningless dialogue are utter tosh. Definitely a book to be opened at the reader's own risk.

Simon R. Green *Deathstalker Rebellion*
Vista, 1996, 568 pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Yogi Berra, the baseball player turned sports commentator, once said: "It's *déja vu* – all over again." After reading *Deathstalker Rebellion*, I know what he meant. The following paragraph will give you the not-so-big idea:

> In the beginning was the Empire, and all was well. It was the great adventure of humanity, springing out from its homeworld, pressing on into the endless dark in search of new worlds and wonders. It was a time of heroes and marvellous deeds, as humanity spread out from world to world and the frontier proessed remorselessly outwards. A thousand worlds, with a thousand civilizations, blazing so brightly against the dark. The Empire (p. 7).

Isaac Asimov should have copyrighted the 'Encyclopedia Galactica'. Green's sago (sic) is blunt-edge space opera, coming as it does long after – say – *Galactic Patrol*, *The Legion of Space*, and *The Weapon Makers*. Some unkind person might say it's all right for somebody who's read everything by everybody to cast critical stones. Then I'd cite 'sampler' movies like *Star Wars* and the continuing 'Treks', which shamelessly recycle the musty ambience of a bygone age.

Perhaps science fiction has entered its dotage...

> By the time of Owen Deathstalker, the Empire was ripe for rebellion. Despite his Family's martial history (see Volume One: 'Deathstalker'), he always saw himself as a scholar rather than a warrior... (*ibid.*)

Fat chance: "Deathstalker. It's not just a name, it's a destiny" (it says here). As a matter of fact, the rebellion – sorry, the Rebellion - doesn't really get going until p. 567... second *Childhood's End*?

The plot hardly bears thinking about – so I'm not going to write about it. Characterization never rises above the funny and/or odd name level. Apart from Owen, other stock-cube types include: Finlay ~~Cameron~~ Campbell ("once known as the Masked Gladiator" – and the Jekyll/Hyde of Tannochbrae?); Captain John Silence ("of the Empire starcruiser *Dauntless*" – Green's *hommage* to the Algernon Blackwood psychic detective?); Empress Lionstone XIV ("the Iron Bitch" – a wee bit of poltical satire?). Josh Kirby would have had a field day with such drams. pers., but the zapping-spaceship cover illustration is by Steve Crisp.

I like to like people and I like people to like me. *Ergo*: I'll hold fast to the belief that Simon R. Green has written a metafiction parody of galactic empire builders/wreckers. But any suggestion that he takes *Deathstalker Rebellion* even halfway seriously would bring me out in reviewer rage.

Steve Harris *Black Rock*
Gollancz, 1996, 495pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Sebastian Phillips

Black Rock may not be the worst horror novel I have ever read, but it's high on the list. At 495 pages, this is overlong, tedious stuff. It was obviously never meant to be the kind of book which terrifies the reader, more the kind of fantasy where reality bends in on itself with mind expanding results – more Magical realism than meathooks and mayhem. This could have worked; but *Black Rock* is too slow moving and every spooky point is heavily laboured, usually in italics. It's not helped by the fact that Harris has given his characters names such as 'Snowdrop Dresden' and 'S´n´J'. It's helped even less by the fact that these characters behave with gobsmacking stupidity. Of course, he explains why they are doing that, but only after a good hundred pages or so.

Most readers won't make it that far.

Shaun Hutson *Lucy's Child*
Warner Books, 1995, 435pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Sebastian Phillips

Lucy's Child, by Shaun Hutson, is a disappointment. The central theme is very strong – a woman keeps her brain-dead sister's body alive because she wants to adopt a baby growing in the 'dead' womb. It would have been a good psychological chiller, drawing on themes like sibling rivalry and mother/child relationships. It's the kind of plot you expect from a writer like Ira Levin, and should be perverse and deeply disturbing – except that Hutson wimps out, as if he can't accept that the theme itself is disturbing enough to interest people. You can almost see the writer scratching his chin and saying, "Hmm... we've gone fifty pages without anything horrible happening – I know, I'll have someone try to mend a waste disposal unit and have his arm torn off!" (I kid you not).

The problem is that the blend of splatter and chill doesn't work. A gorefest has to be unrelenting; it relies on the reader feeling delighted when a character is killed in some bizarre and agonising way, and no one cares if the plot is wafer-thin. On the other hand, a chiller needs to be well-structured, to have involving characters, and to develop atmosphere. *Lucy's Child* ends up somewhere between the two. It won't please the juvenile market because this really isn't inventive splatter (at least until the final and totally expected last couple of pages), whilst more demanding readers will lose patience with it in the two hundred pages it takes to get going.

Diana Wynne Jones *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*
Vista, 1996, 223pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

"Find the Map. It will be there. No tour of Fantasyland is complete without one..." The *Tough Guide* is no exception. There is the Map. These names, or names suspiciously like them, can be found in the first few pages of a hundred half-forgotten fantasy epics. The Citadel of Doom. Port something-or-other. Names with apostrophes where one would not expect to find them. Nuneaton. (And why not?)

Diana Wynne Jones' *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* sets out to give the jaded reader a comprehensive guide to this mystical realm. And it is clear that its author knows it well. One cannot help but feel that she is in some way connected to the *Management*: "the body who arranged this tour for you... will admit absolutely no complaints or responsibility." She is uncannily familiar with *Official Management Terms*, such as 'doomladen', 'reek of wrongness', and the rest. Unlike many another Management figure, however, Diana Wynne Jones makes

no bones about the unspoken crises of Fantasyland. For example, given that there are so few animals, what is the meat of which stews are invariably made? What, exactly, is *in* all the bales that are piled high on every wharf? Where do Fantasyland horses come from, and why are they so well-behaved? And why do female Tourists never have periods?

The *Tough Guide* is a joy, if you can cope with the dictionary format. Perhaps it would have been better as a guidebook or travelogue. On the other hand, that might have meant too much competition for the Management, many of whom are doubtless poring over the entries for Confrontations (Small and Friendly to Final), or Peoples (Human and Other), in a desperate Quest for a meaningful plot. One only hopes they are not too busy to enjoy the trip.

Robert Jordan *Conan the Invincible*
Legend, 1996, 284pp, £4.99
Conan the Defender
Legend, 1996, 184 pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Conan the Invincible and *Conan the Defender* (both Tor, 1982) were Robert Jordan's first two Conan noveloids. Legend have neglected to mention that Sphere published the original editions in 1984.

These passable pastiches would probably have remained 'lost classics' had it not been for the unaccountable recent bestsellering of Jordan's 'Wheel of Time' series. I don't mean to be mean to Jordan and his work, but fake archaisms like... "O most High among the Powers and Dominions, this one is so insignificant beside thee that thou mightest destroy him without noticing such a speck in thy path" (*Conan the Invincible*, p. 15)... giveth me the pip.

'Robert Jordan' is actually South Carolinan James Oliver Rigney, Jr., born in 1948. The pseudonym might or might not refer back to the tormented hero of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: if so, it would help explain his fearsome facility with theeing and thouing. Rigney/'Jordan' served in Vietnam (1968-70), earning the Distinguished Flying Cross and Bronze Star. One day, he'll write one *hell* of a combat-fantasy novel. One day...

Meanwhile, however, I'm reviewing his *Conan the Invincible* and *Defender*. I feel sure that Robert E. Howard would have approved. Conan goes places and kills people – *things*, even – in the very best butch-Hyborian manly fashion. But the law of Diminishing Ripostes ("When you've read about one sword fight, you've read about them all") soon takes ill-effect. At one point... "Conan settled down to serious drinking" (*Conan the Invincible*, p. 26). And so did I; these books presented me with a real three-pint problem.

CODA: "Nobody alive writes Conan better than Robert Jordan" avers L. Sprague de Camp (*Conan the Defender* blurb). But – by Crom's Brazen Balls! – the best living writer of Conan is none other than El Sprague himself.

Patricia Kennealy-Morrison *The Hedge of Mist*
HarperCollins, 1996, 502pp, £5.99

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

When you come unprepared to the third volume of an Arthuriad, set in an unfamiliar star-system called Keltia, there has to be a deal of turning from text to glossary before you get the hang of it. It was a pleasant necessity, for the author's elucidations illuminate her worlds wonderfully, creating fine webs of interconnected destinies and dynasties.

The overall scenario has it that the post-Atlantean/Celtic voyage of Bran, in our fifth century, founded a starry homeland. Within its confines, in our twentieth century, is enacted the Arthurian drama, our own mythic accounts of which are not actually derived from any historical past but are long-range prophecies from that past. It's a difficult equation, well-maintained right up to the bard Taliesin's finally leaving planet Tara for planet Earth. Taliesin, here Arthur's foster brother, is narrator of the two episodes comprising the novel – the Grail Quest and the Morte d'Arthur. The Keltian variation on the former is that the Grail is stolen and must be (and is) retrieved, lest the worlds be blighted by a usurping Black Grail. A variant of the latter is that Arthur and his warriors die by steering their disabled spaceship into a volcano, their bodies then preserved by the salamandrine Firefolk of the planet Kholko, later to be known as Avilion. There are characters loosely, or closely, identifiable with those of the earthly myths, and there are loves, loyalties and betrayals, but these are not always the same as those of the myths.

SFnal artifacts (lasers, etc) sit a little uneasily alongside the magic and swordplay, but where there are vistas of space and planetfall, as in the star annihilation enabling the building of Keltia's protective Wall, the descriptive sweep is powerful and moving. Lyrically effective, too, are passages of reverie and meditation – Taliesin's re-entry into the Throneworld, his returning of Llacharn (Excalibur) to Gwynedd's Inland Sea. And the story has its metaphysical dimension, symbolised in the domain of the Shining Ones, the Sidhe, where lies mortality's path through the Hedge of Mist. In all, an imaginally cohering, inviting and explorable fantasy universe.

Gary Kilworth *Cybercats*
Bantam, 1996, 139pp, £3.50

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

Cybercats is a hi-tech juvenile thriller which combines likable protagonists with fast moving action and some sound SF. It is set in an near future city, where the social fabric has broken down just a little further than in Western society today. The wealthy live on protected estates while the poorest sections of the population live as scavengers on rubbish dumps.

Hotwire and Blindboy are two smart, streetwise kids who originally grew up on the city's rubbish tips. At the start of *Cybercats* they are living with grandfatherly John Woo and working in a computer repair shop, exchanging work for food and a floor to sleep on. Together with John Woo they come up with the cybercats of the title, rubbish eating robots designed to help clear the streets of a city drowning in it's own waste, and persuade the Council to pay them to implement the use of the cats.

However Mouseman, a criminal they helped put away in the previous book, *The Electric Kid*, escapes from jail and tracks them down wanting revenge. The rest of the book deals with their efforts to try and survive and thwart Mouseman. I can strongly recommend this book for children of about nine upwards. The characters are identifiable and believable, and the pace fast enough to maintain interest.

George Lucas & Chris Claremont — *Shadow Moon*

Bantam, 1996, 452pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Susan Badham

This book is – slightly confusingly – both a sequel to a film (*Willow*) and the first novel in a trilogy. However, if – like me – you haven't seen the film, you can still follow the story.

The cinematic background of the original (and of George Lucas' mind) shows in the big set pieces – you can almost see Industrial Light and Magic consulting on the special effects. However, as this is accompanied by lots of excellent descriptive writing and a nice turn of imagination, I didn't have any problems with it.

The book is slightly formulaic, with a tendency to preach which I suspect derives from both authors – the comments are certainly from the 'homespun wisdom' school of philosophy made familiar by *Star Wars* and the 'X-men' comics. The characters spend a lot of time lecturing each other and you almost expect someone to turn up at the end and award them marks out of ten for moral development.

Apart from this irritating tendency the book is a good read, with a muscular story, interesting characters and some novel ideas as to villains and the way they go about things – the major villain is so subtle that even at the end of the book you don't know who he is. Lucas and Claremont aren't afraid to have their characters die and suffer and I'd guess that defeating the bad guy is going to take more than dropping a talisman in a volcano at the end of the trilogy.

All in all, this is a good – though not top-flight – fantasy novel: certainly better than most of the stuff in the shops and well worth checking out.

Ken MacLeod — *The Star Fraction*

Legend 1996, 341pp, £5.99

Reviewed by John D. Owen

A first novel from Scotsman Ken MacLeod, and a very accomplished one. Set in the 21st Century in a Britain broken up into a series of self-protecting neighbourhoods, with security agencies the main growth industry, *The Star Fraction* mixes extrapolated social trends, cyberpunk computer jargon, street-wise characters and a convoluted plot to come up with a fascinating, fearsomely intelligent and fast-moving story that grips from the first pages to the last.

The story revolves around Moh Kohn, a security mercenary with a very smart gun, Janis Taine, a scientist who comes up with a breakthrough in memory-enhancing drugs, and Jordan Brown, a teenage computer-whizz from the Christian fundamentalist enclave of Islington. Taine's breakthrough attracts the attention of the Stasis cops, a secret police whose job is to prevent rapid scientific advance. Kohn realises Taine is in great danger, and gets her away to the relative safety of Norlonto, a capitalist anarchy in North London, built up around the spaceport. There they meet Brown, running from his fundamentalist roots with the proceeds from a deal struck with the Black Program, a mysterious electronic entity, which may have been created by Kohn's father before his assassination by the forces of the US/UN's 'New World Order'. Once the three get together, the plot lifts off into new territory, the politics get very tricky, and MacLeod's imagination really lets rip.

This is excellent stuff, very much in the vein of Peter Hamilton's 'Mindstar' books. Hard to believe this is a first novel, but it's worth bearing in mind that MacLeod is an associate of Iain Banks, who has helped out by reading early drafts. With a teacher like Banks, it's no wonder the pupil turns out so well.

Phillip Mann — *The Dragon Wakes: A Land Fit For Heroes Volume 3*

Vista, 1996, 272pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

This is the third in Mann's alternate history series, which I can only assume is aimed at the juvenile market, set in a world where the Roman Empire never left Britannia. It follows on from *Escape to the Wild Wood* and *Stand Alone Stan* by continuing the three now separate stories of the young protagonists, the Roman Viti (now Coll) and Britons Miranda and Angus, as well as that of Coll's father Marcus Ulysses, now ruler of Britannia on behalf of the scheming new emperor, Lucius Petronius. Miranda continues her delving into the spirit world, Coll continues to agonise over his past but is starting to discover his own paranormal powers, while Angus becomes a freedom fighter, reviving Ulysses' old Dragon fighting machine to deliver blows against the Romans. All the time Petronius is involving Ulysses in his grandiose scheme to raze the forests of Britannia and turn the whole island into a vast sheep farm to feed the Roman Empire.

Despite the handicap that the background premises of this series are extremely shaky, as noted before by myself and other Vector reviewers, Mann's writing skills propel the multi-stranded story forward towards the final denouement, and kept me involved in the fate of the characters. Not the place to start reading this series, but worth carrying on if you've come this far and liked it. I personally found the fantasy elements out-of-place, but I'm sure their importance will be explained in the end. The concluding volume 4 of this series, *The Burning Forest*, is now available in hardback, so it shouldn't be too long before it's out in paperback and we know the final score.

L. E. Modesitt, Jr — *The Order War*

Orbit, 1996, 581pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

It is axiomatic that you should not judge a book by its cover but perhaps we should make an exception here; the external trappings promise a genre fantasy and this is precisely what we get. Another confrontation between the forces of order and chaos, good and evil, in a world of swords and magic. What innovation there is extends little beyond the fact that the white wizards of Fairhaven are the *bad* guys in resolute defiance of the traditional concepts of colour-coding (see Diana Wynne-Jones's *Tough Guide to Fantasy Land*). There is the odd-stylistic quirk – Modesitt seems to favour a description of hair colour as his primary form of characterisation, for example – but, by and large, there is little to distinguish this volume from any the dozens of similar works that clog the publishers' schedules in the mid-1990s.

Although this is billed as the fourth volume in the Saga of Recluse, it does work as a stand-alone volume, and continues to establish Modesitt's reputation as the Master

of Onomatopoeia. Our heroes *thunng, hssssst,* and *clannng* through nearly six hundred pages of action, adventure and conventional genre plot, in a world where *Oooo...* is the sound of someone moaning in pain and horses go *Wheee....* Truly, this is a Fantasy Land. Is this the book for you? Grab a copy off the shelf and go with your first impression; you'll almost certainly be correct.

Michael Moorcock *Fabulous Harbours*
Orion, 1996, 228pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Chris Amies

We open upon the pirate tale of Horace Quelch, the White Pirate, setting sail with the mysterious Rose across the seven seas. This collection of not particularly linked stories continues in a certain sense the stories of the characters of *Blood*. The author, however, is upfront in pointing out that it is not a sequel, nor may the volume after it be a sequel to this. How can 'The Black Blade's Summoning', an Elric story, be linked to the ongoing sequence of the *War Amongst the Angels*? 'The Girl who killed Sylvia Blade' dates from 1966... a thirty-year-old story in a brand new collection? What is born-again Texan Moorcock doing? Despairing of a London grown ever more cynical, as well as polluted, he has left his native shores and these fragments against his ruins? Von Bek, Elric, Cornelius, all the usual Moorcockian suspects have some part to play in these stories. Closing time in the gardens of the West (as symbolised by the autumnal gardens of London); and a search for the Holy Grail to heal the wounded land.

The whole volume sits under the names of Ackroyd and Sinclair – Peter and Iain respectively, whose remapping of the East End of London in 'Lud Heat' and *Hawksmoor* leads to the idea that nothing can be truly built if it usurps the structure of what was already there. The old structure will show through in some way. For instance, the faceless glass buildings on the north side of Hammersmith Road have not entirely replaced Lyons Supermarket and Cadby Hall. The human memory – and the sense of the way things *should* be – cannot simply be dispensed with or bought off. In this sense, though much of its action takes place across an unfamiliar world, and even in the realms of Fantasy, this is a book that relates to the London of the 1980s, a city rebuilt without attention to the interests of those who lived there.

You could look on the A to Z for Sporting Club Square and decide that he's redrawn the entire map of that part of London between Fulham Palace Road and North End Road. Moorcock's rewritten topology is, street by street, not really that important (unless, like your present reviewer, the reader has lived for the last fifteen years in the area thus described). This is an alternate world, where "the further you travel from London, the more exotic it becomes," and which has proceeded some way towards justice and equity. The Rose, the guardian spirit of Sporting Club Square, becomes a kind of conjuration of Mother London herself. It is not just an alternate, but also a possible. At the very close of the book he says, "There's a road between the worlds which shimmers and curves like an erratic moonbeam. It carries a multitude of travellers... they live to taste the textures and music of the multiverse."

André Norton *Mirror of Destiny*
AvoNova, 1996, 394 pp, $5.99

Reviewed by Graham Andrews.

The 'Mirror of Destiny' belongs to Twilla, apprentice healer in the household of Wisewoman Hulde. We first meet her making mystic passes over the disc: "*Up and down, out and in,/Sun's path and widdershins./Power answering to the call/Of flesh and blood and inner all*" (p. 2). She is being intently watched by a shadow-gray cat; yet another familiar Norton – well – familiar.

But neither the cat nor the chant does anybody or anything any good. The ecophobic Industrial Monster has:

> descended upon Varsland, devouring all the arable land in its path. By royal decree, the displaced must venture into the treacherous woodland domain of a strange and secret race. (blurb)

The King's lottery determines that Twilla "must marry – for only the wedded can survive the terrible fate awaiting those who penetrate the primeval forest" (ditto). Who wrote this blurb – Philip José Farmer?

The word 'quest' should be a dead giveaway where the plot is concerned. Enough said that all ends well for Twilla & Co. in what will soon be the best of all possible worlds. Regular fantasy readers might feel that they've wandered into several other books (so what else is new?) I enjoyed the occasional stylistic infelicity, e.g. "The pole ax took her eye" (p. 179) which only means that she caught a glimpse of it.

André Norton has never written a bad novel: but she's written some disappointing novels – judged by her own high standards. *Mirror of Destiny* is one of these rare disappointments, though – having said that – I'd give it 6½ points out of a possible 10.

John Saul *Black Lighting*
Bantam, 1996, 452pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Sebastian Phillips

Black Lighting is a good, straightforward horror novel by a writer who knows his business. Anne Jeffers is a crime journalist who has campaigned for a convicted murderer to receive the death penalty. He dies in the electric chair but the murders start all over again. Has she hounded the wrong man to his death, or is something more sinister than that going on? – the answer is pretty obviously 'yes' but it doesn't spoil the fun.

The book provides more good shivers than it does gruesome descriptions, which make it slightly more disturbing than most of its ilk. Saul's characters are well drawn and we come to feel a certain involvement with them. *Black Lightning* probably isn't a classic, but definitely a page turner.

Christopher Stasheff *The Oathbound Wizard*
Legend, 1996, 409pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

I had a hard time reading *The Oathbound Wizard* (book 2 of *A Wizard in Rhyme*). No fault of Christopher Stasheff's; just that I've read *The Incomplete Enchanter*, by (for the mere record, surely) L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt. Stasheff has done a fine non-pastiche job, but... Oh, roll on the plot-happy blurb:

"Matt Mantrell had been whisked to a world where reciting verse worked magic by runes on a scrap of parchment. Growing more sure of his powers and head over heels in love, he should have been having the time of his life. But, Lord High Wizard or not, he couldn't marry his true love – Queen Alisande. For Matt was only a commoner...

"This was not a good time for Matt to discover that all oaths sworn in this world were as binding as a legal contract. Particularly since, in his anger, he'd just sworn to conquer a kingdom if that would bring him happiness with Alisande. Setting off for the land of Ibile, ruled by the loathsome Gordogrosso...". That's the gist of it.

The Incomplete Enchanter was a hard act to follow; even for de Camp and Pratt (*he Castle of Iron*, yes: *Wall of Serpents*, no). What do I mean, *was? The Oathbound Wizard* seems like weak tea by comparison – but *only* by comparison. I enjoyed it a great deal, after getting over the initial shock.

Tricia Sullivan *Lethe*

Vista, 1996, 384pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

In *Lethe* Tricia Sullivan presents a frightening picture of a future Earth. Air and soil are polluted by the fallout from past wars; the population is fragmented by a combination of radiation effects and genetic experimentation. Most powerful are the 'heads', or 'Pickled Brains', bodiless intelligences who communicate through computer interface.

Central to the novel are the altermoders, genetically altered humans who can assume cetacean characteristics and communicate telepathically with dolphins. Jenae, one of the most talented, is given the task of working with her dolphin group on data about an interstellar gate which has opened up on the edge of the solar system.

Alternating with the story of Jenae is that of Daire, a pure human who is accidentally sucked through the gate and so discovers what is on the other side. As the inhabitants beyond the gate also have an aquatic form – though of a different kind from the altermoders – the reader suspects a connection; but, as the novel explores the nature of this connection, it reveals what has been done on Earth in the past, and what the prospects are for the future.

I found the novel slow-starting because of the amount of background that has to be packed in. Although I could take it on trust that there was a significant connection between the two contrasting settings and groups of characters, it's not until some way into the narrative that the connection starts to emerge. I also felt it unbalanced: the alien world through the gate, the people and their situation there, I found much more sensitively imagined, and more involving, that the picture of a ruined Earth. While Daire remains central throughout, Jenae tends to fade out as the focus of interest. AT the same time, *Lethe* gives a tremendously detailed and powerful view of a possible future, and I recommend it.

Patrick Tilley *Star Wartz*

Orbit, 1996, 409pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Just how many unfunny SF parodies do we have to put up with before Terry Pratchett finishes the Discworld saga and saves us? I'm sure Pratchett would have dispatched the rather piss-poor idea at the heart of *Star Wartz* in a short story. Patrick Tilley takes four hundred pages to decide that a fish-out-of-water tale of an Earthman unwittingly thrust into futuristic space opera is funny. It isn't. Or is it that experienced genre fans will have read this all before in the works of Tenn, Sheckley, Harrison etc?

It would be churlish to pick over plot holes. After all, the only requirement of a humorous novel is the presence of humour. Alas, there are painfully few laughs here. Apart from a few nicely-handled farcical scenes early on, the author seems to think constant (and not very well-informed) references to pop culture serve the purpose of a witty commentary. And I won't mention the 'Sidelights on the Rimworld – by Fizz' sections that make one very aware of how much funnier *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is compared to this woeful mess.

As to the title I can only assume this is a cynical publishing effort to attract the attention of fans of Lucas' franchise. To be fair to Tilley, I believe this is his attempt at a light-hearted (i.e. few laughs) parody of Space Opera in general and the publishers have misguidedly hyped it as some kind of classic of SF humour. It isn't.

George Turner *Vaneglory*

Avon Books, 1996, 283pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Pat McMurray

This is one of three novels set largely in a future Australia of Turner's imagining. The other two are *Beloved Son* and *Genetic Soldier*. In this future the world economy and society collapsed in the mid 2010s, with the death of 90% of the world population through famine, war and disease. By the 2050s a new World Society has come into being. The average age of this new society seems to be below 30 because there aren't many survivors from the Gone Times. The society comprises local governments, mostly a very religous Australia in this instance, with an over-arching heirarchy of stateless who form Security. Security is limited in how it can act within local societies, but is very powerful in those areas where it can intervene. This naturally leads to a lot of beauracratic infighting with local authorities.

This is the story of three survivors from the period just before the collapse, an Australian, a Scotsman and an Immortal. The Immortal is one of a small community of sterile immortal mutants, and is at least 30,000 years old. The Australian and Scotsman survive the collapse in hibernation, the Immortal just lives through it in disguise. The discovery of the two in hibernation forces the discovery of the Immortal and leads to some strong rivalry between local Australian police and Security's man-on-the-spot.

I haven't really summarised this novel very well, there's simply too many things brought into focus and then let slip out of it – psychological theories, the Australian research station, a returned starship crewman, the Australian society of religous cults and violent teenagers, the Immortal society, Security politics, sexual mores of the many groups involved – this novel is too apt to slip out of focus, wander off at a tangent. It doesn't repay the effort needed to read it.

Harry Turtledove *World War: Upsetting the Balance*
NEL, 1996, 468pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Turtledove's sprawling alternative history continues in this efficient third volume, taking us through mankind's development of atomic and chemical weapons to use against the world's common alien enemy. If you've stayed with this epic saga through the first two volumes then you'll know what to expect. Conventional military SF, well-researched (the author has a Ph.D in history), and with a vast array of dramatis personae, including real and fictional characters. A neat twist is the use of both Lizard and human characters to give a more balanced account of the progress of the conflict.

Upsetting the Balance postulates an accelerated Manhattan Project in response to the alien threat with the Axis and Allied forces cooperating in an uneasy alliance. Meanwhile us benighted Brits become the first to use chemical weapons against the invaders (the other nationalities found the prospect too distasteful!). By the end of this volume several cities have been nuked by both sides and it's difficult to see where the story can go without escalation of the conflict destroying the planet.

Rather like the film *Independence Day*, there is little sense of the real carnage being caused by the combatant's scorched earth strategies (literally when both sides are lobbing nukes at each other). Turtledove's position as narrator seems ambiguously anti-war: there's not a single pacifist viewpoint expressed in the novel and there is an element of gleeful indulgence in such a 'mother of all battles' being related in such detail. The author clearly identifies most with his Jewish characters, using real partisan Mordechai Anielewicz as the heroic figure who ends the Holocaust by allying temporarily with the Lizards. This strand of the story works well and offers a break from the more conventional militaristic science fiction.

A comprehensive, diligently researched instalment in what is, for me, a fruitless and heartless saga.

Margaret Weis and Don Perrin *The Knights Of The Black Earth*
Vista, 1996, 384pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

After her massive success with series such as *Dragonlance*, *Darksword* and the *Death Gate* cycle (with Tracey Hickman), best-selling author Margaret Weis has teamed up with Canadian military software specialist Don Perrin for a new line of space operas featuring cyborg Xris and his Mag Force 7 team of crack mercenaries.

Back in 1952, when I started my SF reading career, I read a number of books which stuck in my memory for years: Asimov's *Pebble in the Sky*, Van Vogt's *The World of Null-A*, and my then favourite – a cracking space opera by Edmond Hamilton called *The Star Kings*. In that book, the enemies of the Mid-Galactic Empire thousands of years in the future unveiled their ultimate space disrupter weapon only at the end of the story. In this one, the space rotation bomb that can blow a hole in the fabric of the universe, and destroy all life as we know it, is revealed on page 19! And it gets hairier from then on!

Weis and Perrin have produced a book in the same vein as *The Star Kings*: a huge canvas, exciting, absorbing and undemanding to read. The fanatical Knights of the title mount an attempt to kill the King, topple the Galactic government and restore the lost supremacy of the now almost unihabitable Earth. With the Royal Navy thinking that Xris and his stalwart band are the bad guys, it's up them to use their every skill to evade capture and save the Galaxy!

Book 2, *Robot Blues*, was published on the same day as this paperback, so yet another successful series from Weis and her co-authors could be under way.

David Wingrove *Days of Bitter Strength*
NEL, 1996, 662pp, £6.99

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

Late in so long a saga (this is the seventh volume) it is invaluable to have so clear and readable a resumé as the introductory chapter, 'Of Gifts and Stones'. As well as being succinctly chronological, it highlights the metastructure of the epic, its Yin/Yang-like oppositional/complementary ethos – the inwardness of Ben Shepherd's separatist 'Shell' philosophy and, oppositionally, the expansionist "vision of all connecting light", ultimately that of the stars, which energises Kim Ward's metaphoric philosophy of the 'Web'. Kim was the 'Clayborn' boy who, simulating a spider's action, ascended from the lowest level of the multi-tiered World City into the light of Chung Kuo's interface with the universe. In the present novel, "the paranoia of that great World of Levels has been ended", and fleetingly it seems that days of peace might come to Rhineland China. Wingrove's descriptive talent excels in depicting the complex stretching through Darmstadt to Heidelberg, where "the river was a twisting strip of silver" an "further off the pagoda towers of Frankfurt *Hsien* climbed the night sky, bristling with lights". But the megalomaniacal Empress Pei K'ung, desirous of the "old certainties", drags City Europe backwards towards régimes of darkness, opposed by Kim's vision of cosmic bridge-building, an ultimate "web of light" powered by tapping galactic suns.

As things deteriorate on Earth, so the 'spider/ascent' motif becomes dominant. Prefacing Part Two is one of Wingrove's ever-apt quotations – Whitman's 'A Noiseless Patient Spider', the spider there paradigmatic of the human spirit venturing to "explore the vacant vast surrounding". Earth, devastated by plague and anarchy, seems finished, the future resting on human seed-dispersal: a Wellsian theme replayed. The location shifts to a descriptively splendid Ganymede, where a fleet of Jupiter's' moons is readied for take-off (fictively and symbolically affective, if astrophysically extravagant). Earth remains at the mercy (save for guerrilla action) of the evil genius De Vore and his legions of morphs from Pluto.

Wingrove's short, focus-changing episodes create a 'mosaic' rather than a linear narrative, invariably absorbing: not, as TV puts it, edited for violence and sex – the former unpleasantly but realistically brutal, the latter mostly (though again realistically with exceptions) pleasurable. The whole *Chung Kuo* sequence, leading here towards its eighth volume, is a remarkably sustained imaginative achievement.

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Pulp Fiction – Paperback Reviews edited by Tanya Brown