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The Critical
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the BSFA

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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COVER: Olympus Mons, Mars, (picture courtesy Malin Space Science Systems/NASA) in honour of our interview with Kevin J Anderson, one of whose novels is *Climbing Mount Olympus*.

VECTOR

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Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial**The View From the Thirteenth**

I don't sit here all day counting things, although I am counting words an awful lot – in part due to a project where words are limited to cover a large amount of material, in part due to a pile of essays where the 3000 word limit is interpreted as anything between 1500 and 4000. And of course, by the time you have read this, all the zeroes will have racked up in the year, the unpedantic will have proclaimed the new millennium, and someone will have worked out a name for the decade after the nineties. And perhaps the Age of Acquarious that we've been hearing about for thirty years will finally have dawned.

Churches around have been proclaiming Christ's birthday at the millennium, which is odd given that last year it was meant to be on Christmas Day, although if it is two thousand years since his birth (and we are anything up to twelve years late on this one) I suspect he might be entitled to rather more than just one day to celebrate.

The year 2000 is one of those skiffy dates (as well as a Pulp date), which along with 1999 and 2001 means that we are living in science-fictional times: here we are in the future. Neat, isn't it? A world where we can manipulate the genes of crops so that they are herbicide resistant to ward off predators (and presumably those predators won't evolve into better predators) and where, through electronic tagging, we declare the outside world to be a prison and punish criminal scum by forcing them to live with their families and do their jobs. So what have the rest of us done wrong?

But whilst science fiction is at least to some degree about the future – if only as a metaphorical space in which to explore the present – we at *Vector* are always living in the past.

Inevitably, in order to allow reflection, we need the perspective that distance gives: to allow the pattern of a career or a subgenre to fall into shape against the noise of happenstance. Even in our interviews we are tending to look at people well into careers rather than newcomers (although Ken MacLeod has only been published for four or five years, and we have interviewed others with only one or two novels to their credit).

Forgive us then for looking back fifty years to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the British sf scene in the 1950s, as we print a transcription of one of 1999's Eastercon panels, the first in what will hopefully be a series of four transcriptions over the next few issues. The 1960s gets attention in terms of the New Wave, but the 1950s and the 1970s get overlooked in comparison. As the discussion was focussed on a popular vote by *Vector* readers, inevitably we have ignored the obscure, with the discussion centred on Wyndham. In part we are redressing this balance by printing an interview with E. R. James, a name which did not crop up at any part of the debate.

And forgive us for returning to the ongoing battle of the bookshelves, where the wookie books jostle for space with the trilogies and increasingly rare singletons of 'original' sf. My dialogue with Daniel O'Mahony generated more letters than anything else Gary, Tony and I have published in our twenty-five issues to date, included one from Kevin J. Anderson. As a new book is added to an indisputably classic sequence from the past, but this time not by the original author, Gary Dalkin talks to Mr Anderson about *Dune*, wookie books and sharecropping.

Twenty-five issues, eh? Um, that means I've written thirteen editorials. Gosh. I hope I'm not superstitious.

by Andrew M. Butler, 1999**From JDR, via email**

Congratulations to all concerned in the production of *Vector* 208! It was the meatiest and most rewarding issue that I can remember in a very long time. Even your author interview, a type of literary endeavour that I generally find to be boring, stultifying and quite free of meaningful information, was a gem – or maybe that's just because I have a very high regard for Ken MacLeod's work, although there seems to be rather more to my pleasure than that alone. As a crowning glory to the whole thing, there even seemed to be far fewer typos and editorial lapses than usual.

Please keep up the good work. You have a newly-enthused reader.

David Curl, via email

The line that Farah Mendlesohn borrows about the "punk-DIY" of the Green movement is interesting [V208; 'Impermament Revolution: The Anarchic Utopias of Ken MacLeod'] – apparently, Greens "validate computers and faxes, while rejecting the banks and multinational corporations which make

them possible."

Hmmm. Sure, there are Greens who feel this way – and one of them may now be dancing on a burning cop car at a tube station near you. (In a sense, the Green movement is still where socialism was a hundred-odd years ago: young, contradictory, small, misguided violent and conspiratorial sometimes, inchoate). Still, there's rejection and rejection. The first socialists 'rejected' the industrial culture of having to work sixteen hour days in the factory for a pittance, with no union rights; that didn't mean that they rejected industry per se. Likewise with much of the mainstream Green movement. Of course, there are going to be banks and corporations for at least the next couple of decades (though history teaches us that things can change fast – look at the implosion of the 'Communist' system in Eastern Europe ten years ago), but our task is to organise for a change in the political culture, and to bully and cajole these organisations into a concern for the world's peoples and its environment. The world-capitalist culture can be made to change at least as much as the developed world's industrial culture has been changed, as long as we find the will and the commitment to do it. The way to effect this change is, in part, by building up our own parallel organisations, which trade locally, trade fairly, don't create excessive profits for do-nothing shareholders, and so on: at worst we'll only be bearing witness, but at best we'll be the mammals to the banks and the corporations' dinosaurs, so that they'll have to evolve or die. In the end, many Greens still cleave to the utopian (Marxist, in a sense, except that it predates and will post-date Marx) dream of humanity eating the State and the money-system. It seems to me that the Green movement has a more convincing take on how this might happen (if indeed it ever does – but we still have to believe and live as though it might), whereas the socialist groups including the Labour Party have either sold out this

dream (Blairism; Tony's mantra of "good for business, good for business, good for business"; hell, if it is all work work work, it shouldn't be) or are trapped in sterile oppositionist ways of thought and political action, or are starting to dissolve into the Green movement anyhow.

I've greatly enjoyed Ken MacLeod's novels; in fact, reading *The Star Fraction* was an eye-opener in terms of finding out how possible it is to write readable, exciting, thought-provoking, non-parochial political sf with a Brit style and ideas base. I'd say that his novels have influenced my political thinking or that they've reminded me of what I believe: I still believe in space as the next human frontier, but we need to take care of the earth too, and husband its resources. Like, this is a nice planet and if we have to learn to take care of planets and their resources sometime, we may as well learn now: we may have a shard of the infinite buried in us ('God', religious people call this), but even the universe is finite and we have to live with that. Better that it takes us five hundred years to settle another world than fifty if it means that our moral and spiritual development as a species has caught up with our technological development - if we followed the despair-path of some pro-space and/or transhumanity activists, then we could end up either exporting our current sickness and fucked-upness wholesale or else disappearing into psychosis (see 'The Cassini Division'). If I had to make one prediction for the next millennium (yeah, I know: tacky, tacky) it would be that the first group of astronauts to land on an extra-solar planetary system might be either Franciscan nuns, or Zen warriors. Or else not. Shout abuse at me in the year 3000 if something like that doesn't prove to be the case.

Farah Mendlesohn responds: I partially agree with David Curl, certainly that there are many varieties of Greens (although the inconsistencies I come across in Green ideologies are legion). However, the editors of *Vector* wouldn't let me have another couple of thousand words or so to cover this argument!

Gary S. Dalkin (Former Green Party committee member and election agent, and Greenpeace committee member and publicity officer) responds: *I think David Curl's humanist optimism is misplaced. There is no evidence that we will ever be in a position where "our moral and spiritual development as a species has caught up with our technological development." As for the Green movement, I knew the battle was lost the moment I saw the cover of the Radio Times advertising a*

competition to "win a green car". The term 'green' has for a decade now been diluted by the media and politicians of all persuasions to the extent that it years ago lost any serious political or, even environmental, meaning.

From Syd Foster, Swansea:

When I opened the latest edition of *Vector* (#208) I was disappointed to see two blank pages: page 7, and its other half page 34. Could I have a replacement copy please? I have been unable to refrain from reading some of the Ken MacLeod interview, which is of course interrupted by the blank page, and I am eager to be able to read it properly.

What about an interview with/feature on Tricia Sullivan? I absolutely loved *Someone to Watch Over Me* when I read it earlier this year (her writing is spontaneous and very poetically effective in places, riffing on atmosphere and mindflow, something I love, since I believe plot is sometimes given too much respect as the main component of a good novel: we need character, and we need the pleasure of the writer in his craft! This last is sometimes called 'voice'. It's the arena of direct connection between the creativity of the writer and the creativity of the reader.) I also liked *Dreaming in Smoke* despite Tricia's own claim that she thought the book "hard to like". I also found the ending satisfying. I hope she continues to be her own writer, and doesn't get bent into more 'traditionally' commercial form by editors/agents/critics/fans!

Andrew M. Butler responds: *We apologise for the misprinted magazine; these things happen occasionally I'm afraid. I hope you enjoy the rest of the interview when you get it. We'll think about running something on Sullivan – I confess to finding *Dreaming in Smoke* to be baffling, and much the least interesting of the Clarke nominees. But then *Someone to Watch Over Me* took a couple of reads to sink in. If anyone wants to write about this author, then please get in touch. In the meantime, dig into the archives and take a look at Ian J. Simpson's article on Nicola Griffith and Tricia Sullivan: 'Women Who Watch' (Vector 198, March/April 1998).*

Letters to *Vector* should be sent to Gary Dalkin, 5 Lydford Road, Bournemouth, BN11 8SN or emailed to ambutler@enterprise.net and marked 'For publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.

TWO YEARS AGO WE CONDUCTED A POLL TO DISCOVER WHAT, ACCORDING TO THE READERS OF VECTOR, WERE THE BEST BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS OF THE LAST FIFTY YEARS. THE RESULTS APPEARED IN VECTOR 201. AT EASTERCON 1999 THE BSFA HELD A NUMBER OF PANELS TO DISCUSS THE RESULTS AND THE MERITS OF THE CHOSEN NOVELS. THE FOLLOWING PIECE IS AN EDITED AND REVISED TRANSCRIPT OF THE FIRST OF THESE PANELS.

The Best of British #1: The 1950s

Andrew M. Butler: I broke the results of the poll down by decade, and the three books that formed the top three for the 1950s were Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End* (1953), John Wyndham, *The Day Of The Triffids* (1951) and John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957). Now I know both of you are particularly interested in Wyndham so we'll concentrate on him, but perhaps we need to start by asking what British sf was like in the 1950s.

Andy Sawyer: I remember *Journey into Space*, the *Eagle* and Dan Dare, but written science fiction I didn't come across until quite later. To begin with you had all these people who had started off writing science fiction before the War, coming back, but things are different because there's been this bloody great big war. There's a certain amount of confusion and trying to find your way into a theme. The three books that came so high in the poll seem to me to be very much informed by the

Second World War and the uncertainties of the Cold War.

AMB: Was it the war in general, or the endgame of the war with the atom bomb and subsequent Cold War which most informed the sf? That sense of the end of the world.

AS: One of the things that I discovered in re-reading or re-listening to the 1950s material was how much we are still telling their stories. Hearing *Journey into Space* again, what struck me most, aside from the idea of a British space programme and the chirpy Cockney sparrow characters, was the very strong environmental message, which you might think that science fiction cottoned onto in the late 1960s. Certainly in *Childhood's End* there's a peculiar tension between apotheosis and the spiritual element and the aliens from outer space elements. There's a lot of ambiguity about what exactly caused the disaster in *The Day of the Triffids*, and more so in *The Midwich Cuckoos*. We know it's a UFO, but we don't actually know the identity of these aliens.

AMB: In *Triffids* there's an explanation which is offered, which seems to be a cover story, that it's comets in the sky which coincide with the escape of the Triffids from the plantations in which they're cultivated, but there's also a hint that it's the break-up of spy satellites?

Maureen Kincaid Speller: I think there's a scene where Bill Masen is speculating that it was something to do with a satellite, and he's not clear whose satellite it was, although there's a strong suspicion that it was a Communist one rather than a Western one. But it's all very fuzzy, especially because we don't know what the Triffids are and whether there's some connection with the satellites or comets. It's left extraordinarily ambiguous.

AMB: There's always the feeling that in good science fiction that there should only be one thing different from our world, but the criticism levelled against *Day of the Triffids* is that there are two things different: the aggressive plants and the blindness. Each of those things in isolation probably would not make a novel.

MKS: You could probably make a so-so novel with either of them, and it appears to be an unhappy coincidence, but at the same time it reinforces the idea that the Triffids are actually more intelligent than humans have assumed, that they have an awareness of what is going on and they are able to seize the moment and act upon it. But it remains a mystery: what is it that is going on. You never really get to understand the Triffids, if only because there is no way of communicating with them.

AS: We know that Triffids come out of Russia, that they're genetically engineered, but the original *Collier's* story suggests that they come from Venus.

AMB: Which is quite a difference since it moves it from being invasion from outer space to being cold war.

MKS: That strikes me as being a rather American idea for science fiction than a kind of British notion of the enemy within. I've discussed this with Paul Kincaid over the years; he sees that in American science fiction the threat comes from outside, or the Americans get into their rocketships and head off into the universe, whereas in British science fiction the menace or threat is in the landscape around us, and the exploration is much more interior.

AS: One of the ideas that comes out of all three of these books is that our society is made up of a set of collective, well, not so much illusions as conventions, and once this is pointed out,

whether it's because we've had a fairly major catastrophe, a war or the possibility of nuclear war on the horizon, or simply because of the great political changes after the Second World War, with a Labour government, we're left with the feeling that social world we're living in is not something which has been passed down to us and will continue. Major political and social change is a very unsettling and uneasy process. Masen goes around in *Triffids* and sees a number of societies based on religion, humanitarianism, or feudal militarism, and in *Midwich* you have a conflict between one kind of social organisation, us, and another, the children.

There's a Wyndham short story, almost a squib, called 'Confidence Trick', in which a tube train of ordinary commuters ends up in hell. It's a very tacky hell, full of adverts for first aid kits and ointments and so on, there are two main characters, one a very conservative, reactionary old duffer and the other a young man who is very sceptical, whose attitude to being in hell is that he doesn't believe in it. His scepticism is such that with a puff it disappears and it's back to the surface by tube again. Then you see him looking up very thoughtfully at the Bank of England, and he gets as far as "I don't—" when the reactionary old duffer rescues the bank by pushing him under a bus. Just a few pieces of the wall tumble down. The idea is that all of these institutions from heaven and hell to 'safe as the Bank of England' are shared conventions. Wyndham is exploring the very personal relationships we have with some of the institutions that make up our social lives.

AMB: Over the last fifty years one of the key things is that money has become an illusion, with cyberspace being the place where banks keep your money, or more likely your overdraft. Money has always been an illusion, we've always assigned relatively arbitrary values to certain things, but now we're in the age of credit and confidence rather than of a gold standard. To see Wyndham glimpsing that during the 1950s is quite striking.

Just before the period we're interested in here we've got a major dismantling of the British Empire, the granting of independence to India and Pakistan, the setting up of an Israeli state where previous had been Palestine. There's the end of the Empire on which the Sun Never Sets and we're down to relatively insignificant places like the Falklands and Gibraltar.

There's the sense, in Germany and elsewhere, that the American presence in Europe is going to continue. At home there's the setting up of the welfare state in a form that we more or less recognise today. There's the sense of a new society being set up, presumably a very fragile and bewildered one.

Wyndham gets dismissed as the writer of "cosy catastrophes", which seems to be taken to mean that the end of the world is a late train or a missed issue of the evening newspaper. He's a writer who is seen as safe, especially

when he gets set for O-Level or GCSE examinations, and is accepted by the mainstream as proper writing, but in an article in *Foundation* by Rowland Wymer and in Maureen's article in *Banana Wings* that reputation is being challenged.

MKS: It struck me that Wyndham was one of those writers who we all assume we've read and are very familiar with, probably as children. Reading him as an adult I realised that he was proposing situations that were anything but cosy, with no great happy-ever-after. For me a cosy catastrophe rather implies that there's a problem, it gets sorted out and everyone goes home for tea. I found that it was actually rather different: his *Day of the Triffids* was astonishingly bleak, numerous people commit suicide as a premeditated act because they realise that they cannot function in a world where practically everyone is blind, and whatever is going to happen, there are

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ambiguity about
what exactly
caused the disaster
in *The Day of the
Triffids***

not enough sighted people to look after them. Not only do they take their own lives, but they take the lives of those that they love because they know what is going to happen. I was horrified by the pictures that he paints of a society that disintegrates the moment that people can't see. It's extraordinary the idea of setting that for O-Level; I have visions of hundreds of traumatised teenagers, trying to deal with it. It was frightening but it showed that all it took was one thing, one gentle push and society starts to fall apart.

The Midwich Cuckoos I thought was even more interesting and more subtle. You've got a very traditional, conservative society as embodied in the classic English village – very staid, very well-organised, hierarchical society – and then you see what happens when suddenly all of the women in the village become pregnant, from the young girl who hasn't done anything at all to her mother, to a lesbian couple – one finds she's pregnant. Wyndham was handling a subject that was extraordinary sensitive at the time, a time when young women who become pregnant out of wedlock are rushed off to unmarried mothers' homes, and their children put up for adoption. To create a novel where all kinds of women are pregnant, in all sorts of societal conditions, was an incredibly bold thing to do. It seemed to me that that was a very subversive message to be putting forward in 1957. I was very surprised that he felt willing to take on the norms of society and test them; and that's before you get onto the fact that these are not actually children as we'd understand them.

AMB: And this being published by Michael Joseph and Penguin books is being given a stamp of approval rather than being hidden away in a genre ghetto.

AS: I think we're kind of misled by the term 'cosy' here; someone pointed out to me that 'cosy' could just mean 'domestic'. If you take that on board then many of Wyndham's stories, as well as those by many other British writers, are focused on small groups, families. Ballard's achievement is perhaps that he widened this out so that it's no longer focused on the individual.

MKS: I wonder if one of the reasons that Wyndham survives is that you can read it with your own set of prejudices: you can comfort yourself with the thought that they can escape to the Isle of Wight and self-sufficiency or you can think "Oh my god, the world's coming to end, how are they going to survive?" It supports whatever you want it to support.

AMB: So it could be a utopian, back-to-basics, *The Good Life* situation, with Tom and Barbara going off to the Isle of Wight...

AS: I'm still not certain how deliberate a lot of this is, because if you look at some of the other stuff, which does seem to be domestic and really not very challenging, and then there are these which do have this very powerful impact when you realise what's going on under the surface. I sometime wonder if he wasn't overwhelmed by what he was writing, and that he was forced by his material to explore what this image was about.

AMB: In *The Chrysalids* you've got this logical development from those who are different being treated as outcasts and less than human, to an liberation movement along the lines of "We are human too", to a closing vision of separatism and genocide of what was previous thought of as the norm. In order to escape, the heroes have to massacre their own families. That's a shift which virtually all minorities seem to travel through, whether it be racial or sexual or whatever: outcast, recognition, separatism. For a white, middle class man to be able to see this is extraordinary.

AS: If you think how Wyndham sees himself in a Wellsian tradition, well, there's Wells the writer and Wells the political activist. But that doesn't seem to be part of his image.

AMB: Do we know anything about his political beliefs?

AS: Not really; obviously he thought that the country was going to the dogs, but then so did a lot of people on the left and the right. He lived at the PEN club for many years, which suggests he was broadly speaking on the left. But you have to see that Wyndham did make the decision that he was going to go for being a popular writer, rather than being part of the genre ghetto.

AMB: That was a deliberate change during the war or coming back from it?

AS: There was a stylistic change, or he felt it was. But one of the problems of going for that amorphous, middle-class audience is how do you pitch the discussion. I don't think there was an attempt to become a political writer. I think it was a matter of how to make a living after the war. He had also written detective fiction, a fairly typical sort of detective fiction of the 1930s, but there is nothing to suggest that he might have made a great writer of that genre. There's some stuff of interest in terms of social viewpoints.

AMB: Of course the classic English detective story in the Christie mould is based around the country village that would be disrupted by a murder happening in the heart of a conservative, Church of England, community. Although I don't think that he was necessarily writing that type of crime fiction.

AS: One of the things that he was attacking in *Triffids* was the domestic romance, women's magazine kind of story, in his depiction of women, where say Coker really goes at a young woman who says that women aren't interested in engines: "You know perfectly well that women can and do – or rather did – handle the most complicated and delicate machines when they took the trouble to understand them. What generally happens is that they're too lazy to take the trouble unless they have to [...] Men have played up to it by stoutly repairing the poor darling's vacuum cleaner, and capably replacing the blown fuse" (Ch. 11).

In 'Consider Her Ways' he's very much attacking this point of view through Laura, the future historian, who analyses our present in terms of betrayal of the emancipatory ideals of the earlier part of our century and the commercial idea of romance as something to be sold to keep people quiet – although we're not meant to see her future as any sort of utopian alternative.

MKS: It seems to me that Josella, in *The Day of the Triffids*, is just marking time until the problems start, because she's then actually got something that she can do rather than be stuck at home with mother and father. She's written a novel, but she's obviously been waiting because this is her moment, this is her chance to do the practical stuff, because there's been no way she could do anything in the past other than run the house for her elderly parents. She's released by the collapse of society, and can then shape it to her own needs.

In *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) you've got this woman who's clearly confident, clearly the better writer, the one who has the journalist's instinct to grab, suddenly has to send her husband in because they aren't going to pay any attention to her. At certain points in the narrative she has to flutter her eyelashes at them, and she's doing it quite cynically, to get the information. At the end it's revealed that all along she has realised that they will end up together back in the cottage in Cornwall, where's she's stored some food; okay, it's a very domestic practicality, but she's thought about it and made contingency plans. The husband's been running around doing the writing stuff, but hasn't actually thought about what will happen after that.

Again there's a dichotomy: on the one hand Wyndham's pushing forward the notion that women are very powerful and competent people, but they do it quite gently.

There are portions of *The Kraken Wakes* that I'm quite ambivalent about. Still the male character has a moment of weakness, he suffers a breakdown from the experience of seeing the Xenobaths attacking the village, but he's not willing to let on about how he's suffering.

AMB: He's still got a stiff upper lip?

MKS: Yes, but it's starting to break down. There's a suggestion that there is another way. It's a bit like laying out the ideas as bait and seeing if anyone will pick them up, whilst holding back from fully exploring them.

AMB: One of the things that Andy mentioned earlier that I'd like to pick up on, is Wyndham's debt to Wells. One of the things that they have in common is that they write about evolution, and that there's a downside to evolution in terms of the survival of the fittest as to what happens to those who don't survive. Wyndham sometimes is suggesting that in order for the fit to survive they have to wipe out the unfit. And of course warning that although we are top dogs now, there will be things that will try to topple us. I suspect that is part of a British tradition of uncertainty and the sense of an ending.

AS: Clarke can be seen as part of an American tradition, but I'm not convinced that applies to *Childhood's End*. Clarke perhaps straddles the two. There's a lot of the English anxieties in there.

MKS: That whole way humanity is consumed at the end of *Childhood's End*, I get the same feeling every time I read the ending of *The Time Machine*. He describes the heat death of the universe, and every time I read it I get this sense, okay, far into the future, that it's going to happen and that there's absolutely nothing I can do about it. I won't witness it, but there's a terrible poignancy about it, the same poignancy about the end of humanity in *Childhood's End*.

AS: But there's also the sense in *Childhood's End* of "Whose side are you on?"

The novel can be read as a great apotheosis, but you sometimes want to cynically sit back and say, "Hang on a minute, what are these Overlords actually getting out of this?"

AMB: I see we're running out of time. We're talking about endings, so to close, what would your favourite novel of the 1950s have been?

MKS: It would have been a Wyndham, certainly, and I think *The Day of the Triffids*, because to me it has the most solidly realised society and what happens to it if something goes wrong.

AS: I think it would probably have been *The Midwich Cuckoos*, but that may simply be because it was a book I read quite early. It was one I found quite chilling, and still do.

AMB: I think for me, again on the principle of the one that got to me first in the Michael Joseph/Octopus omnibus of a number of his works, *The Day of the Triffids*.

In the next of these panels, we'll be talking about the 1960s, but I'd like to give thanks to this panel for all their contributions.

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Maureen Kincaid Speller, former administrator of the BSFA, wrote an article on John Wyndham for *Banana Wings* # 11. Andy Sawyer, librarian of the Science Fiction Foundation, was the curator of an exhibition *Return to the Triffids*.

IN JUST OVER A DECADE THE AMERICAN AUTHOR KEVIN J. ANDERSON HAS PUBLISHED MORE THAN 50 BOOKS. BALANCING HIS OWN ORIGINAL WORKS WITH COLLABORATIONS WITH OTHER AUTHORS AND NOVELS TIED TO STAR WARS AND THE X FILES, HE HAS BECOME ONE OF THE BEST KNOWN AND PROBABLY THE BEST SELLING SF WRITER IN THE WORLD. HIS MOST RECENT NOVEL, HOUSE ATREIDES, WRITTEN WITH BRIAN HERBERT, MARKS THE BEGINNING OF AN AMBITIOUS PROJECT TO CONTINUE THE DUNE CHRONICLES LEFT UNCOMPLETED ON THE DEATH OF THE ORIGINAL DUNE CREATOR, FRANK HERBERT.

Inheritor of *Dune*

An email interview with Kevin J. Anderson by Gary S. Dalkin

Gary S Dalkin: I know that you were very influenced by seeing *The War of the Worlds* film on TV when you were five, and that you first read *Dune* when you were ten, which you cite as your favourite novel, but what made you so determined to become a SF writer? You certainly must have been phenomenally determined, because on your web site you say that you've a collection of 750 rejection slips – which incidentally, given your eventual success, is a terrific inspiration to any unpublished writer to just keep on writing.

Kevin J Anderson: In my office I have a trophy that says "The Writer with No Future" because at a writing conference I was able to produce more rejection slips by weight than any other author in attendance. (Which kind of goes to show you how much some awards are worth!) Sure, I'm very successful now, but it took me about twenty years of non-stop writing and submitting to become an 'overnight success.'

I'm a very driven, goal-oriented person. I made up my mind I wanted to be a writer when I was five, and I never budged from that goal. I love telling stories, inventing characters and scenarios, playing with the tapestry of the plot. At one time, early on, I had 30 different short stories in the mail at once; I

got a lot of them published in small press magazines, which gave me just enough confidence to keep writing, keep practising, keep improving my craft. It wasn't until I finally began to tackle novels, however, that I really hit my stride.

GSD: *Dune* has been very important to you long before you became professionally involved with the *Dune* chronicles. Can you remember the impact the book had on you the first time you read it? How did your understanding of the novel change as you re-read it at various times as you got older, and, and how has that book, and others by Frank Herbert, influenced you as a writer?

KJA: *Dune* is so fabulous because you can read it on many different levels. When I read it at the age of ten or eleven, I saw an incredible adventure story on an amazing world (and I knew I didn't really understand all the politics). Upon repeated readings, I began to unravel the vast implications, the ecological underpinnings, the complexities of the politics. From the very beginning, though, *Dune* showed me the true 'majesty' that science fiction could be – this book does everything the genre can do.

I studied all of Frank Herbert's works, all of the *Dune* books and all of his other books. I found it fascinating how he laid down wheels within wheels, plots within plots. It awed me how his characters were so *smart* that they could predict how other people would react several steps down the line. This came from an intense understanding of human nature, much better than the purely mathematical psychohistory (and oh so purely Asimovian!).

Many of my original novels, particularly *Resurrection, Inc.*, *Blindfold*, and *Climbing Olympus* are heavily influenced by Herbert's plotting. In fact, as soon as I sold my first novel, I managed to track down Frank Herbert's home address and had promised myself that I would send him the first copy of my first book – but Frank died between the time I sold the novel and before it could be published.

GSD: Clearly you have written so many books in just over a decade that we couldn't discuss them all, but I wondering how you feel about your earliest titles. *Resurrection Inc.* has just had its tenth anniversary edition, which indicates a healthy level of popularity. How well do you feel that book, and say the Gamearth trilogy stand-up compared to the way you write now?

KJA: *Resurrection, Inc.* is still one of my favorites – in fact, *Res. Inc.*, as well as *Climbing Olympus* and *Blindfold* (which are my three very best solo novels), were just released in UK paperback editions from HarperCollins, so they are available to British readers at last. HarperCollins is my *X-Files* publisher, and they decided to try to catch some of my crossover readers... so far, it has worked quite nicely; my sales in England of these three titles are about as high as they were on the books' original release here in the U.S.

The Gamearth trilogy is awfully hard to find these days, as it's been out of print for some time. It is a fun adventure with some interesting quirks, the kind of thing my *Star Wars* readers would really love, but I could not get any publisher to reprint it. Maybe someday...

As a writer, you must always strive to improve what you're doing. Thus, in a way, it's rather (unintentionally) insulting for someone to say "Your first novel was the best," implying that a writer hasn't learned anything in years of producing novels. My new solo novel, *Hopscotch* (which Bantam will be publishing here in a year or two), is a book I've wanted to write for decades, but I was simply incapable of handling such a huge topic before. I don't think I could have written anything as complex as our new *Dune* novels without years of stretching my creative muscles.

The best part about gathering a larger readership is that publishers sometimes do bring your old work back into print. I'm still proud of my early novels and I hope to get more people to pick them up.

GSD: As you say, you had to stretch your creative muscles as a writer for years to develop to the stage where you could take on something as complex as the new *Dune* novel. Now *Prelude To Dune* is being written in collaboration with Frank Herbert's son, Brian, himself a well-respected SF writer. But this isn't the first time you've worked in collaboration, in fact you've written a lot this way. Starting with *Lifeline* in 1990 (and including *Virtual Destruction*, *Ignition* and *The Trinity Paradox*) you've written quite a few novels with Doug Beason. How does your writing relationship work, and how does what you write with Doug differ from your solo novels?

KJA: The old cliché says "two heads are better than one" and especially in an ambitious, highly technical project, it is an advantage to have two sets of expertise to check each other and add information. Doug Beason is a respected PhD physicist and a Colonel in the Air Force; his background has a lot of things in it that I don't have, and between the two of us we can write a novel much richer and more complex than

either of us could do alone. That's the point of collaborating. I have also written 16 books with my wife, Rebecca Moesta, a series set in the *Star Wars* universe which just won the Golden Duck award for excellence in science fiction for younger readers. You have to learn how to check your ego at the door, do what's best for the current project. Brian Herbert is wonderfully easy to work with – we both have such a great respect for *Dune* that we are rather intimidated to be working in it, and we make certain each of us does the very best work possible. In a collaboration, even though we each write only half of the chapters, we rewrite each other's work so many times that the end result is seamless.

GSD: Mention of writing with your wife leads quite nicely to one of the major developments in your career. It says about you on your web site that "After he had published ten of his own science fiction novels to wide critical acclaim, he came to the attention of Lucasfilm, and was offered the chance at writing *Star Wars* novels." Just how did this come about? This was the first time you had worked in someone else's already established science-fictional 'universe'. How much of a challenge was that, and did you feel a lot of pressure, one the one hand that a million critical *Star Wars* fans might be waiting to pounce on every detail, and perhaps on the other that some of your existing readers might feel you were 'selling out'?

KJA: Because I had worked well with my editor at Bantam on my original novels (i.e., turning them in on time, listening to revision suggestions, not arguing about tiny details), she thought I might be a good author to work with Lucasfilm; she sent them some of my novels, all without my knowledge. I got a phone call as a complete surprise, asking if I'd like to write three sequels to *Star Wars*. I love *Star Wars* very much, and I think it did more than anything to drag science fiction into mainstream popularity, so I readily agreed. It was an exciting project for me, both creatively and in terms of sales.

For me, it was never a question of 'selling out' because I never stopped writing my original novels, and the vast fan base for my *Star Wars* books only got me new crossover readers for my own novels. (Anybody who claims there are no crossover readers simply doesn't know what he is talking about. Period.) It is a win-win situation.

I know there are some 'snobs' out there who think that by turning away an entire generation of new readers, they are somehow protecting our sacred genre. In an earlier issue of *Vector*, Norman Spinrad made some disparaging comments about media books and even cited me specifically by name, that once I started writing media novels the field has "lost me." It's nice to have an opinion, but *facts* make for a stronger argument. Since my first *Star Wars* book came out in 1994, my novel *Assemblers Of Infinity* (with Doug Beason) appeared on the final Nebula ballot, my novel *Climbing Olympus* was on the preliminary Nebula ballot and was voted the best paperback science fiction novel of the year by the readers of *Locus*. *Blindfold* was also a preliminary Nebula nominee; my novels *Ill Wind* and *Ignition* (both with Beason) were optioned and sold, respectively, for Hollywood films; Doug and I also wrote three high-tech SF mysteries, *Virtual Destruction*, *Fallout*, and *Lethal Exposure*. I have completed the 650-page *Hopscotch* and another big, ambitious 'on spec' project. It is a 'fantastic historical' novel, the life story of Captain Nemo (titled, appropriately, *Nemo*) – which postulates that Jules Verne and Nemo were boyhood friends; Nemo went off and had numerous fantastical adventures, while Verne stayed home to write about them. I've worked for two years researching and developing this book, and I have had an immensely good time. It's out to publishers right now.

With all those titles, how can anybody say the field has "lost me"? Sheesh! After reading Spinrad's comments in *Vector*, I sent him a package with all the books I'd published since I supposedly left the field... but he never responded.

The other thing the snobs don't seem to consider is that I may actually *like* writing *Star Wars* or *X-Files* books. I enjoy the movies very much and I am still enough of a fan at heart that I think it's really cool to meet with George Lucas, or Ralph McQuarrie, or Chris Carter. I spend a great deal of time and effort on my media books and I think they are all damn fine novels in their own right – I have to do that, because if I ever expect my media fans to read my other novels, I must give them what they are looking for. I think I've done it, too – my first two *X-Files* novels won, two years in a row, the *SFX* magazine readers poll for best novels of the year (beating out Kim Stanley Robinson, Neil Gaiman, and Terry Pratchett); my third *XF* novel was the first media book *ever* to make it on the preliminary Bram Stoker Award ballot. My *Star Wars* novels are often cited as among the best of a very large number of titles. I enjoy writing in my favorite universes (how is it different from writing an episode of a TV show?), and I enjoy writing my original novels. So I do both. For me, it's the best of both worlds.

GSD: That's a good point, about how writing media novels is really no different to writing an episode of a TV show. No one took Stephen King or William Gibson to task for writing episodes of *The X-Files* (well, maybe over the quality of the finished episodes themselves) but not over the actual idea of doing so in the first place. I was wondering, therefore, have you ever thought of, or been approached to, write a teleplay or screenplay? Would you ever do so? And, have you finished writing *X-Files* novels now, or will there be more in the future, or perhaps other projects with the show's creator, Chris Carter?

KJA: At one time or other, *every* writer has thought about writing screenplays, but it is really a different art form, with different requirements and different constraints. I am good at writing novels and short stories; to start over with scripts would be like becoming a beginner all again. It would be like asking a good heart surgeon to do a brain operation – similar skills, but a different expertise. I would, however, like to see some of my work brought to the medium of film. Keep your fingers crossed.

At the moment, with three *X-Files* novels under my belt and six comics, I don't have anything more in the works for them... however, with the *Dune* projects, plus a sequel to *Fantastic Voyage*, two novels based on the new Fox movie *Titan A.E.*, and a couple of original novels in the works, I don't really have time to take on anything new.

GSD: No, that's quite a schedule to fill, but just for the record, and before we move on to talk about *Dune*, why two novels based on *Titan A.E.*? That seems an unusual move give the relatively small amount of story material in a movie compared to even an average length book? Does this mean you've been given the freedom to create a lot of back-story?

KJA: The *Titan A.E.* books are rather short, on the level of the Young Jedi Knights novels, and we were asked to write the back story of the two main characters, one novel for each. The movie is fun (we've seen the rough-cut of it), and the Fox people are wonderful to work with, giving us as much freedom as we could ask for. After finishing the Young Jedi series, Rebecca and I wanted to keep our toes in the Young Adult publishing arena, and this seemed the best project for now.

GSD: So we'll wait for the *Titan A.E.* movie for now. If we could move on to talk about *Dune*? Now that it's happened, it seems almost inevitable that you should eventually become involved with the *Dune* chronicles. It's also rather nicely circular, given how both your own writing and the *Star Wars* saga has been so influenced by the *Dune* books, that by writing for both you finally make a tangible link between the most successful SF film series ever, and the genre's best selling novels. Could you explain how you came to be involved in working with Brian Herbert on the continuation of the *Dune* chronicles?

KJA: You're absolutely right – it is very nicely circular. Back when I was a kid, I knew I wanted to be a writer... and as soon as I read *Dune*, I knew that *this* was the kind of book I wanted to write. I eagerly read and reread all six of the *Dune* chronicles, and enjoyed all of them. After Frank Herbert's death in 1986, I had kept waiting for his son Brian (an accomplished writer in his own right) to complete the story. But in the meantime I went on to publish many of my own novels; my original work received great critical recognition and awards nominations, while my *Star Wars* and *X-Files* work taught me how to live inside another person's universe and tell my own stories there. I had enough credentials that I knew Brian wouldn't laugh at me if I *asked*...

It turns out that Brian had been pondering doing other *Dune* novels, since he and his father had discussed writing more *Dune* books together, and since Frank Herbert himself had certainly intended to finish the story. When Brian and I first talked, we hit it off immediately and demonstrated our equal passion for the *Dune* universe. From the moment we began discussing the possibility, the project seemed to be guaranteed. Once we had opened the door, we couldn't *not* do it.

GSD: So once you'd got to that stage, how did you decide what story to tell, given that you haven't chosen, yet, to finish the chronicle Frank Herbert left unresolved at the end of the sixth novel in the series, *Chapter House Dune*?

KJA: Ironically, while I was very much hoping to know the end of the *Dune* saga (either to *read* it as a fan, or to help write it, if that's what it took), Brian had been contemplating telling the beginning – the very beginning, all the way back to the Butlerian Jihad, ten thousand or so years before the events in *Dune*. After we started talking, however, we realized that we had to be considerate to the readers: this would be the first new *Dune* fiction published in 13 years. While *Heretics of Dune* and *Chapterhouse* sold millions of copies, the first *Dune* novel remained everybody's favorite. If we suddenly picked up the story with Book 7, after all this time, we would be confusing a lot of readers. On the other hand, if we went all the way back to the Butlerian Jihad, which is set in a time before the spice was discovered, before the Fremens settled on the desert planet, etc., we would be writing a *Dune* novel that didn't have any 'Dune' in it!

We chose to tell the immediate prequel, the love story of Duke Leto and Lady Jessica, their battles with the Baron Harkonnen, how the Planetologist Kynes is assigned to Arrakis to study the origins of the spice, how Crown Prince Shaddam takes the throne. This story, we felt, was something that *all Dune* fans could enjoy. With reawakened interest in the *Dune* chronicles, we now have many more options ahead of us.

GSD: First I should add that I found *House Atreides* to be particularly gripping. It made me want to find out what happened next, such that I read the last 150 pages more or less straight through in an afternoon and evening. It's not often I do that with a new SF novel. We know that this is the first of a new trilogy, to continue with *House Harkonnen* and conclude with *The Spice War*, which presumably will take events up to the opening of the original *Dune*. Again there is a parallel with *Star Wars* and the new trilogy of films beginning with *The Phantom Menace*, but your mention of having many more options ahead: will you and Brian Herbert eventually go back to the Butlerian Jihad, and perhaps later still continue beyond the point at which Frank Herbert left off?

KJA: Due to many discussions with *Dune* fans, Brian and I have decided to call the third book in the trilogy *House Corrino*, instead of *The Spice War*. We are now plotting Book 3 whilst on our book signing tour around the US. If everything rolls smoothly, we will be delivering the manuscript for *House*

Corrino in about a year, just in time for the publication of *House Harkonnen*.

Brian and I are discussing a few other possibilities beyond these first three novels. Of greatest interest is probably the Butlerian Jihad saga, but there are also stories about the formation of the great schools (Mentats, Bene Gesserit, Spacing Guild) as well as the slavery of the Fremen and how they came to settle on the desolate desert planet. Naturally, we want to write *Dune 7*, since we have Frank Herbert's complete outline to end the story, but that project will likely come closer to the end.

GSD: So clearly you could be writing *Dune* books for a long time to come. I would imagine that each collaboration with a different writer tends to work differently, and of course, Brian Herbert was an established SF novelist before you began writing together. Given that, how does this particular collaboration work in terms of the actual writing process, and if there is a disagreement how do you work it out?

KJA: Everybody always asks that question, so sooner or later we're going to have to manufacture a disagreement in order to find out... When Brian and I work together, we brainstorm the story from start to finish (and keep talking all the way through the writing process), so that we share the same 'vision' for the book. Rule #1 in collaborating is that you check your ego at the door; you are both trying to get the best novel possible. We each have particular strengths in writing – Brian is better at philosophy and religion, I'm better at plotting and action sequences, he's better at juggling a million diverse details and keeping them all straight, I'm better in the science department. We defer to the other person in certain areas, but it is all a give and take process. What emerges at the end of the writing efforts is better than either of us could do individually.

GSD: So does this mean once you have agreed on the story, that you decide between you who will write each particular sequence, then when you've written a section hand it over to the other for any comments and revisions or improvements, etc? Certainly *House Atreides* appeared seamless to me, I couldn't begin to guess who wrote what.

KJA: That's basically how it goes. *House Atreides* went through eleven drafts, and *House Harkonnen* is now on its eighth. Our writing styles are somewhat similar in the first place, but after so many edits, I will clean up anything that doesn't 'sound' like me, and Brian does the same. By the time we're finished, the style should be fairly seamless.

GSD: We're coming to the end of the interview now, and I think hopefully we have a fairly good understanding of the creative processes that go into your books. I'd just like to ask, given that you're still a comparatively young writer, yet have already achieved so much, do you have any particular ambitions left? Do you have a dream project, or more challenges set aside for the future?

KJA: As for a "dream project" – *Dune* has already filled that bill. There is nothing that I would ever have wanted more, and I am exhilarated to be working with Brian on it, and I hope we have many more *Dune* projects ahead of us.

I really love writing, and I love telling stories. I think if I ever slowed down to one book per year, I would go nuts. Because of my success in other areas, I am able to fit in original projects of my own, novels that I have the freedom to tackle, regardless of any market considerations. I just finished my Captain Nemo novel, and I have ambitions to write other 'fantastic histories'. My SF novel *Hopscotch* is the kind of science fiction I would love to write, and will no doubt fit a few more of those in. I like to do different things. This is the best job in the world.

GSD: Kevin J. Anderson, thank you very much.

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BACK IN VECTOR 206, WE PUBLISHED 'MIRRORS, DOUBLES, TWINS: PATTERNS IN THE FICTION OF CHRISTOPHER PRIEST: 1: IN THE DREAMTIME' AND AN INTERVIEW WITH PRIEST CONDUCTED BY PAUL, ENDING THE ARTICLE WITH A PROMISE OF A SECOND PART. SINCE THEN PAUL HAS BEEN AROUND THE WORLD ON HIS DUFF TRIP, AND WAS UNDERSTANDABLY DELAYED IN GETTING THAT SECOND PART TO US. WE HOPE YOU AGREE IT WAS WORTH THE WAIT...

MIRRORS, DOUBLES, TWINS – Patterns in the fiction of Christopher Priest

by Paul Kincaid

2: IN THE REALTIME

Grey was a practical man, trained to use eye and hand. His vocation was with visual images, deliberately lit, carefully photographed. What he saw he believed in; what he could not see was not there.¹

By the time he wrote *The Affirmation* (1981), Christopher Priest had already exhausted the possibilities of the Dream Archipelago, and indeed destroyed the archipelago as a potential setting for any further fiction in that novel. The world of dream and the world of reality moved steadily closer within the book until they became one, and the identification of the Dream Archipelago with the psychology of Peter Sinclair made it impossible to return to the islands as any sort of objective reality. But though he abandoned dream as the location for his

secondary world, Priest did not abandon the secondary world. In fact the novels he has written since *The Affirmation* have examined the secondary world, the fluid movement between parallel realities, the way the world is mirrored and refracted, more thoroughly and more obsessively than ever.

The two novels he wrote after *The Affirmation*, *The Glamour* (1984, revised 1996) and *The Quiet Woman* (1990), are in their various ways perhaps the most troublesome of his career. *The Glamour* has been reworked consistently so that the first three editions of the book (Cape 1984, Doubleday 1985 and Abacus 1985) each contain significant differences, and a thoroughly re-worked revised edition appeared in 1996. While Priest himself has said of *The Quiet Woman*, "I don't feel very strongly about it. I don't like it myself."² There are external reasons enough for this. Of *The Glamour* Priest said it

¹ *The Glamour* (London: Cape, 1984, revised edition London: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 267. All subsequent quotations from this book will be marked in the text thus: (G. 267).

² 'Throwing Away the Orthodoxy', interview with Christopher Priest by Paul Kincaid, *Vector* 206, July/August 1999, 5.

“is unendable. It’s not a plot, *The Glamour* is a set-up, it explains an idea”,³ while *The Quiet Woman* “came out of a very bad period of my life”.⁴ But there is another explanation: they are both transitional works, works in which Priest is slowly working out the transition from an objective secondary world to one which reflects perspective and interpretation, a fiction which explores not one secondary world but a myriad. This transition would eventually produce what is perhaps his finest work, *The Prestige* (1995), and perhaps his most complex, *The Extremes* (1998), but much of what would come to flower in these two later works was already there in the earlier novels.

The Glamour, as *A Dream of Wessex* (1977) before it, opens in a world threatened by terrorism, but where *A Dream of Wessex* was already distanced from our reality by being set in the future, *The Glamour* is set clearly in the here and now, and breaks the pattern of all of Priest’s earlier fiction by resolutely staying there. Richard Grey is an acclaimed television cameraman who is, as the story opens, recovering after being caught in a terrorist bomb explosion. Practically the first thing we learn about Grey is that he is a loner who resists the “subtle but constant pressure... to mix with the other patients” (G. 8). This alienation is important, the whole novel revolves around forms of social alienation which are expressed in the social invisibility of the *Glamour*, as is made explicit when Susan tells us:

I was only partially an invisible woman, barely under the surface of normality, able to rise to visibility if I made the effort. Niall had no such choice. He was deeply invisible, profoundly lost from the world of normal people (G. 157).

It is the perceptions of the world engendered by this alienation which provide the novel’s secondary world.

What is also invisible in this world is the self. Grey is suffering partial amnesia brought on by the blast, he can no longer see part of what makes him who he is. It is noticeable that when Susan Kewley turns up he does not at first see her, for Susan doesn’t just recall him to the world of the invisible, she also belongs to that part of his life obliterated by the amnesia.

Part of the shock of dislocation provided by *The Affirmation* stems from the parallel narratives which we are repeatedly told refract upon each other but which we eventually learn do not exist. This disorienting refraction, which shatters reality into a kaleidoscope of other worlds, is a device that Priest uses again in *The Prestige*, *The Extremes* and here in *The Glamour*; but where, for much of the narrative, we are meant to see the parallel worlds of *The Affirmation* as objective realities, in *The Glamour* he begins to use them right from the start to upset our notion of what is real. It begins with the hypnosis that is part of Grey’s therapy. While under the trance, Grey begins to write something, and what he writes turns into his memoir covering the lost months.

It should be said right from the start that Grey is not an unreliable narrator. Of all Priest’s narrators only Gordon in *The Quiet Woman* is clearly unreliable and that is primarily the result of his madness; Priest’s narrators are generally telling the truth as they see it, but the narrative is unreliable. Truth is a variable, and it is this lack of an absolute that breaks reality down into so many incoherent worlds. Thus Grey tells the story of his meeting with Susan, how they got together on a trip to France and decided to stay together. Susan was supposedly on her way to an abusive boyfriend, Niall, who remains an unseen but threatening presence throughout the story. At first, despite its origins, it seems we can trust this version of events, it seems perfectly reasonable, until small

incongruities start to creep in. At one point the couple encounter a painter who might be Picasso, though this is after Picasso’s death, and another time see bathers in old-fashioned costumes, as if time has been subtly distorted. Later we discover more reasons to distrust Grey’s narrative. When he returns from the nursing home he finds his flat has one room less than he remembered, and his car is not where he recalled leaving it before the explosion. Moreover, Susan tells us flatly that she has never been to France.

It is interesting to note that when Susan takes over the narrative we find ourselves more ready to trust her because of the inconsistencies that have been revealed in Grey’s story, even though what she has to tell us is more overtly fantastic. For it is Susan who reveals the world of the glamorous, people so distanced from society that they become invisible to it. This is not the invisibility of H.G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man* (or even of Priest’s Rupert Angier in *The Prestige*) in which the body literally becomes transparent to light; rather, society at large simply chooses not to notice them. This has its thrilling aspects, at one point Susan shows Grey how the glamorous are able to invade somebody’s house and do as they will without being seen. It also has its less glamorous aspects, lack of adequate medical care, inattention to personal hygiene, a life lived always beyond the edges of society. Though glamour is mostly associated with sexuality:

It was invariably like this when the glamour was consented to. It was like stripping in front of strangers, like those dreams of nakedness in public places, like sexual fantasies of total vulnerability and helplessness. Yet invisibility was secure, a concealment and a hiding, a power and a curse. The half-guilty surge of sexual arousal, the sweet desire of unprotected surrender, the sacrifice of privacy, the exposure of hidden desire, the realisation that it had started and could not be stopped (G. 150).

Susan’s story seems to fill in some of the gaps in Grey’s narrative, and to correct some of its inconsistencies. They are seen, for instance, taking a tour of England, not of France. But

**...the whole
novel
revolves
around forms
of social
alienation...**

it is a mistake to take any narrative in Priest’s fiction at face value. Susan tells of meeting Grey in a London pub, of starting a relationship despite the opposition of the profoundly glamorous Niall. Susan, Grey and Niall form the same triangular relationship as Julia, David and Paul in *A Dream of Wessex*, Niall even has Paul’s violent proclivities, he “knows how to hurt you, how to manipulate you, how to twist things round against you” (G. 71). There is one chilling episode in which Niall, invisible, rapes Susan while she and Grey are making love. Our sympathies are, not unnaturally, drawn to Grey, and just as

Julia and David are drawn together so Susan is drawn towards Grey. However, in this instance the pattern is a mirror image of *A Dream of Wessex*, where Julia’s flight to David was a flight into the dream world, Susan’s flight is away from the dream world of the glamorous and into reality. As Susan says at one point: “I was growing up at last” (G. 185), abandoning glamour is equated with growing maturity.

But Priest has one more twist in the pattern, one that is almost as disturbing to our sense of reality as the discovery that Peter Sinclair’s manuscript in *The Affirmation* is composed of blank pages. At the very beginning of the book is a short prologue in which a narrator explains how he became increasingly alienated from other children during his youth. He ends, in a clumsy way: “at the moment I am only ‘I’. Soon I shall have a name” (G. 4). Since we go immediately into Richard Grey’s story, and he is clearly the central character in this story, it is tempting to equate Grey with this ‘I’. In the very last pages of the novel, however, we discover that the narrator is Niall. Earlier, before the bomb that injured Grey, we have seen Niall hand a manuscript over to Susan. Now, this story,

³ Ibid, 6.

⁴ Ibid, 5.

which started after the manuscript had been written, is revealed to be the story told in that manuscript. All of a sudden our sense of reality takes another knock. Everything in this book, Niall's villainy, the relationship between Susan and Grey, the fact of invisibility, is called into question. It is clearly a twist ending designed to close off a novel that Priest called "unendable", but it is at the same time a highly appropriate ending, producing yet another in a complex series of shifts in our sense of reality. If reality is itself unstable, there is no need to create a parallel dream world as its counterpoint, and this notion, first fully explored in *The Glamour*, is the thrust of the three novels that follow.

That there are parallel worlds within the one reality is actually embedded in the structure of *The Quiet Woman* with Alice's story told in the third person, Gordon's in the first: distinctly different viewpoints that reflect the distinctly different ways in which reality is perceived. *The Quiet Woman* is a novel about paranoia. Alice is caught up in the Kafkaesque coils of faceless government when her book on six women is confiscated: "the effect of the restriction order is that the book has no existence until they decide otherwise... So long as the order is in effect we can't tell anyone that it exists, or that they've taken it in".⁵ She is also researching the life of her friend and neighbour, Eleanor Hamilton, who has been murdered. Moreover, there has recently been a massive accident at a nuclear plant at Cap La Hague just across the Channel and there is the resultant fear of radiation poisoning. All of this is told in the third person. Gordon, who tells his story in the first person, is one of the faceless people who has caught Alice in these Kafkaesque coils, he is the alienated son of Eleanor Hamilton, and he sees the world as a source of constant threat. There has been threat before in Priest's work (one thinks of the terrorist bombs in *A Dream of Wessex* and *The Glamour*) but it has been largely off-stage, this is the first time it has been at the centre of the action. And while there have been allusions to madness before, in both *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour*, in those cases it was tied up with more important issues of identity, love and one's role in the world. Like the amnesiac Grey before him, Gordon is invisible to himself, which explains the stories he makes up to explain who he is, but this time there is no secondary world offering escape or resolution, not even the questionable escape of invisibility; there is only the corporate madness of the situation and the personal madness of Gordon.

That Gordon is not only mad but also the most straightforwardly unreliable narrator in all of Priest's fiction is the major weakness in this book. On his first appearance Gordon witnesses UFOs landing and creating corn circles, enough, perhaps, to make us feel dubious about him, but when, a little later during the funeral of his mother, he witnesses a nuclear bomber crash while no-one around him notices anything, both his sanity and his reliability are undermined. Gordon offsets his madness onto his mother. At one point he tells a story, uncorroborated by anything else we learn about him or his mother, in which his father and brother are killed in a bizarre Ferris wheel accident. Eleanor suffers traumatic amnesia as a result of the shock (as in *The Glamour*, loss of memory is suggested as a way of losing self), or as Gordon puts it: "My mother became mad, but I became sane and whole" (QW. 42). When Gordon was a child, Eleanor told him stories which she then developed into a series of successful children's books, the Donnie books. For Gordon, these stories are further proof of her madness: "The proof for me that my mother was irremediably mad was the way she told me her stories" (QW. 78), though since he subsequently says "I stole the stories from her and made them my own" (QW. 82), one wonders if he is not also taking on the madness that he ascribes to her. Certainly the dreamworld he

goes on to describe bears a striking resemblance to the tales his mother wrote, there is even one in the series called *Donnie and the Flying Saucers*.

Eleanor's stories also bring up a curious resonance. Alice discovers that Eleanor wrote the books under her maiden name, E. S. Fulton, and we have already learned that she used to be called 'Seri', an abbreviation of her middle name, Seraphina. So Eleanor is Seri Fulton, the woman who to some extent personifies the Dream Archipelago in *The Affirmation*. More than that, Eleanor reports that she was in Greece when the Second World War broke out, and on the boat taking her back to Britain had an affair with an Englishman called Peter who had been convalescing in Greece. The parallels with the Dream Archipelago are clearly deliberate, and as *The Affirmation* resolved into a story of a shattered personality, so *The Quiet Woman* constantly presents us with people who are more than one thing. At times this is on a relatively trivial level – Eleanor is both Eleanor Hamilton, the Hilda Murrell-like campaigner, and E. S. Fulton, the writer of children's books – at other times it is less so: as Gordon's fantasies become wilder, for instance, we are presented with two perverse sexual encounters with an Alice who clearly bears no resemblance to the Alice we know. Most significantly, like Peter Sinclair in *The Affirmation* before him, Gordon lives a double life, as Gordon Sinclair and as Peter Hamilton (the names are clearly meant to echo the earlier book), and again there is a connection with literature, in this case his mother's children's books. As the book progresses we discover parallels between what we know of Eleanor's novels and what he tells us of his life, but in this case, perhaps because Gordon's madness is both nastier and more clearly a reflection of society than that of either Peter or Niall, it is less easy to tell how much he made up his life and how much he was made up by the stories. In one reality he lives a life of odd dramas, including spending a time as a member of a quasi-military but non-existent force which almost turns this part of the book into a fully realised secondary world; in another he operates at or very near the top of a shadowy quasi-government office that seems almost as unbelievable as his militaristic fantasies, except that clues in the objective reality of the novel suggest that this is really the case. As so often in Priest's work, we are left questioning what is really happening in the novel, but for once dubious events are not presented as a mirror of the protagonist's mental state, but as a construction from out of that madness. Throughout *The Quiet Woman* we are being shown that the world consists of many different realities, some of them insane to us, but none of them splinter off into fully realised dream worlds as they do in *A Dream of Wessex* or *The Affirmation*. As Gordon puts it: "All my life I had walked around with an instinctive pseudo-reality as alive to me as the external world itself" (QW. 116).

Intimately entwined around all these multiple versions of reality is the extraordinary power of secrecy that runs throughout the book. Alice is a biographer, part of what she does is to seek out the secrets of others. Yet right at the start of the novel she is enjoined to secrecy about her own most recent book, the force of the government order placed upon her is such that she cannot even admit to its existence. Moving to the village Alice had realised "Very little could be kept secret. And the Home Office had completed the process, making her feel not only picked on, but picked out" (QW. 87). In other words she is a believer in openness and the secrecy imposed upon her is presented as a threat, both to her work and to her sense of self. Yet she quickly learns the habits of secrecy, making an illicit back-up copy of her work and hiding it from the authorities. Moreover, at the end of the book she is shown using duplicity to get a grant out of the authorities, and this is presented as success, she has learned the skills of survival in this secretive world. Eleanor is first seen by Alice as open and friendly, it is why she warms to the older woman in the first place. But gradually she discovers more and more

⁵ *The Quiet Woman* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990) 20-21. All subsequent quotations from this book will be marked in the text thus: (QW. 20-21).

about her, things that were not exactly secret but were not exactly open either: the fact that she had a son, her involvement with the protest movement, her children's stories. Even the name under which Eleanor wrote her books is deliberately withheld from Alice. And there is Gordon, of course, whose two lives are both built upon secrecy, until his eventual comeuppance comes about, it is implied, when the secrecy starts to break down.

This secrecy, the way it shapes lives and creates levels of reality, is sketchily portrayed in *The Quiet Woman*, never quite attaining the symbolic weight it seems intended to bear, but it would be more thoroughly developed and more effectively presented in Priest's next novel, *The Prestige*. One of the two main narrators of this novel, Alfred Borden, even begins by saying: "The story of my life is the story of the secrets by which I have lived my life."⁶ Borden and the other main narrator, Rupert Angier, are rival stage magicians during the latter part of the 19th Century. Their careers, their livelihoods, are therefore based on duplicity and secrecy, and the secrecy shapes their lives. Borden tells the story of Ching Ling Foo, whose most famous trick involved producing a heavy goldfish bowl at the climax of his act. There was only one place the bowl could be concealed, held between his knees beneath his mandarin gown, but Ching Ling Foo was obviously too frail a man to be able to carry that weight. In fact, this frailty was a deception, he was a robust man who walked with a hobble to present the illusion of being frail, and "never, at any time, at home or in the street, day or night, did he walk with a normal gait lest his secret be exposed" (P. 40). The effort to maintain his illusion has taken over his life, and the story of Ching Ling Foo serves as a metaphor for both Borden and Angier: "My deception rules my life" (P. 41), Borden says. Borden claims to believe that "The wonder of magic lies not in the technical secret, but in the skill with which it is performed" (P. 72), yet bends his very being to maintain the deception of his trademark illusion, the New Transported Man. Angier, meanwhile, seems, like Alice, to believe in greater openness: "If five hundred people are baffled, he said, it was of no importance that five others should see the secret" (P. 63) yet his quest first to discover the technical secret behind the New Transported Man, then to create his own illusion, is to have a drastic effect upon his life.

Borden and Angier are opposites, their intense rivalry comes to obsess them so that they put themselves and each other in danger to pursue it. In the end, neither can really exist without the other – "Borden and I might have made better collaborators than adversaries" (P. 359) – but this pairing of characters is just the most obvious if least significant of the many doublings that run through this novel. As the characters in *The Quiet Woman* are all in some way double, so *The Prestige* is made up of a succession of twins and pairings, real and imagined, as if we are watching events enacted before a mirror. We start with a young journalist, Andrew Westley, travelling to an assignment and convinced that a twin brother is trying to communicate with him – "a direct urging of me to arrive, to be there with him" (P. 14) – even though the records show that he had no twin. Westley's assignment is to investigate a cult whose leader is supposed to be able to be in two places at once. Though quickly dismissed, this bilocation is a prefiguring of the instantaneous transportation that is, in very different ways, incorporated into the acts of both Borden and Angier. Westley, it turns out, is a descendant of Borden, the strange young woman whose home is now occupied by the cult is a descendant of Angier. Both have suffered as a consequence of

the ancient rivalry, and their story frames the narratives of the two magicians.

Borden's story is extracted from an autobiographical introduction he wrote to a book of magic, a book that was, unknown to its author, edited and published by his arch rival, Angier. We learn that Angier has, even if only in a minor way, interfered with the text – "I have improved his text by making it less obscure" (P. 361) – adding a subtle extra layer of uncertainty to the narrative. As in *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour*, we are told that the very heart of the novel, the very act of literature itself, is untrustworthy. (As in *The Glamour*, inconsistencies lead us to distrust the first narrator, Borden, so we are more likely to trust the second narrator, Angier, whose story, though more overtly fantastic, seems to set the record straight. Significantly, however, we also know that Angier has ripped pages from his own diary: no work of literature within any of Priest's novels stands entire and reliable.) Not that Borden's story needs any extra uncertainties, for this is a story whose very texture contains an odd dislocation, as if the words are at war within themselves. "The very act of describing my secrets might indeed be construed as a betrayal of myself, except of course that as I am an illusionist I can make sure you only see what I wish you to see" (P. 36) – the opening of Borden's narrative admits the conflict within the text, indeed draws attention to it the way that a magician might draw attention to some feature as a way of concealing what is really going on behind it. The question remains: who is being betrayed, and is this legerdemain really concealing anything or is it revealing more than the author might care to admit? It is not long before the text seems to betray a curious schizophrenia: "I said nothing of this to me!" (P. 50), "what I intended to do before I interrupted" (P. 55), "I... remained in the workshop while I returned to the flat" (P. 100). The clue comes very early:

Already, without once writing a falsehood, I have started the deception that is my life. The lie is contained in these words, even in the very first of them. It is the fabric of everything that follows, yet nowhere will it be apparent (P. 38).

The very first word of Borden's narrative is "I" (P. 35). Like Ching Ling Foo, Borden has made his whole life an illusion in order to preserve the secret of his great stage trick. Later, an investigative journalist will provide Angier with information about his rival

that is sufficient to make us doubt everything we have been told by Borden, in turn revealing how extensive an illusion this is. Not even the name is correct – "The child's full name was Frederick Andrew Borden, and according to the almoner's records his was a single birth" (P. 232) – and Frederick and Andrew were twins, the explanation for Borden's celebrated New Transported Man, and one of the most important instances of the twinning that occurs throughout this extraordinary novel.

The lengths to which Borden will go for the sake of his trick reveals how much value he places on the craft of being a stage magician, the importance of preserving the illusion. So when Angier, who has publicly argued against the necessity to preserve the secrets of the craft, uses his skills as a magician by working as a fake medium, it seems to Borden like a betrayal (that word again) of everything he most cherishes. Angier, on the other hand, clearly finds the skills of a magician difficult to acquire – "I never understand the working of an illusion until it is explained to me" (P. 186) – and is less interested in the illusion than in the technology that produces it. He is a product of the new rational, scientific age, and sees his work as a medium as no more than a way of earning a living while exploiting the gullibility of an older credulous age. Their rivalry grows out of these different sets of beliefs, but is

**"The story of my
life is the story of
the secrets by
which I have lived
my life."**

⁶ *The Prestige* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1995) 35. All subsequent quotations from this book will be marked in the text thus: (P. 35).

ignited when Borden disrupts one of Angier's seances and accidentally injures Angier's future wife. From then on their careers are dogged by constant attempts by the one to disrupt the act of the other. In another example of the way everything in the novel works by being part of a duality, Angier even sends his assistant to spy on Borden, she eventually becomes Borden's mistress but there are suspicions that she may be a double agent. She, furthermore, becomes a part of the duality of Borden's life, as he puts it: "I had my family, I had my mistress. I lived in my house with my wife, and I stayed in my flat with my lover. I worshipped my children, adored my wife, loved my mistress. My life was in two distinct halves" (P. 97). Borden maintains this illusion within his life by the same means he maintains the illusion of the New Transported Man.

It is the New Transported Man, inevitably, that is at the heart of the plot. This is the one trick whose workings Angier cannot penetrate, so he sets out to create his own. To do so, he travels to America to enlist Nikola Tesla (inevitably, given the pattern of doubling throughout the book, Borden had been inspired to elaborate his own trick following a lecture by Tesla). Tesla devises a form of matter transmitter, its drawback being that any living thing used in the device is killed, but an identical and living copy is created instantaneously in a new place:

My body is wrenched apart, disassembled. Every tiny particle of me is thrown asunder, becoming one with the aether. In a fraction of a second, a fraction so small that it cannot be measured, my body is converted into electrical waves. It is radiated through space. It is reassembled at its designated target (P. 315).

To perform his act, therefore, Angier must constantly double himself by being killed and reborn; in rehearsing the trick he says: "I had died twice. I had become one of the walking dead, a damned soul" (P. 317). Where Borden has sacrificed his identity, his individuality, for the sake of his illusion; Angier sacrifices himself: in the end it comes to the same thing. Death seems to attach itself to Angier: when he separates from his wife, Julia, "to maintain appearances she lives the life of a widow... so I have perforce become a dead man" (P. 236), later he says: "Death uniquely surrounds my life!" (P. 364). It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that Angier becomes addicted to the pain and shock of transportation, in a sense it is an addiction to death, so that when Borden accidentally interferes with the act at a critical moment and Angier, only partially transported, becomes like a living ghost, it seems to be a natural culmination of Angier's own desires. Throughout the novel the outcome of a magic trick is referred to as the "prestige" (a word of Priest's own devising), and this is the word that Angier applies to his own dead bodies that are the outcome of his act. Describing Borden's existence, Angier has said:

Two lives made into one means a halving of those lives. While one lives in the world, the other hides in a nether world, literally non-existent, a lurking spirit, a *doppelgänger*, a prestige (P. 358).

Yet this precisely describes Angier's state after the accident. Just as the two Peter Sinclairs become one in *The Affirmation*, so the two magicians effectively become one. There are, for a time, two Rupert Angiers, as there are two Alfred Borden. One is a tangible being but with most of the life sucked out of him, the other an invisible man (the action takes place only a few years after the publication of H. G. Wells's novel, though it is never referred to) into which a full quota of life has not been projected. For Angier, as for Niall, invisibility is a form of non-being – "All that I love is forbidden to me by the state I am in" (P. 384) – so when the corporeal Angier finally dies, the invisible one plans to use the Tesla device to project himself into the body. The result would be either suicide or reanimation, but for Angier the two states have become indistinguishable. What he achieves, however, is a sort of eternal undeath. So, many years later when Borden's grandson, Andrew Westley, comes to the cellar where the Tesla machine is stored to learn that as a child he was flung through

the transportation device and to discover his own prestige and still the voice of his 'brother' in his head, he also finds Rupert Angier. Having been Wells's invisible man for a while, Angier has become at the last Mary Shelley's creature, wild and monstrous, shambling away into eternity across a snowy waste.

In *The Glamour*, Priest presented the notion that the secondary world could be part of our real world, defined only by our perceptions. In *The Quiet Woman* he was moving towards the notion that each individual is a secondary world to everyone else, but he did not find a way of expressing this notion successfully until *The Prestige* with its proliferation of doubles, twins, and mirror images. By the time of his next novel, *The Extremes*, he is taking the idea another stage further by giving his characters the opportunity to create their own secondary worlds, to give their imaginings concrete form.

The link between *The Extremes* and the proliferation of twins and doubles in *The Prestige* is made explicit right at the beginning of the later book when, as a child, Teresa "has a mirror through which she can see into another world".⁷ In later life, Teresa is constantly trying to push the envelope of Extreme Experience, taking her avatars within these virtual reality worlds beyond the scenario that has been created for them. The origin of that is laid here in childhood when we learn: "The mirror world is where her private reality begins. Through there it is possible for her to run for ever" (E. 3). More significantly, in this mirror she sees Megan, an imaginary playmate. When she is seven Teresa plays with her father's gun and shoots the mirror, in effect killing her playmate and destroying the secondary world of the mirror. Thus the theme of the book is played out in miniature in this brief prologue to the novel, how violence crosses the boundaries between worlds, affecting and reinfected the inhabitants of both. Moreover, there is an important later discovery about this incident when we learn:

Yes, there had been a twin sister; yes, and her name was Megan. But Megan had died at birth, so frail, so small, such a tragedy. You wouldn't remember Megan, they said. What she thought she remembered was untrue, unreliable (E. 195).

Symbolically, Teresa has killed her twin, making her a player in the continuing mirror-drama begun in *The Prestige*. More than that, the unreliability of memory ties in with a continuing theme that has developed from *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour*.

This small version of the huge drama played out in *The Extremes* gives the reader a clear statement of the story to hold on to as the novel itself twists and turns through the most contorted plot Priest has so far essayed. The plot seems simple enough: there have been two shooting incidents on the same day, one in Kingwood City, Texas in which FBI Agent Andy Simons is among those killed, and one in the English seaside town of Bulverton, "a town so appallingly twinned with Kingwood City that it became an irresistible lure" (E. 190). Teresa Simons, Andy's widow and herself an FBI Agent, cannot resist the lure and comes to Bulverton to see if the one shooting will give her the clues she needs to understand the other. But this simplicity cannot hold, realities slip, events in one world seem to have an effect in the other, some incidents seem to have been caused by actions that only occurred later.

We tend to think our quotidian reality is fairly solid, that in any event in which we were a participant or a witness we know what happened, that any mystery or confusion over historical events could be resolved if only we had access to all the facts. But accounts of any event, even from reliable witnesses, rarely tally, memories are selective and often differ. For instance we are told "The Grove shooting was probably the single most disruptive event in Bulverton since the upheavals of World War II, but the crucial moment within it was misremembered by

⁷ *The Extremes* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1998) 1. All subsequent quotations from this book will be marked in the text thus: (E. 1).

those who witnessed it" (E. 299). It is this gap in reality, this sense that all our private worlds are in a way secondary, that comes to be the core of *The Extremes* when even so public, so thoroughly examined an event as the massacre proves to be not entirely coherent. We get our first hint of this when Teresa recaps her initial investigations and concludes: "There were anomalies she had yet to resolve: there was an unexplained gap in the timing, and an apparent overlap, but she knew that more investigation would probably resolve these" (E. 129). In fact, far from resolving them, further investigation will make the anomalies ever more mysterious, but like most of us Teresa believes the world can be made sense of. That it can't is increasingly the message of Priest's novels.

More and more as Teresa investigates the massacre that Gerry Grove carried out in Bulverton, the boundaries of her reality break down. As Grey's remembered holiday in France contains incidents out of time, so here, in addition to the coincidence of the two shootings, evidence mounts that time is somehow out of true. The first time Teresa sees Dave Hartland she feels she recognises him; GunHo are offering an Extreme Experience scenario of the Bulverton massacre while they are still collecting memories; Grove's timetable has inexplicable gaps; the two guns that Grove used in his massacre and which were found by his body were also found in the boot of his car; Teresa comes out of her long ExEx session in the mind of Gerry Grove to find her credit card won't become valid for a couple of months, she has travelled back to the day of the massacre:

If entering the Grove scenario, then leaving it, had taken her eight months into the past via the medium of Gerry Grove's disgusting consciousness, how come she had turned up here in the same clothes she was wearing when she left the hotel this morning? How come she had the same shoulder-bag? Carried the same credit cards? Had the same tissue in her pocket when she needed to mop her face, the first time to wipe away the rain of a freezing day, the second time the perspiration of a heatwave? (E. 352-3).

The key to all this is Extreme Experience, ExEx, a form of virtual reality that is first introduced as part of Teresa's FBI training. Virtual reality provides an obvious secondary world, but when Teresa, as a trainee, meets some of the real people featured in her training scenarios it emphasises the fact that one person's secondary world is another person's reality. Teresa learns that "she could defy the scenario and act independently of it" (E. 173), making Elsa Durdle, the old black woman involved in a scenario about a police roadblock in San Diego in 1950, drive away from the scene and into an endlessly unchanging landscape as the limits of the prescribed scenario are reached. She also learns to communicate with Shandy, the star of a porn scenario she visits. In other words, Teresa herself is initiating the breakdown between realities.

She was learning how to push at the limits of the scenarios. There was a freedom involved. At first it had seemed to be one of landscape: distant mountains, roads leading away, endless vistas and promises of an ever-unfolding terrain. She had tested the limits of landscape, though, with results that were usually disappointing, and at best only ambiguous.

At last she was realizing there were other landscapes, other highways, the inner world of the consciousness (E. 267).

Eventually she finds herself linking scenarios – "An ExEx scenario already represented a sort of intersection" (E. 298) – until at one point she finds 268 scenarios linking Elsa Durdle with Shandy, two people with no connection at all other than that Teresa had accessed scenarios involving them. An intrusion from this world, therefore, is already beginning to affect the nature of the secondary world. There are already hints that the effect can work the other way. Twice, as she has gone about Bulverton, Teresa seems to have directly experienced scenes from the massacre eight months before: "It not only felt strange, it felt unsafe, a place that existed on

the edge of chaos" (E. 142), and this chaos really breaks down the barriers between the worlds when Teresa enters the ExEx scenario of the Bulverton massacre. Riding inside the mind of Gerry Grove, she discovers that not only can she control his actions, but that he is aware of her presence. When he carries out the first shootings she realises that he cannot handle his gun properly, that he could not have committed the crimes he was supposed to have done, that it is her weapons training that comes to the fore and allows him to shoot as efficiently as he in fact did. Only her intervention makes it possible for Grove to carry out the crime she has come to investigate.

Even more alarming, when she enters a scenario of the Kingwood City shooting in which her husband was killed, she discovers that Aronwitz, the gunman, was Gerry Grove. Just as she was the only link that connected Elsa Durdle and Shandy, so she is the only link that connects Bulverton and Kingwood City. But she is also the trigger who, simply by virtue of her interest in both events, is the cause of each of them.

Reality has shattered. Each person is their own world, and their own secondary world. Regardless of what actually happened in both Bulverton and Kingwood City, Teresa has made them part of her own reality, and has therefore shaped them to fit her own perspectives. Briefly, towards the end of the novel, as Teresa rides inside the mind of Gerry Grove, a triangular relationship begins to develop, similar to the relationships that tied together Julia, Paul and David in *A Dream of Wessex*, or Susan, Niall and Richard in *The Glamour*. Grove, violent, manipulative and dominating, is a clear avatar of Paul and Niall, and as such he exercises a genuine fascination over Teresa. But just as Julia was eventually drawn to David and as Susan turned to Richard as part of her growing up, so Teresa is drawn to her husband, Andy. In the end she exploits the "hyperlinks, cross-references, hyperreality" (E. 286) that she has found connecting the multiplicity of ExEx scenarios, and as Julia and David retreat into the dreamworld of Wessex, she and Andy drive away into the limitless scenarios of this virtual reality dreamworld.

Have these patterns and cross-references that link the novels of Christopher Priest, and illuminate them by reference one to another, drawn this sequence of novels into a full circle? It is tempting to think so, and the ending of *The Extremes* certainly calls *A Dream of Wessex* irresistibly to mind. But Wessex represented a single secondary world, a benevolent world that stood in stark and significant contrast to the real world. Wessex was a place, but the Dream Archipelago, and particularly *The Affirmation*, turned that place into a mirror of the mind. The books that have followed, *The Glamour*, *The Quiet Woman*, *The Prestige* and *The Extremes*, have shown that the secondary world continues to exist, but it exists, as Peter Sinclair discovered, within the ravages of one person's mind. Authors traditionally play the role of God over their creations, and the authors who inhabit the worlds of *The Affirmation*, *The Glamour*, *The Quiet Woman* and *The Prestige* are all in their way responsible, as *primum mobile*, for the worlds they make, even though those worlds might be an attempt to describe reality as they see it. If the mind is insane, then so is the world, as we see in *The Quiet Woman*. But even minds that are not insane, as in *The Prestige* for instance, create entire worlds to support their illusions. All that *The Extremes* has done is suggest that every person is the author of their own world, every person is supporting their own illusions. One secondary world has become a multiplicity, and the dreamworld into which Teresa and Andy escape is no consensus world but hers alone.

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IF EVER THERE WAS A GOLDEN AGE OF BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION, THEN FORMER SKIPTON POSTMAN E.R. JAMES WAS AN INTEGRAL PART OF IT. FROM 1947 TO TODAY HIS FICTION HAS BEEN PROMINENT IN GENRE MAGAZINES. ANDREW DARLINGTON SPOKE TO HIM FOR THIS RETROSPECTIVE.

E.R. JAMES: FROM SKIPTON... TO THE STARS

by Andrew Darlington

FROM NEW WORLDS TO NEW MOON

"I am rather ancient" E. R. James admits with sly humour, "tho' not yet moribund." To this seventy-seven years young 'time-traveller', science fiction is a vital pulse that has carried him across not only hundreds of future centuries, but thousands of light years of interplanetary space too. All from the modest confines of his Postal Delivery route through Skipton, North Yorkshire.

But E.R. – or Ernest Rayer, is maddeningly self-deprecating. Tall, with short spiky silver hair, he sits opposite me now, rubbing his forehead or stroking his neatly disciplined moustache as he says "your praise leaves me shattered". This, from the man who wrote as Somerset Draco or Edward Hannah, whose science-based fantasies are reprinted in German and French magazines and anthologies, while there are over one hundred stunning fictions published under his own name from 1947 to the present day. If there was ever a Golden Age of British science fiction, then E.R. James was an integral part of it. He was there at its inception. His fast-paced action stories jostling for space with those of E.C. Tubb, John Brunner, and Ken Bulmer – often in consecutive issues of the same magazines. While open up a recent 1990s title – *New Moon* – and he's there too with a fine ecological story of the endangered rainforests.

"I don't know that there has ever been a 'Golden Age of British SF'" he argues. "Some of Hamilton's and Carnell's magazines of the 1950s and 60s may have merited 'gold' – but it depends on the reader, as does all writing. I merely enjoy trying to write stories. I spent most of my life earning, rather than writing, just to survive. The stories helped me run a car..."

His right eye has a greenish iris, the legacy of World War II enemy shrapnel that 'peppered him' after five weeks in Normandy. "At the end of the war I was still in the Army – a Lance Corporal," he recalls. "When my cousin (SF writer Francis G Rayer, who died in 1981) wrote that he knew of an editor who wanted science fiction stories. This was Walter Gillings, a very helpful man who took three of my earliest tales." The first of these, 'Prefabrication' appeared in the slender *Fantasy* No.2 – one of the original British weird fiction titles. A collector's gem that now carries an outlandish price-tag, it arrived in April 1947, during a time of post-war reconstruction – but his story concerns the prefabrication not of houses, but people. 'IS SUCH A THING POSSIBLE – TO CREATE SYNTHETIC LIFE?' probes the magazine blurb, 'SCIENCE HAS FOUND A WAY TO MANUFACTURE HUMAN BEINGS... IN A WORLD IN WHICH MONOPOLY HAD THE LAW ON ITS SIDE. RESULT – CONFLICT!'

His next editor – John Carnell of Nova Publications, "asked me to meet him in London, and we had a lunch together. London was very different then, and I'm not sure – but I think I was still not demobilised at the time." Carnell's stable of magazines became a regular E.R. James market, with work subsequently appearing most frequently in *New Worlds*, *Science Fantasy*, and *Science Fiction Adventures*. He experienced little editorial interference, although James recalls Carnell as being a 'very moral' editor; "he once commented 'is it really necessary to have the word 'body' in this story? I mean – 'body!'"

The E.R. James novel-length 'Robots Never Weep' took the cover of the launch issue of *Nebula* in 1952. Oddly, editor Peter Hamilton Jnr. liked the story because it was significantly different to what Carnell was publishing. To further emphasise the 'clear blue water' between titles Hamilton initially wanted to publish the story under a pseudonym. James wasn't keen, and the ensuing dialogue resulted not only in his name being retained, but at an improved word-rate too. 'HE AWOKE. FINDING HIMSELF IN A METAL WORLD, PEOPLED MOSTLY BY MACHINES, HE STRUGGLED FOR THE RIGHT TO LIVE – AND GRADUALLY THE NIGHTMARISH TRUTH CAME HOME TO HIM...' ran the blurb. The wide sweep and breath-catching speed of its two-fisted action has many purely Gernsbackian elements, leaving little space for reflection, motivation or characterisation. There are metal raiders with pre-Asimovian tendencies rampaging from a fantastic Space Island built on an orbital 'volcanic asteroid'. Their leader, the deranged Ursula, is a brain in a metal shell, "a woman shut up in a sphere, with lenses for eyes. Human, yet inhuman". Agent Johnny Found comes to awareness as he's about to be pitched into an 'atomic furnace' by a noxious dwarf and his robotic cohorts, only to be rescued from certain death by the lovely Sacha ("his stunned soul warmed to her exotic beauty"). He has had his memory erased and replaced with an artificial identity enabling him to infiltrate the raider's base, where he finds himself torn between his conflicting loyalties to the ravaged and besieged Earth he has left behind, and his new

allegiances to the evil cybernetic dystopia planned by Ursula. Meanwhile, the armies of manic mechanoids attack, "from the sky, between lofty pinnacles of tall buildings, down past upper-level roads, huge rockets soared tail-foremost. Robots moved towards this second wave, even while the roads still glowed red hot".

Johnny Found's adventures in the robotic future came with a dramatic cover painting by long-time SF artist Alan Hunter. James was just 32 when he wrote 'Robots Never Weep'. But by then he'd already sold over forty articles and stories, some half of which were SF-based. According to Hamilton's editorial comment he also had a novel placed with an agent – although "this (is) by no means sure of publication..." Well, that novel has yet to appear, but as the 1950's picked up momentum E.R. James's magazine adventures were unstoppable – the powerfully tense 'Blaze Of Glory' has three people trapped in an asteroid as it spirals in towards the sun, 'Ride The Twilight Rail' – often cited as his greatest tale, is a cover story for *New Worlds* set on the hostile planet Mercury with its silent inhabitants "utterly alien beings, outwardly featureless, huge; inwardly a complexity of crystalline structures with a silicon base", and then, notably, there's 'World Destroyer' for which *New Worlds* set aside its 'strongest editorial taboo – that of current world politics coupled with the threat of atomic war'. Beyond the solar system – in 'The Moving Hills', he created the deserted Siemens Planet, a world of dead cities and apparently empty deserts in which two stranded Earthmen become assimilated into the automated self-replicating pseudo-living landscape. Other stories include 'Made On Mars', 'Galactic Year', 'Advent Of The Entities', 'Forty Years On' (a retro-Detective tale as Dormer – as in 'Sleeper', attempts to reconstruct events leading up to the explosion off Ceres which cost him four decades of life) and so very many more. His prose is often functional, his protagonists have Euro-friendly names like Johnny, Ricky or Ann, while his female characters are little more than plot confections, and although there's an unmistakable sophistication as the work evolves, James remains an exponent of well crafted story-telling. The elements he excels in are conflict, hardship, and action, all set against the eerie poetry of the solar system where "on one side of the thread of life was the burning heat of killing, on the other the utter chill of death".

In the 1957 fanzine *The New Futurian* (no.6), he contributes a rare article touching on his methods of writing. "With me, the idea is the peg for a story." He explains to me now that his stories were written directly onto the typewriter, "but it was already worked out in my head, everything that was going to happen through every stage. Perhaps the ending wasn't clear yet, but everything else was." He pauses, "In the past I used to have an idea, sit at my new Imperial Companion, and change hardly anything. But now I write and re-write before turning to an electronic machine..."

He gets up and leaves the room for a moment, to return with an original Nova Publications share certificate, dated 1st January 1949 and signed by John Beynon Harris (John Wyndham). He passes this rare artefact of SF history across to me dismissively. "You might as well take this. As a souvenir of Skipton!"

TO BOLDLY GO... TO SKIPTON ?

Critics were not uniformly supportive. "You could go to the bookstalls and there they were on time, the same shaggy old writers in there" recalls Brian Aldiss (in *Crucified Toad* no.4), "all those frantic people, E.R. James and Francis G Rayer, couldn't put two words together in the right order". James's success throughout this period proves that others thought differently. Lacking the intellectual vigour and experimental energy that Aldiss was to bring to the genre, James's stories are never less than solidly inventive and often wildly enjoyable, ideally suited to the demands of the magazine market of the period. Born in 1920, science fiction was always part of his life. The influences that shaped his style began when, "as a boy, I read some of the Gernsback 'pulp' and the first three volumes of the Martian romances of the Old Master Edgar Rice Burroughs which held me spellbound (but not so much his Venus books)", while H. G. Wells "still reads as well now as when I first read them. Then there were boys mags such as *Adventure* and *Wizard*". "I began reading science fiction stories before leaving school" he told a *Nebula* 'KNOW YOUR AUTHOR' column, "and can remember the plots of quite a few stories out of the American 'pulp' of Gernsback and his contemporaries. I wondered why these and other such stories were not more popular, and began to write manuscripts with a science flavour myself – and enjoyed doing so, though

no-one wanted them". He continues, "I wrote a little, but submitted none of it. The war altered everything, however".

As the first stories appeared he "made plans with a friend, also writing and selling, to live together. But instead married Margaret, and altered my address from Somerset to North Yorkshire". In common with many of his contemporaries he took a 'bread and butter' job, with the GPO – perhaps delivering his own royalty cheques, and the occasional rejection slip too.

Skipton is a beautiful town for such activity. On the way here today I pass Menwith Hill – a surreal formation of huge Quatermass-like white spheres that house a U.S. radar installation (don't look for it on the map, it's not there!), and a Greenham Common-style Peace Camp beyond its periphery. Then I pass through the looming shadow of Skipton Castle. Two very different zones of fantasy. "I found that postal work fits in with a career of part-time writing very well" he told a *New Worlds* author profile. "In fact, I declined

an offer of an indoor clerical appointment in the Post Office because I felt that the outdoor work left my mind less exhausted and more eager for thinking up stories".

He was a guest speaker at the Harrogate SF Convention alongside Aldiss, Kingsley Amis, and James White (who was 'even quieter than I am!'). Organiser Ron Bennett, now a Harrogate-based book-dealer specialising in Edgar Rice Burroughs-iana "had me give a sort of opening speech, at the beginning of which I stood on my head Yoga-fashion to get attention".

Among the work produced through this, his most prolific period, was 'Refrigerator Ship', delineating the murderous equation necessary when a ship full of deep-frozen colonists emerge from star-drive to find their potential colony-world vaporised by nova, and they have insufficient reserves to return them *all* to Earth. There were also a number of collaborations with cousin 'Frank' Rayer, beginning with 'The Lava Seas Tunnel' for *Authentic*, predicting the eco-energy crisis when an expedition beneath the Earth's crust in a boring machine seeks an alternative to the exhausted oil and coal fossil fuels. Built up largely by passing manuscripts back and forth, making alterations and additions to each other's work, he admits to being "never completely satisfied" by such joint efforts. Although they were snapped up by the magazines. He *does*, however, admit to a certain retrospective satisfaction with his fictional portrayal of Venus as a super-heated desert world, "more as it is, or more as the planet has *proved* to be" than the lush tropical jungles envisaged there by some of his contemporaries. Among my own favourites is the hauntingly atmospheric 'The Truth' from the December 1958 edition of *Nebula*. Four survivors of a Space-Time Liner from the 22nd Century are marooned in the 'endless ooze' of a world that may, or may not be primeval Earth. The corpses of two other crew members are buried there with the foreknowledge that "the

atoms of their bodies don't belong in this time and place", and inexorably their viral presence infects and alters the biosphere. Meticulously worked out, and forsaking his more usual speed of narrative pacing for a slow claustrophobic intensity, it's a beautifully worked-out story.

"Then TV came along, and the old magazines all suffered. Not just SF titles but all printed-word publications clear down to the text-based boys comics. I transferred to working on the Post Office counter and did less writing." He resumed with a vengeance following his retirement, selling a number of extremely well-received stories to a new generation of magazines – beginning with 'Second Century Koma' in *Dream*, and then 'The Tree' in *New Moon*. His current writing method involves "two large bulldog clips on a sheet of plywood about 12"x18", or another sheet of plywood about 12"x30" with an adjustable lamp on one end and a slot into which the smaller board will fit. These are excellent when sitting in an armchair. One clip holds notes and the

other the narrative on old A4 paper (torn in two and written on the back)." He half-jokingly toys with the idea of writing and submitting a story to one of the current crop of Women's magazines, *Best* or *Bella*, while adding "I'm halfway through a novel (*The Lure Of Far Centauri*) of which I have high hopes – who can have more?", so perhaps Peter Hamilton's 1952 prediction will yet be fulfilled.

"I still enjoy other people's stories. I subscribe to *Interzone*, and belong to a postal book-chain through which I get issues of *Analog*. But I look in the science fiction section of W.H. Smith, and there's no SF there! It's all Fantasy or Sword & Sorcery. I still wonder why the British public generally takes so little interest in science, and more particularly in the wonderful, if frighteningly vast and terrible vistas which seem only just around the corner of the future in these inspiring times." And on a more personal note "I just keep trying, somewhat fitfully, but hopefully, to become a little famous" he concedes modestly.

Now ancient – but not yet moribund, he's not always at ease with current trends, or with all of the stories he shares magazine space with. "I live reasonably well. I survive and write an occasional short story that does more for postal profits than it does for me. *Interzone* seems out of my reach, my ideas don't suit them [he writes that Ed Gorman's 'Cages' in *Interzone* no.109 "would have so disgusted E.J. Carnell of the old *New Worlds* that he would have lost faith in humanity"]. Perhaps I'm too old, but I find some of their kind of writing very disturbing. There's so much sex-for-sex sake and sarcasm these days that I try to promote a little romance and sincerity whenever I can. But of course", the slyly self-deprecating humour again, "it could be said that, as I am no longer so fired-up with youthful ways, some of this is sour grapes – and the rest is a senile tendency to think the best of people...!"

**"...from the sky, between
lofty pinnacles of tall
buildings, down past
upper-level roads, huge
rockets soared tail-
foremost."**

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There were other stories sold 'all rights' to various small publishers under various pseudonyms, of which "I now have no record beyond small cash entries". There is a letter published in *Interzone* no.111 (Sept 1996), as well as the following:

'Scapegoat' (As Edward Hannah), 'Masque' (as Somerset Draco), 'Dodie Slammed the Door', and 'The Cleverjack and the Moonstalk' plus a long story By F.G. Rayer in *Worlds at War* (Paperback anthology from Tempest Publ, Bolton, Lancs)

'Champion Robot' Lead story in *Cute Fun Annual* (Gerald G Swan Juvenile Hardcover 1953)

'The Quantimers' in *Schoolboys Album* (Gerald G Swan Juvenile Hardcover 1954)

'Murder in Reverse' – A "time-travel story, if I remember correctly", accepted by Peter Hamilton for *Nebula*, but never used due of premature cessation of the title.

My thanks to E.R. James for invaluable assistance and co-operation in compiling this feature.

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Andy Darlington last appeared in Vector 207 with his thoughts on the Moon landings – Eds.



First Impressions

Book Reviews

edited by
Steve Jeffery

Mark Anthony – *The Keep of Fire*

Earthlight, 1999, 442pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-684-86041-4

Reviewed by Colin Bird

This is the second volume in Anthony's *The Last Rune* series. It's got a map, a dragon and characters which transfer between contemporary Earth and a mediaeval world where magic works. Presumably that's all that fantasy fans need to know before they will rush out to purchase this book since most books in this genre seem to stick to the same tired old formula. More discerning readers have to search hard to find fantasy which stretches the genre boundaries (such as Tad Williams' *Otherland*) or is simply so well written that it transcends cliché (George R. R. Martin's *Clash of Kings*). *The Keep of Fire* resolutely fails to enter either of these categories.

Travis Wilder is back tending bar in the nondescript mountain town he calls home. He seems little changed by the life and death struggles of his first adventure. When a strange man comes into the bar and gives a convincing demonstration of spontaneous human combustion Travis realizes that some sort of evil has spilled across the inter-dimensional gateway linking Earth to the magical world of Eldh. Meanwhile, former doctor Grace Beckett, who decided to stay

on Eldh after her adventures in the first book, learns that Travis has returned to her new world and his life is in great danger. She musters a party to ride to his rescue. On the way they discover victims of the burning plague which is spreading across both Eldh and Earth, and attempt to overcome this threat to both worlds.

This second volume again suffers from poor pacing. There are some interminable episodes in the middle of this volume which serve no purpose other than to pad out a rather thin story. When the two main protagonists finally link up, removing the need for the awkward switches of viewpoint that dog the first half of the book, then *The Keep of Fire* becomes a perfectly readable novel. The author shows signs of commitment to his saga with some well-developed use of myths and legends which weave into events from both books in the series. However, you have to navigate through long aimless stretches before the pace picks up, and only fans of the first book will feel it worth their while to reach the all too familiar ending.

Mike Ashley (ed.) – *The Mammoth Book of Seriously Comic Fantasy* Robinson, 1999, 494pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-84119-089-6

Fantasy

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

I can't claim to have laughed out loud at any of these stories, but they all amused me to a greater or lesser extent. I was hard put to choose my favourites, but gave it a try.

I was pleased to find several of my own favourite authors here, in particular Esther Friesner who, in 'Uncle Henry Passes', introduces a Frankenstein-like 'scientist' who creates magical hybrid animals. In this case, we encounter not just a cross between a rabbit and a Tyrannosaurus Rex called Gretchen, but Mighty Alan, the only gay superhero I've come across.

Then there's Lawrence Schimel's take on what really happened to Elvis Presley, in a skilful adaptation of the fairy tale concerning the shoemaker and the elves. The concept of Elvis strutting his stuff for the Queen of Elfland over seven years, and in desperate need of new blue suede shoes, definitely amused me.

In fact, it's the pastiches on fairy tales and nursery rhymes that worked best for me. One of the best is Neil Gaiman's 'The Case of the Four and Twenty Blackbirds', a brilliant satire on the private eye stories of the 1930s. In this case Jack Horner has to solve the murder

of Humpty Dumpty. Somehow, Gaiman manages to include all kinds of characters from well-known nursery rhymes and make the whole thing believable.

Another story that deserves a mention is L. Sprague de Camp's 'The Eye of Tandyla' where Derezong Taash, long-suffering sorcerer to King Vuar the Capricious, purloins, on his king's orders, the third eye of a statue of the goddess Tandyla. The misfortunes Derezong and his assistant suffer reminded me of The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God, and thus I could not take it seriously.

However, the story I liked best was Tom Holt's 'Escape from the

Planet of the Bears', which puts an entirely different slant on A.A. Milne and Winnie the Pooh, as well as having a sting in the tail it would be unfair to reveal. Second favourite was Alan Dean Foster's 'The Metrognome', which has nothing to do with music and everything to do with the subway.

The one I liked least was 'The Triumph of Vice' by W.S. Gilbert (of Gilbert and Sullivan), but that's because I have never liked their operettas.

That aside, I enjoyed this anthology tremendously and can honestly recommend it if you want a good laugh.

Richard Calder – *The Twist*

Earthlight, 1999, 282pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-617-03719-6

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

The Twist is just plain weird. We are in Cold War 1950s America, but this is a very alternate history. The American west has become a bridge, an almost endless corridor that connects to the distant planet of Venus – the near end of which has remained a parody of the classic Wild West of the previous century, with stagecoaches and six shooters. Ever since they arrived the Venusians themselves have been here to offer a helping hand to the natives to try and prevent the mass-slaughter during the Indian Wars. They are still supplying super-science, such as the E-bomb, to aid the USA effort against the red menace. These shape-changing energy creatures are Death incarnate and the harvesters of willing and not so willing souls.

Our hero narrator is Nicola E. Newton, a very precocious young girl – chapter two sees her knocking back the whiskey in a saloon. Precocious but likeable, she simply knows what she wants: to escape her latest boring school and her suffocatingly religious parents. Her salvation lies with Mr Twist, gunslinger and bar singer, a cross

between Clint Eastwood's Man With No Name and another 'Killer', rock and roller Jerry Lee Lewis. He is accompanied by a faithful delicious Venusian 'necrobabe', Viva Venera, who is waiting to grab back his dying soul after saving him from an earlier hanging and spirit it back to Venus for a perfect union. In a series of adventures the three of them head further and further west towards their ultimate fate in the necropolis of Desdichado.

It is a rattling yarn and it is to Calder's skill that he keeps us reading through the continuous jaw-dropping strangeness and lush language. Among the madness we have irresistible touches such as a gun-fighting English Teddy-boy bounty hunter, an Apache Manitou from Vega, a flying-saucer and Men in Black. And I can forgive much for lines such as "I knew from now on cordite would always be my perfume of choice."

Ultimately it is a twisted three-way love story. Oh and the last chapter is a poem. As I say, weird.

Mark Chadbourn – *World's End*

Gollancz, 1999, 424pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 575 067829

Reviewed by Colin Bird

World's End represents an entry in the curious sub-genre of stories in which magic goes to war against modern technology. These novels always involve ancient forces, which used to rule the Earth, returning from another dimension to find Mankind has abandoned the supernatural and embraced science. Authors tend to place such efforts firmly in the fantasy camp since any attempt at the rational consideration of such events, required for a more science fictional approach, will inevitably flounder. Chadbourn is no exception with this effort subtitled 'Book One Of The Age Of Misrule'.

The plot follows a group of five ordinary characters who gradually join up to form the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons (surely The Fellowship would have been more appropriate nomenclature?). This group of humans is charged with finding the four objects of power: a sword, a stone, a spear and a cauldron (curiously no ring). With these objects, all straight from ancient legends (Excalibur, The Holy Grail, etc), the five motley champions can defeat the Dark Ones and continue The Age Of Man. This first volume takes the story to a conclusion of sorts but a rather unsatisfying twist in the tale leads directly into the stuff of volumes two and three (and, no doubt, four and five *ad nauseam*).

Relocating fantasy clichés into the contemporary landscape can bring benefits by freshening stale ideas. However, these kind of stories with dragons dive bombing traffic on motorways can highlight the silliness inherent in such ideas. A high element of skill is required from the author for such a novel to work. Unfortunately Chadbourn, whilst offering professional prose which rattles along nicely, has a shortfall in the imagination department. In particular his continual use of coincidence to drive his narrative really grates despite some explanatory references to fate's grand design. We get to see little of the breakdown in the fabric of technological society, which might have been more interesting than the rather dull quest which fills most of the novel. The author's constant reference to Celtic mythology is impressively researched but rather redundant for this kind of fantasy-by-numbers.

Chadbourn's characters are refreshingly unheroic and believable (apart from the rather obvious expository member of 'the Fellowship' who offers continual infodumps). What a shame the author couldn't find them something more interesting to do in this volume. Perhaps, now he has dispensed with the obligatory quest, future volumes will develop down more interesting paths.

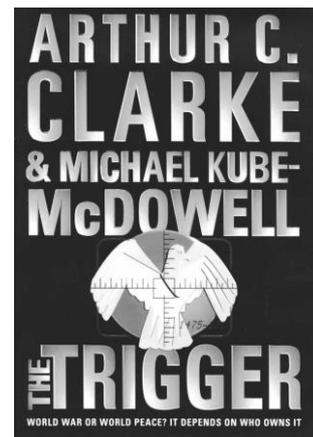
Arthur C. Clarke and Michael Kube-McDowell – *The Trigger*

Voyager, 1999, 550pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00-224711-9

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

If Isaac Asimov is now writing posthumously through the co-authors of the new Foundation series then Arthur C. Clarke is writing prehumously with a series of collaborators. Unlike *Richter 10*, which seems to have begun this stream, *The Trigger* comes with no notes indicating how the work has been divided. However, these works are set in closely related near-futures so that, no matter who his collaborator, these novels show no difference; the background is a worsening of current events: racial tension, ghastly wars abroad, gang warfare at home and declining social conditions. These collaborations tend also to carry the same faults, but with a common parentage that is what one might expect.

The eponymous Trigger is a device that can make explosives burn (normally before they can explode), an unwitting discovery resulting from experiments to build the gravity equivalent of a laser (a glazier it is never called). Even while the scientists of Terabyte Laboratories struggle to discover the full nature of their device, they realise that



anyone going through a gateway which would make the bullets in their shoulder holster burn and take off their arm is likely to be either deterred from travelling or from packing a pistol, so slowing the deployment and use of domestic weapons. With a Trigger in every school there might never be another Columbine High School shooting (or its five equivalents in 1999).

From the short Prologue in which the start-up capital for Terabyte comes from a billionaire and the land for the campus laboratory obtained in Columbus, Ohio, the agenda for *The Trigger* is American. With small diversions, such as one in which a Trigger is taken to Cambodia for use in mine clearing, the agenda remains American, revolving largely about the almost psychopathic defence of the Constitutional Right to Bear Arms. Large parts of the rest of the world remain in war, or devastated by the remains of war, while some parts of the world, such as the European Union, remain no more than an example of how a gun-free society might be – but the President of the U.S.A. and the Senate are going to find large parts of their time occupied in the struggle with a thinly disguised National Rifle Association. It is the fictional NAR which engages in murderous conspiracies against Mind Against Madness, a lobby-group for a gun-free America.

Clarke and McDowell remain optimistic. I imagined at first that the

Trigger would fall into the hands of the military-industrial complex, and mad generals devise their own agenda, but the President is accessed quite easily, and the devices slip into public buildings as easily as a rodent exterminator. The tension of the novel comes from the actions and legal suites of the NAR; we almost slip into John Grisham and David Baldicci territory.

The scientific background to the Trigger remains slim, and later on the authors elide too quickly over its logic. The device is adopted with no tests of potential harmful effects (you might be prepared to set-off someone's pocket pistol – they'll be the only ones affected – you might not have thought that all boats carry emergency flares when you put other triggers at harbour mouths), but what a device radiating something unknown (and never identified) might do to a human body is left untested completely. We're talking engineers here, not scientists, I think. At least, that's their defence.

The American and British editions of *The Trigger* are not identical; in the most striking difference, the former has 26 chapters, the latter 33 chapters. An explanation of the differences (and the reasons for them) can now be found at: <http://www.sff.net/people/K-Mac/trigger.htm> The material posted there includes the five chapter intros which appear in the UK edition but not the US edition.

Hal Clement – *Half Life*

TOR Books, 1999, 252pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0-312-86920-7

Reviewed by Chris Hill

The human race is dying. For unknown reasons there has been a huge increase in new mutations of existing diseases. In a desperate attempt to reach a fuller understand of the origins of life, a team of 50, mainly terminally ill, people are sent to Saturn's moon Titan, a place in the solar system that may be in the early stages of developing life. Many of the crew die during the journey and the survivors try to make sense of the alien world.

I have to confess that I found *Half Life* a curiously flat novel. Most of the human characters have no more emotional life than the artificial intelligence that processes and advises on the data collected. Even the better-defined characters have one overriding characteristic (perm one of irritable, excitable, dour, cheerful, ...).

There is quite a lot of technical description of the aircraft used to travel from orbit to Titan. Unfortunately their appearance is never described, so when, for example, ice builds up on the wing of one craft causing it to crash, it is difficult to visualise what actually happened. There is little sense of wonder about Titan itself; sometimes it might as well be one of the infamous quarries so beloved of BBC

film crews.

The biggest problem I had, though, was with the basic scenario. If this mission was the last best hope for humanity, why send a crew principally of terminally ill, non-scientifically trained 'enthusiasts'? It just seems silly. To me, the hopeful, but annoyingly inconclusive ending made little sense. Perhaps by that point I had stopped paying much attention.

There are several scenes that do manage to generate a certain amount of tension, particularly when one of the crew gets caught on the surface during a geological upheaval. However the fact that most of the work on Titan is done by remote control means there is a loss of immediacy to most of the dangerous situations.

Hal Clement is regarded as one of the founding fathers of *scientific* science fiction; *Mission of Gravity* in particular is generally remembered with fondness. If *Half Life* had been written at the same time, it would probably be considered with the same affection. But as a modern novel, it lacks the advances in characterisation that many modern readers have come to expect.

Philip K. Dick – *Beyond Lies the Wub*

Millennium, 1999, 404pp, £7.99 ISBN 1-85798-879-5

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Philip K. Dick began writing for publication in 1951. His fourth work and first published short story, 'Beyond Lies the Wub', appeared in *Planet Stories* in July 1952, and two of those other three appeared soon after; one of them, 'The Little Movement' in *Fantasy And Science Fiction*. In fact, of the twenty five stories he wrote (and are collected here) in the first nine months of his career only one, his first story, was not published. That's a remarkable achievement, especially as there is little obvious difference in quality in the first, 'Stability'. And more remarkable when you think that he also had his day job in a music store.

Was the well-known 'Philip K. Dick' obvious even then? Was he already exploring his themes of humanity and reality; the human and the android; reality and illusion and how they might risk being exploited? Yes: two of these stories became parts of later novels, and other elements are obvious, as well. Some of them show features that might be associated with other authors, Theodore Sturgeon or Clifford D. Simak I noticed, but that does not stop them also being Dick-ian. 'The Little Movement' (*F&FS* November 1952), for instance, could be a Sturgeon story, but it can also be tied forward. From somewhere unexplained, toy soldiers sold on the street are infiltrating family homes so that they might take them over (the toys are sentient and malign), only to find that the teddy bears and pandas are waiting for them. Why this war should be going on in the toy rooms of America is never explained, nor how or why the toys hide their intelligence from their young owners. If Sturgeon had written this story I think the soldiers would have done more damage, if not won; Dick excoriated

evil, saw its frequency, but would let good win when he could. Later on, of course, in *Do Androids Dream...?/Blade Runner* the question of goodness in toys and simulacra would become much more uncertain.

'The King of the Elves' is the sort of story Simak would have written. In his notes, collected at the end of this volume, Dick says this story was re-written after one of Anthony Boucher's writing classes. It is one of the least Dick-ian pieces here and suggests that sometimes Dick was writing whatever he could, rather than developing his own interests and ideas.

Some stories show lines of development that came to nothing. Dick started a series featuring a mad inventor, 'Doc Labyrinth', and there were others featuring distant space adventure. The last story in this collection, 'Nanny', seems to repeat one of Asimov's robot stories, until the last couple of paragraphs, when it reveals Dick's completely different approach. Nanny is a robot, not an android, and Nanny and the other robot nannies have been built by Mecho-Products and their rival, Service Industries, Inc., for one purpose: to create a market for more robot nannies, by creating a perception that there is a need for more.

You don't have to be paranoid to read Dick, but read him to know what it's like.

Philip K. Dick – *Martian Time-Slip*

Millennium, 1999, 226pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-837-X

Reviewed by Chris Hill

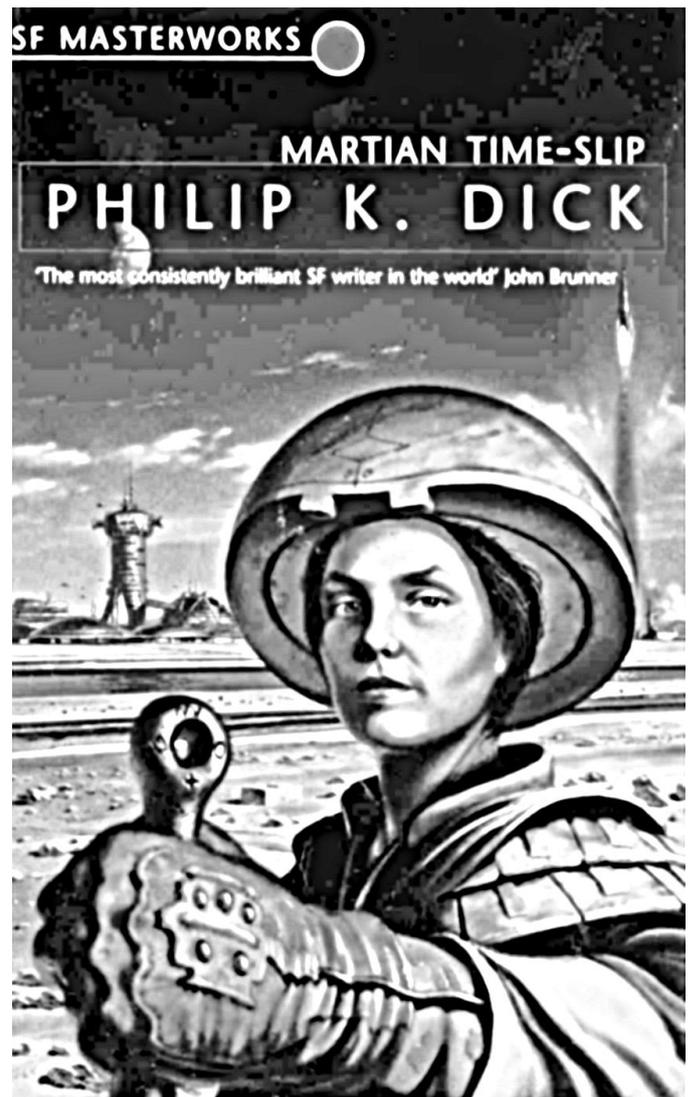
On a colonised Mars, one of the most powerful men is Arnie Kott, head of the plumbing union and thus the person who controls the water supply. With the help of a recovering schizophrenic technician, Jack Bohlen, he conceives of a plan to use a possibly prescient, autistic child to predict the future. When Kott learns too late of a land deal which would have made him rich he finds a way to go back and change events, with different results than he expected.

There are two threads to *Martian Time-Slip*: the way relatively good people can be corrupted by a powerful person and a study of the possible causes of autism. The version of Mars that forms the backdrop, with free water in canals and native inhabitants, the Bleekmen, was out-of-date even when the book was first published. However Dick was never a writer of 'hard' sf; he was far more interested in what is going on inside the heads of his characters.

The central figure of the story is Kott, everyone else revolves around him. His popularity with the people he influences is difficult to understand – he is powerful, but unpleasant. In many ways he is very childish, going into fits of temper and sulks if he is crossed, planning petty revenges. Bohlen is unstable, knowing that he could relapse into a schizoid state at any time, especially when under pressure. Manfred, the autistic child lives perpetually in a world of horror, with people seen as mechanistic bags of decaying matter, obsessed with sex. Not only that, but he lives in terror of a vision of his own future.

With modern sensibilities it is difficult to avoid Dick's rather dismissive attitude to women in the novel. Kott's ex-wife is the only one that seems to have an independent life, but is regarded with some contempt. The other two main female characters – Doreen, mistress of both Kott and Bohlen, and Silvia, Bohlen's wife – are entirely defined by their relationship with the men around them. The only choice they are allowed is which man to stay with.

Overall, though, it is a powerful study of isolation, power and mental instability and one of Dick's strongest works. Millennium's SF Masterworks series is rapidly becoming a fine collection of some of the best work that science fiction has to offer.

**Gardner Dozois (ed) – *Best New SF 12***

Robinson, 1999, 671pp, £9.99 ISBN 1-84119-053-5

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Twenty four stories from 1998 and such diverse sources as *Interzone* and the Internet. How can you cover this many stories in just a few words. You can't of course, but I'll have a go in a minute, after this...

The page count of 671 pages is a count of the story pages. In addition, Dozois has written a 64 page 'Summation: 1998'. This is a huge round up of the year covering just about every aspect of the sf world, including Conventions and semi-prozines. This very detailed and comprehensive guide is well worth a read, (and money in its own right, or at least reprinting under some national SF association's auspices...) The coverage of the current magazines and their online presence (as of 1998) is excellent.

Anyway, on with the motley...

How do you cover so many stories? I would start by highlighting the diversity. You like hard sf? Read Stephen Baxter's 'Saddlepoint: Roughneck' from *Science Fiction Age*. How about a ghost story; 'Jedella Ghost' by Tanith Lee from *Interzone*? I could be honest and say that if heroic fantasy is your thing, then this isn't the book for you (but then I remember Paul J. McAuley's 'Sea Change with Monsters' which isn't really fantasy, because it's got science in it, but is

probably as much a fantasy as, say, *Heiro's Journey*. And of course, you've got your alternate world stories like Howard Waldrop's 'US' (first published in 1998, online on *Event Horizon*, www.eventhorizon.com, the site is still there as I review this.)

So then, something for everyone (except horror fans, or fantasy fans) who likes sf. And I suppose I should give Honourable mentions to the ones that I liked and loathed. Well, Cory Doctorow's 'Craphound' worked for me, and Robert Reed's 'The Cuckoo's Boys' seemed least plausible. But hey, that's just my opinion. This is a good all round read. A good roundup of the short sf of 1998. It does what it says on the cover.

Greg Egan – *Teranesia*

Gollancz, 1999, 249pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-57506-854-X

Reviewed by John Newsinger

Greg Egan's reputation as a writer of science fiction stands justifiably tall and this latest novel certainly does it no damage. It tells the story of Prabir Suresh, from his precocious childhood on an isolated Indonesian island he christens Teranesia, through his coming of age and early adulthood in Canada to his eventual return to Teranesia. Prabir's personal odyssey takes place against a background of genetic upheaval involving the appearance of new plant and animal mutations spreading throughout the Indonesian islands. The implications of this for the future of humanity are terrifying. Along the way Egan declares for rationalism and makes some enjoyable sideswipes at postmodernism to which we will return.

Prabir, aged only nine, and his younger sister, Madhusree, live with their scientist parents on the deserted island of Teranesia. His father, Rajendra, and mother, Radha, are studying the local butterflies, tracking down a new species. Egan goes out of his way to make clear his commitment to a scientific world-view in his detailing of Rajendra's biography. The man is a hero. A child of the Calcutta slums, Rajendra had been helped by the Indian Rationalist Association, escaping from poverty through the agency of education. The IRA had even helped him avoid 'the clutches of the Mad Albanian'. Is this any way to write about Mother Theresa? Yes, it is! Rajendra became a rationalist himself, helping to expose the gurus and mystics who preyed on the city's population. He became a biologist and, together with his partner, Radha, is in the pursuit of understanding. Around them Indonesia is dissolving into wars of secession.

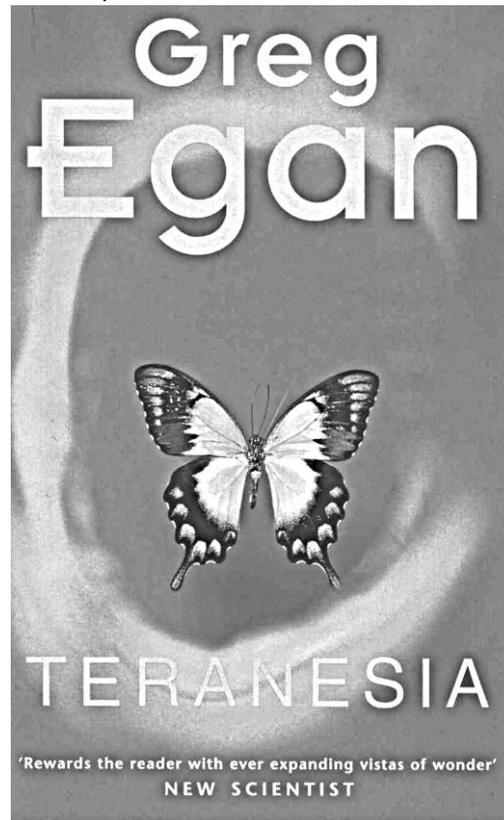
The family are safe on their isolated island until Prabir's precocity draws down upon them the wrath of the Indonesian military. His mother and father are killed but he saves his sister and they both end up as refugees in Canada, the charges of

their aunt, Amita, and her partner, Keith.

At this point, Egan takes time for some well-deserved blows aimed at the mystics and gurus of the opulent West.

Keith has a PhD in X-Files theory from UCLA, while Amita has a Masters in Diana Studies from Leeds and for her doctorate developed an interactive graphic novel of Conrad's *Nostromo* as an exercise in post-colonial transliteracy. At the moment she is investigating why computers are so hostile to women. This, of course, does not require any knowledge of computer science. This wilful obscurantism in the face of the problems confronting Prabir and his sister, let alone the problems confronting the world at large, is savagely satirised. The emergence of genetic anomalies in Indonesia and his sister's involvement in field research into the problem force Prabir to confront the guilt that has haunted him since the death of his parents. The novel tells of the resolution of these issues. How successful is Egan in handling the wealth of material, ideas, attitude and character that he deploys? The book demonstrates his strengths as a writer. He very definitely has something urgent, something interesting to say about the world.

He has created strong characters in Prabir and his sister Maddy. The scientific detective story that runs through the novel is excitingly told. Nonetheless, this reader was left with nagging doubts. Prabir's guilt was too obvious, too reminiscent of cod psychology. The character deserved better. The political environment Egan creates is extremely convincing in some respects, but not in others. To sum up: an excellent but imperfect novel. Still, a definite must for anyone interested in contemporary science fiction.

**Raymond E. Feist – *Krondor: The Assassins***

HarperCollins, 1999, 352pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-00-2246953

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

This second book in a trilogy follows on directly from events at the end of *Krondor: The Betrayal*. Prince Arutha and his court have returned to Krondor and it's not long before Jimmy The Hand is despatched once again to the sewers beneath the city to use his considerable skills as a thief and discover who is behind a spate of killings. Someone is bumping off magic-users, and the stakes are raised dramatically when a visiting noble from a neighbouring state is added to the list of deceased. The sewers are in chaos; the Upright Man has disappeared, feared dead, and a new regime has moved in. Jimmy and his friend, Knight Lieutenant William conDoin, must find out who is behind it all before The Kingdom is plunged into another war.

Once again Feist trots out all his well-used and best-known characters, and there is more than a little predictability about their thoughts and actions, not to mention the plot. As always it's a page-turner; the action comes thick and fast and there

are enough twists and turns to keep the reader interested. However, that said, it really is becoming all a little bit too tired and worn, and one wonders whether Feist really has anything new to say in or about his created world of Midkemia. Feist is beginning to resemble David Eddings in his ability to continuously re-package and re-tell the same story, but at least Eddings attempts to disguise the fact by renaming his world and his characters (even if they are exactly the same by any other name).

This book is classic Ray Feist, and will no doubt satisfy all but his more demanding readers. This reader wants something new, and the fact is that after 15 books or so now, nothing is new with Ray Feist anymore.

Chris Ferns – Narrating Utopia

Liverpool University Press, 1999, 265pp, £14.95 ISBN 0-85323-604-6

Gwyneth Jones – Deconstructing the Starships

Liverpool University Press, 1999, 221pp, £11.95 ISBN 0-85323-793-X

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Two excellent and very welcome titles from the Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies series under General Editor David Seed.

Utopias are tricky things. Look at them long enough and you realise they are places where most of us would go slowly up the wall out of either boredom, frustration or disaffection. That is, if we happen to be white, male and middle class. For others, the process might take considerably less time. *Narrating Utopias*, taking the subtitle *Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*, examines a range of utopian fictions from a broadly feminist perspective; from the early 'Dreams of Order' of More's *Utopia* (1516), Campanella's *City of the Sun*, (1623) and Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), through the 19th century social engineering of Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* and Wells's *A Modern Utopia* and their nightmare reversal in the dystopias of Zamyatin (Zamyatin's *We* is reviewed elsewhere this issue), Orwell, Huxley and Atwood to libertarian alternatives (Morris, Bogdanov and Huxley's *Island*) and the separatist feminist utopias of Gilman, Gerhardt, Russ, Piercy and Le Guin.

The 20th century dystopias provide a cultural pivot point to both the book and to the ideology and form of utopian literature. Visions of social conformity and order under a benevolent autocracy became unsustainable after WW2 and Stalin's communism. The dystopias "make absolute what in utopia is only implicit", showing the thinness of the coin which separates the two faces. The exposed nightmare of the repressive (and patriarchal) world state prompts a return to other forms of separatism – either isolationist or adversarial – particularly in the subsequent feminist utopias. At the same time early narrative

models based on 'instructive dialogues' and catalogues of wonders to serendipitous visitors are largely abandoned for more radical 'frame breaking' devices that start with Wells's *A Modern Utopia* and combine with other sfal devices in works as varied as *The Female Man*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Always Coming Home*.

Subtitled 'Science, Fiction and Reality', *Deconstructing the Starships* is a collection of essays and reviews by Gwyneth Jones, collected from such diverse places as *Foundation*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, papers presented at various conferences and for the British Telecom Information Technology Systems Division. The first half, and two sections, of the book, are the various essays, on topics as diverse as 'brand name' fantasy, futurological extrapolation, cyberspace and the body ("how did SF's delight in a new toy for minds come to involve such disgust for the flesh?"), feminism, aliens and the Other. The second half comprises a dozen reviews, between 2000-6000 words in length. These range from Lefanu's *In the Chinks of the World Machine* and Datlow's *Alien Sex* to Hand's *Winterlong*, Tepper's *A Plague of Angels* and Charnas's *The Furies* to Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and the deliciously titled 'Glory Season: David Brin's Feminist Utopia', together with two extended overviews, one on C.J. Cherryh and the other an impressive study of landscape and utopia in the work of Le Guin.

Sharp, provocative, witty, often delightfully funny, and combining prose and arguments that are a model of clarity. Very highly recommended.

Christopher Fowler – Uncut

Warner, 1999, 406pp, £7.99, 0-7515-2644-4

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

In *Uncut*, Christopher Fowler presents a collection of favourite stories and adds three new tales. In this collection he shows his fantasy writing as well as his urban horror and extends themes of injustice, frustration and the need for escape through his claustrophobic style.

In 'The Trafalgar Lockdown', Sadita Kobe is hired to travel on the HMS Trafalgar as an artist. She mixes with the crew during the early part of the voyage but is put into deep sleep for the remaining journey. When she is woken later, the captain claims that the sleep pods were damaged and that they have lost contact with Earth. However, she discovers that the Captain is obsessed with the death of his partner in a sleep pod and has murdered the crew. Sadita chooses to go back to the pod as her only chance of escape and to wait for the Captain's death. Fowler extends grandeur to his description of the space ship and yet manages to compress the atmosphere until Sadita escapes back into sleep. The Gormenghastian 'Tales of Britannica Castle' develops an increasingly closed atmosphere as the castle's myths are stripped away. The traveller of 'In Persia' finds solace in returning to a spiritual home, whilst seeking release from the reality of being

interrogated for an unknown crime. He understands that gazing at the words written on the deity's pedestal cause madness but he does so test the boundaries of his enchanted world.

The two new urban stories further the interest in finding release from internal anger and frustration. In 'Two Murders', Fowler charts the decline of a murderer as the killer tries to escape his crimes. When a woman confronts him and challenges him to kill her, he finds that he cannot do so. After his arrest, he confesses and begins to offer an explanation for his behaviour and so, from internal claustrophobia and frustration, finds release in his deadly act. In 'Thirteen Places of Interest in Kentish Town', the closed community is shaken by the murder of a young child. The revenge taken by Mrs Atherton, after her husband has an affair, shows Fowler's interest in the informal justice that exists within small enclaves.

Fowler's writing has become subtler, less reliant on the grand guignol pieces such as 'Dale and Wayne Go Shopping' or 'Jumbo Portions'. This selection of stories gives a solid overview to the Fowler's work, throwing many of his themes and obsessions into relief as his writing developed.

Richard Garfinkle – All of an Instant

TOR Books, 1999, 383pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-86617-8

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

I had no idea people were still writing sf quite like *All Of An Instant*. This could have been written 60 years ago or yesterday, and is reminiscent of a bizarre cross between Stapledon's *Star Maker* and of Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*. The former for its immense scope, the latter for the single weird

idea taken to its limits.

The single weird idea is that time is split into two layers, likened to earth and water. You and I live in the earth layer (or Flux), prisoners of linear cause and effect. "Above" us lies the water layer (or Instant) where every moment of time in the

earth layer exists simultaneously. The Instant has been progressively colonised by tribes of humans who have learned how to use its ripples and currents to alter history back in the Flux, with the result that the Instant is now in complete anarchy as hundreds of tribes fight to stabilise their preferred version of history in place of others'.

We are rather leisurely introduced to the three primary characters (or, more correctly, I suspect, archetypes) in the narrative: Nir, a War Chief of the Ghosts, sworn protectors of the single mother of all humanity many thousands of years ago, Kookatchi, the legendary greatest thief of the Instant and Quillithé, the Lady of the only army of the Instant. The appearance of an inexplicable phenomenon in the Instant portends the onset of a catastrophe against which they must combine their knowledge and transcend their prejudices. That's the plot; any more detailed synopsis would only end up swallowing the rest of this review.

All Of An Instant is a simple idea, complexly realised in a beautiful semi-mythical style about which I freely admit to

being rather dubious after reading only the first page, since Garfinkle's prose seems deceptively simplistic. But it is simple rather than simplistic, flowing easily, letting you forget just how bizarre the world you're reading about is until suddenly you have to reread a whole page s-l-o-w-l-y. There's no difficult words, no experimental style or stream of consciousness, it's the *concepts* that can confound the unwary (i.e. me). The writing style might grate a little at first, but you soon realise that there's simply no other way of writing a book like this. It isn't hard sf, isn't traditional fantasy, in fact doesn't really read as anything except, perhaps, myth. My one complaint about *All Of An Instant* might be that it is overly long; the narrative complexity working against this mythical perception rather than with it.

This was a pleasant alternative to... well, to almost anything. A strange odyssey of a book, well recommended if you fancy something out of the ordinary.

Tom Holt – *Alexander at the World's End*

Little, Brown, 1999, 434pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-316-85058-6

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

Tom Holt, writing in the genre of the historical novel, well-removed from his farcical takes on legendry, creates the Athenian, Euxenus, pupil of Diogenes, as the wry, disenchanted observer of the Attic, Macedonian and Asian scenes in which he and the Great Alexander are inter-relatedly, ironically-paralleled actors. Euxenus, in old age, writes his story as told to Phryzeutis, a young illiterate Scythian of the remote colony of Iskander, in Sogdiana (modern Uzbekistan), which he had been sent by Alexander to manage. Because, for Phryzeutis, Euxenus has to elucidate Greek and Persian background, the occasion is there for Tom Holt to do this painlessly for the reader, often through anecdotes, recollections and the debunking of historic 'truth'. The whole narrative favours digression, but without any weakening of the main threads. It uses modern idiom, usually succeeding in making it appropriate to Fourth Century BC situations.

Here are the main threads. The young Euxenus, con-man turned pedagogue, becomes (with Aristotle and others) tutor to the royal Macedonian boy, Alexander, teaching him little, but impressing on him the advantages of pragmatic detachment and thus ensuring reactions of wilful determination. King Philip takes to Euxenus's idea of settling redundant mercenaries in

new colonies, and packs him off to found Antolbia on the northern Black Sea coast. After years of pacifying raiding Scythians, Euxenus returns to his native Attica to claim and farm family land. It is from this that Alexander summons him to take over Iskander. On the journey there, he encounters his brother, Eudaemon, an officer in Alexander's army, who tells at length, in blunt and bloody style, of campaign siege and battle; of, to Euxenus's incredulous dismay, Alexander's belief that all his motivation stemmed from his tutoring; and finally of Alexander's paranoia and death. Euxenus goes on to Iskander where he concludes that he should occasionally exercise his absolute power "if only to show the people here how lucky they are to have me, rather than someone who rushes about *doing* things all the time."

What are here missing, what are too subtly conceived for condensation, are the fortuities, evasions and strategies of Euxenus's career: the (supposed) prestige-ensuring snake (the daemon of Socrates) that he keeps in a jar; the infinitely adaptable example and parable of the bees; the constant punning exposition of the "yapping dog", pretension-stripping Cynic philosophy. These are the novel's greatest joys, all eloquent of its current relevance.

Kij Johnson – *The Fox Woman*

Tor, 2000, 384pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-85429-3

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

To the Japanese, the fox is a subtle creature, a shape-shifter, an illusionist whose magic is the stuff of deception. In the fox's world, nothing is ever quite as it seems. The world of the Japanese court is equally subtle, with a wealth of meaning made manifest in the manner of a gesture or the colour of a robe. Having inadvertently fallen from favour at court, Yoshifuji has returned to his neglected country estate to ponder his future. He is fascinated by the foxes who live in the garden, and who seem to represent the freedom which is missing from his own life, rigidly governed as it was by the protocols of court and city. But Yoshifuji's wife, Shikujo, fears the countryside, the foxes in particular, and their effect on her husband, whose erratic behaviour is becoming ever more incomprehensible to her. Meanwhile, one of the foxes, a young female called Kitsune, is equally fascinated by the humans who have unexpectedly invaded her domain and falls in love with Yoshifuji. Determined to possess him, she begins to study what it means to be human, performing the fox's mysterious magic in order to have that which she most desires.

In some respects, *The Fox Woman* embodies the classic British tale of the town mouse and the country mouse, each

unhappy in the other's chosen milieu, but there is much more to the story than this. Instead, one might more reasonably think of Kitsune as embodying that part of themselves that Yoshifuji and Shikujo cannot otherwise express, each of them in their own way longing to break free of the well-regulated but stultifying life of the city. Kitsune, in trying to become like them, finds her own animal spirit almost crushed by the literal weight of appearing human, of remembering what is appropriate at every moment, unable to give vent to her own authentic feelings for Yoshifuji. The tragedy of Yoshifuji and Shikujo is one of conformity, that neither can truly express their feelings to the other, although each is lonely and unhappy. It takes the intrusion of Kitsune into their lives, and her efforts to understand human happiness, to make them understand what it is they fear, and to realise what it is they truly want even while the illusion of Kitsune's fox-magic points up the sham nature of their own lives.

Kij Johnson's debut novel explores a mythological tradition which will be unknown to many readers, although we know of the fox as a cunning and resourceful character in British folk tales. She uses unfamiliar characters and narrative

expectations to give fresh impetus to old themes, and in doing so produces a novel which is very compelling. Although seemingly slow-moving at times, mimicking the stultifying pace of Yoshifuji and Shijuko's lives, *The Fox Woman* repays patient reading; after a while, you will find yourself swept into this

strange half-world where nothing is quite what it seems, but where each word, every description, is delicately calculated to achieve just the right effect, where you do genuinely care about what happens to these desperately confused people and where the bitter-sweet ending seems perfectly judged.

Dennis Jones – *The Stone and the Maiden*

Avon Eos, 1999, 421pp, \$23.00 ISBN 0-380-97801-6

Reviewed by Elizabeth Billinger

This is a very purple book: with the dust jacket it positively dazzles, without it merely glows. I know one is not supposed to judge a book by its cover, but I feared for the contents, especially when I discovered the map and the fact that it is the first in Jones's *The House of Pandagore* trilogy.

I was, however, pleasantly surprised by the quality of the writing and sufficiently intrigued by the story-telling to feel the need to read on and find out 'what happens next'.

It is a quest fantasy which centres around a princess and a soldier. It seems that Mandine, the royal princess and heir to the Ascendancy, and Key, the cavalry officer, are the only ones who can save the land from the depredations of the ruthless and bloodthirsty Tathars and from the growing powers of a dreaded sorcerer, Er kai the Chain. Despite the formulaic nature of the plot there are sufficient twists, turns and little details to keep the reader's interest as the couple journey through forest, wastes and different lands in search of the *signata*.

The political intrigue that happens as the Ascendancy makes its last stand is well-drawn, there are little things that hook the imagination: Er kai's chain moves like a living thing as he and it take on greater power, but the characters never stray

beyond the predictable stock characters of fantasy. Jones has obviously developed a detailed background for the book, justifying people's actions and foreshadowing solutions that do not then feel too contrived. It is a shame, however, that he cannot resist putting so much of this in the book: "let me explain, my lord". This tendency to tell rather than to show also spoils the characterisation. The delightful tension of an impossible love between Mandine and Key is lost because the point is laboured so often and the author anxiously tells us how each party feels, leaving no room for the reader to smugly spot things ahead of time and wait anxiously to see how things work out.

Jones's writing also seems to fail at the conclusion of the quest when Mandine and Key enter what may be a strange part of their world or may be a magical experience. What is clearly intended to be a dream-like sequence of hallucinations and shifting landscapes never quite manages to capture the right hypnotic effect.

A quick and entertaining read, but I shall not be rushing out to buy the other two volumes of the trilogy.

John Kessel – *The Pure Product*

Tor, 1999, 381pp, \$14.95 ISBN 0-312-86680-1

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

The Pure Product contains 17 stories and two poems, nine of which appeared in an earlier Arkham House collection *Meeting in Infinity*. Copyright and publication dates range from 1980 ('Herman Melville: Space Opera Virtuoso') through to 1997 and the two new stories appearing in this collection, 'Gulliver at Home' and the manic 'Faustfeathers'.

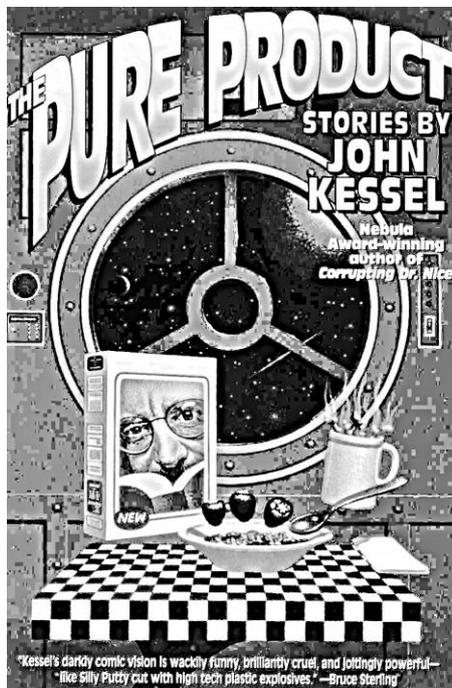
Several of the stories are companion pieces to Kessel's time travel dark comedy *Corrupting Dr. Nice* (reviewed in V208) and while it's not necessary to have read that book it does add to the enjoyment.

Kessel in fact seems fascinated with time travel and alternate histories and the majority of the stories here hinge on that slightly skewed sense of 'what if?'. What if future time travellers had abducted a comatose Marilyn Monroe from a lonely hotel bedroom in order to fight a VR ratings war with Universal Studios' *Laying on of Hands*, hosted by a similarly abducted Jesus Christ? What if there are no qualms about interfering with the past because any act, however outrageous, merely splits off an alternate timeline that you won't have to live in? What if you could have bad memories of relationship selectively erased, as in 'Hearts Do Not in Eyes Shine', only to make the same mistakes again?

Not all the stories work, and the wide spread of dates leads to some unevenness, with the later ones through the '90s being, on the whole, more accomplished. I really didn't get the

point of 'The Lecturer' or indeed the title story, despite it being nominated for a Nebula. I have read 'Buddha Nostril Bird' three times now, and I'm not sure I'm the wiser. I suspect its moebius time paradox twists (like Heinlein's 'All You Zombies') are like those Magic Eye illusions. Either you can see them or you can't. I felt similarly lost through much of 'The Franchise', another alternate history in which George Herbert Bush and Fidel Castro face each other in the World Series baseball finals, not for the story itself, which has some sharp things to say about the relationship between politics and sport, but because much of the sense of tension relies on an understanding of the arcane language of baseball. No such problem with 'Gulliver at Home' in which Lemuel's long absences and unworldly strangeness are told from the view point of his despairing wife, culminating in his return from the land of Yahoos and his horror of people and of his family. It ends on a note of sad resignation that Gulliver now at home is more thoroughly lost than during any of his voyages.

The definite highlight, though, is 'Buffalo', which feels a far more personal story than the others, and involves a meeting which never happened (in more than one sense) between Kessel's father and his hero H.G. Wells. It's a wonderful, haunting tale of missed opportunities and mutual misunderstandings that just balances at the end between dejection and hope.



Garry Kilworth – *Shadow-Hawk*

Orbit, 1999, 434pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85723-742-0

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

"The writer had a review to complete, but though he had written plenty before he didn't know how to begin. Suddenly he had an idea and wrote it down. Eventually he had four ideas. His review was only short, like Tippritter, the native god of writers..."

Shadow-Hawk confused me terribly when I read it. Most of the story is told as above, in blocky expository sentences. In fact it reads like many of the Juveniles I read when younger, but just when you're convinced it is a Juvenile there can suddenly appear a mention of sex or some gross-out violence that jars absolutely with the style.

Garry Kilworth has had an impressive number of books published, and many of them have been Juveniles, which makes me wonder if he hasn't been afflicted by a literary synaesthesia, writing in 'Juvenile' for an 'Adult' audience (my humble apologies to all Juvenile writers reading this, I am stereotyping *all* of your work in my own, dated, recollections).

But. *Shadow-Hawk* is a historical yomp around the fringes of

the British Empire circa 1880, where the assuredness of the Empire fades into the mysteries of the rainforest and indigenous legends. Basically, two competing expeditions, one officially sanctioned and one not, strike out into the inexplicable forest looking for the seven ancient heads of the Punan – "It is said that possession of these seven heads will lead to untold riches." I've checked and double-checked, but this rather flimsy premise is the basis of the entire plot.

Kilworth's English characters just aren't Victorians; they could be transplanted into a modern context without any difficulty whatsoever. There is a fair bit of colourful local detail included, something Kilworth has specialised in previously it seems, but even this feels as though it's been crudely stuck on with prodigious amounts of Sellotape.

I couldn't recommend *Shadow-Hawk* at all, not even if Baneoftheauthor's life, reviewing demon of the Dayak tribe, were to demand it of me!

Nancy Kress – *Beaker's Dozen*

TOR Books, 1999, 352pp, \$13.95 ISBN 0-312-86843-X

Reviewed by Robert W. Hayler

This anthology contains thirteen recently published stories, the majority of which are hard-ish tales about genetic engineering and its consequences, hence the anthology's amusing title. As a whole they feel as well researched as, say, Egan's; Kress can certainly extrapolate just as convincingly, yet she trumps the competition completely when it comes to human interest.

The two novellas that bookend this collection provide ample evidence of her patience and skill. In the Hugo award winning 'Beggars in Spain' she presents to us the lives of some genetically enhanced young people who lack the need to sleep and graphically imagines the hostility with which the envious world reacts to them. I've read stories by lesser writers in which they detail how emotion could be artificially manufactured. In contrast, and much more interestingly, this story details how artificiality can manufacture emotion. 'Dancing On Air' is just as worthy of plaudits but since when did stories about ballet win awards at Worldcons? Art squares up against artificiality, performance versus purity, in an exciting tale of ambition and its costs. It also stars a great enhanced dog. The other stories in the genetics

strand are uniformly excellent: considered, involving and exciting.

For me, though, a couple of the real stand-out pieces are not part of the chemistry set. 'Unto The Daughters' is a feminist retelling of the fall from the snake's point of view. The snake's persistence in the face of Eve's indifference is finally rewarded when Eve sees her daughter being excluded by Adam and her older sons. In less capable hands this could very easily turn glib and patronising yet Kress's story is nothing short of breathtaking. Similarly, the inversion of Sleeping Beauty that is 'Summer Wind' maintains a haunting atmosphere throughout with carefully chosen imagery and leads to a satisfying and only partially expected ending.

These are stories enriched by a rare maturity both in their treatment of themes and in their characterisation of the relationships between people. At this level of consistent quality one can even forgive Kress the indulgence of introducing each story. I consider this sort of thing to be true sf: a convincing attempt to show how our quest for knowledge and its technological products affect who we really are.

Nancy Kress – *David Brin's Out of Time 1: Yanked*

Avon Books, 1999, 246pp, £4.99 ISBN 0-380-79968-5

Sheila Finch – *David Brin's Out of Time. 2: Tiger Sky*

Avon Books, 1999, 242pp, \$4.99 ISBN 0-380-79971-5

Roger McBride Allen – *David Brin's Out of Time 3: The Game of Worlds*

Avon Books, 1999, 256pp, \$4.99 ISBN 0-380-79969-3

Reviewed by Chris Hill

In the 24th century Earth has become a utopia. Then it is visited by advanced aliens, dubbed the 'Gift Givers'. They give humans teleport technology and promise more if they can go through 'Nine Steps' of development – only the Gift Givers will not say what these steps are. Earth has two problems: violence and aggression have been bred out of the race so they lack 'grit' (sic). Secondly, only children can use the teleporters for long-distance travel. So they take young people from the past with the requisite 'grit', ask them to perform the missions and then return them home (after wiping their memories).

In *Yanked!*, a colony ship crashes on a distant planet. In his dying message, the Captain announces that he has found out what the 'Third Step' is and has hidden the information on the ship. Unfortunately, the alien Panurish are also searching for the clue.

In *Tiger in the Sky* a small, furry alien life-form is accidentally brought on board a space station on the edge of the solar system. Before you can say 'tribble', 'Paramount' and 'litigation', the space station is overrun with them.

Although it does not say on the covers, these stories are aimed at the teenage market. I can see that the 'wish-fulfilment' aspect would appeal to many adolescents ('Wow! Adults have to ask the kids to sort out their problems! Cool!') but as an adult I find myself asking questions about the morality of it. The children are kidnapped from their own times and sent on missions that will put them in mortal

danger. They may be given the option of saying 'no' but how many teenagers would have the wherewithal to really question what is going on?

That aside, the individual stories are quite entertaining. While I usually like Nancy Kress and I have been rather rude about Sheila Finch's writing elsewhere recently, I have to admit that *Tiger in the Sky* is better written than *Yanked!*, although there is a certain amount of contrivance to generate tension (a fully-crewed space station only having two space suits, for example, and the most obvious solution to the problem is not even noticed).

In Allen's *The Game of Worlds*, humanity is opening negotiations with another race, the Devlin. However, there is evidence that the Devlin have had some contact with humans before and it is reasoned that they have found one of the missing human colony ships. A team from the past is infiltrated into the negotiation team to try and find out if their suspicions are correct. Where the other books have concentrated entirely on the 'Yanked', *Game* ranges a bit wider, giving scenes from the viewpoint of two alien races and the survivors of the crashed colony ship. This makes it seem rather more substantial than the previous offerings in the series. The plotting is tighter and the scenario has rather more of a sense of being grounded in reality. The only real complaint I have is that the boy Roberto, an illiterate Brazilian slave from 1883, gains far too good a grasp of twentieth-century

idiom, even with the translation devices. On the strength of this I will certainly be looking out some of Roger MacBride Allen's adult sf novels.

Overall, despite a dubious premise and some rather lightweight

writing, they are quite fun. If the series editor only has the courage to darken the scenarios a little (for example, question the motivations of the Gift Givers) it could turn into something quite interesting.

Stephen R Lawhead – *Avalon*

Avon Books, 1999, 442pp, \$25.00, ISBN 0-380-97702-8

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

After thoroughly exploring the story of a Dark Age Arthur in the five volumes of the Pendragon cycle, Stephen Lawhead turns his attention to Arthur's return.

In a tired and cynical Britain, a political process is under way which will end in the abolition of the monarchy. The suicide of the reigning king, Edward IX, appears to accelerate the process. Instead, James Arthur Stewart, a young man who initially has no idea of his noble blood, is proved to be the last surviving heir to the throne, and comes to realise that in another life he was Arthur.

James is an attractive character, and the two halves of his personality integrate well. Presenting someone so charismatic that he can almost single-handedly revive a failing nation is very difficult, and Lawhead succeeds in making him believable. The story of his struggle to establish himself is tremendously readable, and generally fast paced, though I felt that sometimes James's inspiring speeches went on a bit long. There's also the satisfaction for Arthurian enthusiasts of identifying figures from Arthurian legend who reappear along with Arthur himself: Kay and Gawain, Merlin and Queen Guenevere.

But this isn't the novel that it might have been. There are indications that the book is set about a hundred years in the future,

yet there's little attempt to create a future society. The creation of a viable political background isn't followed through; details of everyday life like transport and communications appear very much as they are now. A more minor difficulty that disengaged me from the story at several points is that although Lawhead has spent several years in Britain, his American origins show through. He doesn't know, for example, how English working people speak, or how to refer to a clergyman of the Church of England.

Another problem is that the opposition to James/Arthur isn't nearly strong enough. His political opponents make little attempt to get rid of him, and the supernatural forces of evil embodied in the woman who is revealed to be Morgan le Fay are remarkably ineffectual. Various elaborate plots fail or rebound on the plotters, when a well-placed assassin's bullet would have solved the problem – and wrecked the story.

The novel ends with James's coronation and the investigation of the ancient land of Llyonesse – here identified with Avalon – which has risen from the sea off the Cornish coast. There's a lot more potential material, and it may be that Lawhead plans a sequel. In spite of this novel's flaws, I hope he does, and I'd certainly read it.

Ursula K. Le Guin – *The Dispossessed*

Millennium, 1999, 319pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-882-5

Reviewed by Carol Ann Kerry-Green

"Go to Urras," Takver said. Her voice was so harsh that Shevek sat back as if she had hit him in the face. (p309)

On a world with an anarchist utopian society, Shevek and the Syndicate of Initiative tussle with their society's inward looking isolationism as they attempt to open up communication with Urras, the sister planet their ancestors left over 150 years. Anarres a world where names are made up by computer; where anyone can walk into any supply depot and take anything they wish; where accommodation and food are there for the taking; where everyone is equal and work assignments are doled out by the computer. It is also a world where innovation is frowned upon: Shevek's daughter Sadik suffers bullying and his partner, Takver, is shunned at work because of his attempts to break out of the stalemate his world has entered. An ambiguous utopia.

One section of the novel deals with Shevek's trip to Urras, with his reactions to Urrasti society and the concept of money and class. The other section follows Shevek's life from a small boy to the above scene where he makes the momentous decision to go to Urras. The contrasting sections highlight the differences between Anarresti and

Urrasti ways of life, but some things remain the same. On Anarres, Shevek is prevented from teaching and publishing his physics work by Sabul, the head of physics at the Institute, and when he goes to Urras to pursue his theory of simultaneity he realises that the Urrasti scientists he has befriended over the years would betray him to their government. Driven to protect his fledgling theory, Shevek flees the carefully controlled environment of the University in Ioti, and meets up with the present day Odonian revolutionaries.

The Dispossessed is a book that explores society and human nature, it looks at how a utopian society becomes inward looking and stale after 150 years. It also explores the question of who owns science, so in a bid to deny ownership of his theory, Shevek asks the human ambassador to "...broadcast the equations, to give them to physicists all over this world, and to the Hainish and the other worlds..." (p288) enabling him to return to Anarres with empty hands, "as they had always been." (p319)

This remains a powerful book over twenty years since it was originally published; if you enjoyed it then, revisit it for the sheer enjoyment of discovering old friends, if it's new to you, enjoy.

Julian May – *Orion Arm*

Voyager, 1999, 364pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-00-224624-4

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

This is the second in a rip-roaring space opera yarn. It picks up pretty much where the first one left off, kicking over the tables sufficiently to disallow the obvious winning streak with which the hero ended the first book.

This new series, which may or may not continue, is a departure for May. Her previous interlinked series (Saga of the Exiles, et al.) were heavy, fairly serious stuff, although the sense of humour of some of the characters lightened the tone quite well. The less said about her Trillium work (alone and with Norton and Bradley) the better, as far as I am concerned. The Rampart Worlds is an old-fashioned space opera. We have scheming mega-corporations, boardroom battles that spill over into space battles, assassinations, kidnapping and sundry other illegitimate business. We have two alien races, with some interesting biological differences to humanity (although bipedalism still wins out on the whole). And finally, we have a wise-cracking, honest to goodness hero with the unlikely name of Helmut Frost (Helly to his friends). The name's forgivable since it's a nom-de-guerre (or rather, a nom-de-lack-of-guerre) chosen by Asahel Frost when he's living the quiet life as a disenfranchised (i.e. not employed by a big corporation) sport-dive guide on an idyllic water world.

His idyll was interrupted in the first book by a giant sea toad trying to eat his beach-side house. Similar difficulties entertain our hero and drag him back into the world of high finance and low skulduggery once again. May recaps the first book in one of the early chapters committing a sin I've railed against in the past: she did a very good 'what has gone before' section for her Saga of the Exiles and trying to shoehorn reminiscences into the plotline rarely works. If I'd read the first one recently it would have been very annoying, I suspect. As it is it reminded me of the events of book one (*Perseus Spur*) sufficiently without being too boring a precis. This is the only fault I have with this book, however. It's action all the way as our hero stumbles and falls and sprains every muscle (breaking a bone or two along the way) in his efforts for truth, justice and the American Way. Well, after all, his family are still ranchers at heart and anything else just wouldn't be baseball.

If you're looking for deep, meaningful prose on the nature of humanity and the meaning of life, you won't find it here. If you're looking for a rollicking good time with a book you won't want to put down then this is for you.

Maureen F. McHugh – *China Mountain Zhang*

Orbit, 1999, 313pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85723-862-1

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This novel first appeared in 1992, when it won a number of awards including the James Tiptree and the Locus Award for best first novel. A prospective reader can feel hopeful that here is something special.

China Mountain Zhang depicts an alternative world where China has become the dominant power, and rules the US. Only the pure Chinese have the opportunity to rise to the top. Zhang, the narrator of the bulk of the novel, is apparently Chinese, but really half Spanish-American; he approaches the Chinese culture and power structure as an outsider, his alienation reinforced by the fact that he is also gay. One of the satisfactions of the novel for me was the way in which he works out his destiny while retaining the essentials of who and what he is.

Interwoven with Zhang's story are sections with other narrators. Most closely involved with Zhang is the girl he might

have married; the other narrators are a kite racer – a competitor in a popular and dangerous future sport – and members of a Martian colony. Their stories are only loosely connected with Zhang's, and if I have a complaint about the novel as a whole it's that these episodes aren't really integrated into it. I wanted to know more, about the people and about their environment.

The future world is beautifully imagined and described, with a great deal of concrete detail. I'm technically illiterate, and yet I can understand McHugh's new technologies – especially the splendid Daoist engineering – and imagine them working in the real world. At the same time the characters aren't sacrificed to the world building; I was engaged with them and I wanted to know what happened to them. For anyone who didn't read this on its first appearance, I recommend it highly.

Juliet E. McKenna – *The Swordsman's Oath*

Orbit, 1999, 566pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85723-740-4

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

This is the 'Second Tale of Einarinn', and is, as you might expect, the sequel to the first, *The Thief's Gamble*. It follows the further adventures of Ryshad, Livak and Shiv (only his mother calls him Shivvalan). The first book was an excellent first novel and McKenna has followed it up admirably with this offering. The characters remain endearing and all too human. These aren't perfect heroes but real people with real problems. They are the centrepiece of a cold war between two cultures with two different forms of magic. McKenna isn't afraid to let major events happen off-screen even if they include one of our main characters, and this keeps the plot moving along nicely. Even at a fairly hefty 550+ pages this doesn't drag, but drags you along instead.

We begin by following Ryshad, the swordsman of the title, and an old friend from book one, as he chases reports of a bunch of the Elietimm. Having been ordered on this mission he follows it with a glad heart, hopeful of a chance to repay them for the death of his comrade Aiten (in *The Thief's Gamble*). While doing so he runs across Shiv the wizard, finding out later that Shiv deliberately tracked him down on a mission for the archmage. They set off to trace Livak, bringing back together what remains of the party from book one. Joining them this time are the rumbunctious elderly mage Viltred and Livak's sometime partner in crime, the ex-mercenary Halice.

We follow their adventures and misadventures through to a colony which was abandoned at the time aetheric magic became mostly extinct (leading to the rise of elemental magic, practiced by the archmage, Shiv and the rest). This collapse contributed much to the collapse of an empire: a fairly standard plot device. Foreigners with an unknown magic covet the rich land of our heroes. McKenna avoids the obvious traps with this and is neither trite nor coy. *The Swordsman's Oath* is all about what happened to cause the fall of the empire and the collapse of aetheric magic. It's a long journey to the truth for the protagonists but hints and ideas along the way prevent it from becoming frustrating for the reader. The characters seem neither too smart, seeing things from the flimsiest of clues, nor too dense, missing the all too obvious in furtherance of the plot. We do get the truth of things in this one, paying off the mysteries from the first book with no sense of disappointment, a feat all too rarely achieved. While the main mystery has been solved, the main events remain to be fully tie up, although this book has a complete and cohesive internal development to the climax.

The history has deepened, our knowledge of this rich world has been broadened, and the plot has been well thickened. Bring on the next episode!

China Mieville – *King Rat*

TOR Books, 1999, 318pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0-312-89073-7

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

In *King Rat*, China Miéville updates the Pied Piper of Hamelin, using contemporary London streets, sewers and the Drum and Bass subculture as the battleground. When Saul Garamond is arrested for his father's murder, he begins to question the relationship he thought he once had. The mysterious King of the Rats springs Saul from jail, bringing him to the netherworld of sewers and rubbish and teaching him how to live like a rat. On reaching the rat palace, the rats are hostile towards their king, and Saul eventually learns of the Rat Catcher and the reason for the Rat King's loss of authority, while learning that he is both heir to the Rat Throne and a tool in a game of power and revenge. The Rat King seeks redress for Hamelin, still angry and fearful of the Piper's power, and wants to use Saul for retribution.

In the surface world of Drum and Bass, a pale stranger visits Natasha, a friend of Saul's. She introduces him to her music as he adds a flute harmony to her tracks. Beguiling Saul's friends with his tunes, the flautist slowly tracks Saul through London, messily killing people as he stalks King Rat

and the heir apparent. When Natasha is put forward to DJ at a club, he seizes his chance to set his trap for the rats and the children of London.

Miéville recreates a tense and uneasy relationship between Saul and his human father. Returning to his old flat, he finds his human father's diary and begins to fully understand how much he was cared for and finds himself resenting the rat king even more. The Rat King fears Saul as he grows in confidence, gaining skill in the new city around him. As Saul discovers redemption of his guilt through action, he begins to command the rats' respect, throwing King Rat into further despair and weakness as the Piper's plan comes closer to fruition.

The sense of personal hatred and enmity between the Piper and the Rat King is indelible as they manipulate people around them. Both are amoral in their use of people as weapons, only faltering with Saul as he manages to break their influence on him. Miéville creates a dark, close atmosphere compacted through the horror and sewage of subterranean London. *King Rat* is a well-realised debut novel.

Pat Murphy – *There and Back Again*

Tor, 1999, 301pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-86644-5

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Or to give it its full title, *There and Back Again* by Max Merriwell, by Pat Murphy, although the jokey attribution of this story to Max Merriwell only appears on the title page. It is left to Pat Murphy, in the second Afterword (Merriwell has the first), to explain that Max inhabits an alternate world in which he is a prolific, middle-aged writer of sf under his own name, while writing fantasy under the pseudonym Mary Maxwell (whose *The Wild Angel* is scheduled for Spring 2000) and mysteries as Weldon Merrimax. The joke is nicely sustained to the photo inside the dustjacket flap which shows the two authors sharing a sofa.

Luckily, the plot is (slightly) more straightforward.

Take one part *The Hobbit* and one part galactic space opera. Season with clones, add a dash of Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*. Stir thoroughly and strain through several wormholes. Serve with a large dose of good-natured fun and (deceptive) frivolity.

It starts with Bailey, a 'norbit' or orbital asteroid miner, living in a hollowed out asteroid in a quiet backwater of the galaxy, who rescues a drifting message pod while travelling home in his steam powered rocket. The pod belongs



to the Farr Clone, a wealthy family whose fortune derives from mapping wormholes for safe travel through the galaxy. The Farris immediately come to retrieve their pod and its contents, an alien artifact that may be an ancient, and incredibly valuable, fragment of a map of the whole wormhole system. Gitana, the leader of the clone group, insists that Bailey accompany them on their return and the home-loving norbit suddenly finds himself at the centre of an adventure that involves daring escapes from space pirates, Resurrectionists and mind paralysing 'Trancers', and the awakening of the dreadful Boojum from its lair on the moon of a far-off colony planet. There's even a Gollum of sorts, the pathetic result of a horrible Resurrectionist experiment, and a 'ring of invisibility' (here a Moebius band that can speed or slow localised time) that Bailey wins from it in a contest of Riddle-Me Haiku (he cheats). Episodes like this, and the export drug 'jack' on Orphir, make this at times a darker tale than Tolkien's original, although the overriding mood, with its steam-driven 'tea kettle' rockets, and Bailey's friendship with a cyborg fighter ship called Fluffy, is one of irrepressible fun.

Stan Nicholls – *Legion of Thunder*

Gollancz, 1999, 281pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-06871-X

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

Legion of Thunder is the second book in the series 'Orcs: First Blood' and a sequel to the strongly recommended *Bodyguard of Lightning*. It tells of the attempts of Stryke and his war band, the Wolverines, to obtain more 'stars' in order to gain a better future for their race; or at least a more powerful bargaining position. In this quest they are opposed by a number of forces, the most powerful of which is their erstwhile owner, Jennesta. Although it would be better to read *Bodyguard of Lightning* first it is not necessary to do so. In the opening section of the book, 'What has Gone Before', Nicholls provides a good summary of the first novel.

The first section of the book proper contains an underwater battle between the Merz and the Nyadds. This provides a good 'hook' into the story with the events being fast-paced and the well-written prose carrying the momentum. The ruler of the Nyadds is Adpar, a minor but important new character. Readers of the previous book will remember her sister, Jennesta, who demanded absolute obedience but was indifferent to the opinions of others. In counterpoint "Adpar demanded both submission and praise". Unlike Jennesta, however, she is not without a certain ironic humour. For example, she describes her ruling style as "merciless supremacy, backed by violence; it runs in my side of the family", adding, as an oblique reference to Jennesta, "It's a female thing". After the opening section the story line splits into

several strands, each dealing with a different group or major character. This device allows Nicholls to develop the character of Coilla, the Wolverines' strategist, which works well, and a further development involving Jup and Haskeer, members of the Wolverines, although I feel more could be done here. Despite the splitting, the story flows freely and at times with page-turning pace. The mystical element continues to develop nicely. Stryke's visions are beginning to seem more real to him than reality itself, although there is an interesting hint of a more prosaic than mystical explanation for this. I enjoyed the description of the Orc gods, whose roles reflect perfectly Nicholls' portrayal of Orc culture. However, one mystical device I did not like was the appearance of Serapheim, 'a roving bard' with minor deity-like powers. He appears to possess an inexplicable knowledge of events, and is able to travel large distances instantly, appearing and disappearing at will. In a lazy device Nicholls uses Serapheim as a convenient way of directing Stryke to Coilla's location. Within this book, Serapheim unbalances the story, weakening the reader's suspension of disbelief. However, it is possible he will develop in a more rounded fashion, and evidence of his lack of omniscience and his growing weakness suggest further characterisation to come.

André Norton and Sherwood Smith – *Echoes in Time*

TOR Books, 1999, 319pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0-312-85921-X

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

André Norton is one of the most prolific sf writers, best-known for her Witch World series, now a successful 'shared world' with many contributors. Born in 1912, her first novel appeared in 1934, followed by over a hundred more since then. In the last few years there has been a spate of books appearing as collaborations between Norton and other writers, including two in the Solar Queen series with Sherwood Smith, herself mainly known for young-adult/juvenile sf books. The original Time Trader books appeared between 1959 and 1962. I haven't read them but I assume *Echoes In Time* has the same characters and follows on, more or less, from the earlier books.

Time agents Ross Murdock and Eveleen Riorden are called back from their honeymoon to join a group of Russian time agents and look for a team of Russian scientists who have disappeared in the far past of a far-off planet, having gone back to when a now-deserted city was still a major spaceport. The contents of a time capsule left by the missing Russians makes their disappearance even more explicable. Also on the mission is Saba Mariam, an Ethiopian time agent and musicologist. The reason for Saba's involvement is soon explained – an artifact found in the city in the present day is an ancient wood carving of a human woman's face,

undeniably that of Saba.

The previous novels were written during the Cold War, when the Russians were as much adversaries as the ferocious aliens the American team combated (the 'Baldies'), so this one brings them together to face common adversaries. The joint team travels to the planet and travel back in time to about 100 years after the disappearance, to attempt to work out what happened so they can go back and effect the rescue as safely as possible. When they enter the now-inhabited alien city they are amazed to see a huge wooden statue of Saba. The aliens are friendly, especially to Saba, but as the weeks pass, not only do the team seem to be no nearer an explanation, but they are all afflicted by an unknown illness which their medicines cannot alleviate. To make matters even worse, the Baldies turn up shooting! As time runs out for the mission, it is up to Saba to use her unique skills to solve the mysteries of what happened to the Russians, and why she is an icon, through the unlikely route of understanding the aliens' music.

The Echoes Of Time is a pacey, undemanding read, which younger readers will also enjoy, with strong characters (especially the women) and an intriguing puzzle that's cleverly solved.

Jane Palmer – *The Drune*

Swift, 1999, 212pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-874082-27-8

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

As its Josh Kirbyesque cover proclaims, this book is intended to be a humorous romp through fantasy and sf cliché-land, covering such ground as moronic protagonists ("tell me just one more time why we're doing this"), disappearing nuclear warheads, UFOs and alien abduction, Hollow Earth adventures, etc., etc. The dialogue is wonderfully stilted, sounding as though it has been lifted wholesale from early TV episodes of Batman: "The explosive pod has to have a short timing. There will only be a matter of minutes to escape" – "Have it your own way you loony leporid". It's the gratuitous alliteration that evokes Batman so strongly. I won't even

attempt to summarise the plot. Suffice it to say that it will leave your mind reeling, if you can follow it, which I couldn't.

Unfortunately, I found all of this irritating rather than funny, and was unable to finish the book. I couldn't empathise with any of the protagonists (whom I found either insufferably stupid or insufferably all-knowing), and I found the characters, the plot, and the scene-setting pretty much one-dimensional – cartoon-like, in fact. I would guess that if you enjoy children's cartoons, you'd enjoy reading this book, but otherwise – and I really am sorry to be so negative – don't bother.

Frederik Pohl – *The Far Shore of Time*

TOR Books, 1999, 317pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0-312-86618-6

Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

In 1995 physicist Frank Tipler published *The Physics of Immortality*, a highly speculative work of popular science which argued that, come the far future re-collapse of the universe, all intelligent life that had ever existed would be reborn in a virtual paradise beyond the resultant singularity (the Eschaton). Although derided by most of the scientific community at the time, the book has enjoyed a healthy afterlife in the imaginations of sf writers. Its central conceit, a secular re-working of Catholic philosopher Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point conjecture, forms the basis of Fred Pohl's Eschaton Sequence of which *The Far Shore of Time* is the third (and final?) volume.

Two alien races, the Beloved Leaders and the Horch are waging a war to determine the ultimate fate of the universe, with the Beloved Leaders ruthlessly enslaving or destroying the galaxy's intelligent species to achieve their aim of dominating the future Eschaton. As the novel opens, US government agent Dan Dannerman, kidnapped by the Beloved Leaders two novels previously, has escaped their clutches, only to fall into the hands (claws?) of their implacable enemies, the Horch. His frequently frustrated efforts to escape to earth to warn humanity about the threat they face, and what happens when he does, form the basic plot of the book.

Pohl's first-person narrative, told from the viewpoint of Dannerman, is spare enough to prevent the reader from

lingering too long over any absurdities inherent in either the novel's concept or characterisation (rather cartoonishly drawn aliens, for instance), but the first hundred or so pages suffer somewhat from its narrator's passive role as captive as Pohl lingers over an unnecessarily extended tour of a Horch colony liberated from the Beloved Leaders.

Even so, the reader has every reason to expect that, once Dannerman returns to an earth very different from the one he was forcibly removed from, the novel will achieve the kind of momentum promised in its early pages. Sadly, they are destined to be disappointed. Despite the scale of its concept, spiced with the threat of an alien plot to destroy life on earth (by releasing the vast methane reserves trapped in clathrates below the ocean floor), the narrative resolutely refuses to gather pace. Rather than ending with the required bang, the novel annoyingly fizzles out, with far too many issues being resolved in a cavalier 'with one leap Jack was free' fashion. The fate of the universe, meanwhile, remains in the balance, leading to the suspicion that there may be more books to come in the series. If there are, then Pohl needs to inject their pages with a greater sense of cosmic wonder, and of menace, than he achieves here. Though smoothly written *The Far Shore of Time* is too often lazy and pedestrian in its execution. A writer of Pohl's quality can produce far better work than this.

Fred Saberhagen – *Earth Final Conflict: The Arrival*

Ebury Press (Random House), 1999, 255pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-09-187262-6

James White – *Earth Final Conflict: The First Protector*

Tor Books, 2000, 320pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0-312-87409-X

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

These two books herald the beginning of a new series of television series tie-ins and are both by well-respected authors in the genre.

In *The Arrival*, Fred Saberhagen tells the tale of Jonathan Doors – the multi-billionaire who leads the resistance to the Taelons on Earth. It tells of the first landings, and centres solely around Doors and his immediate family. Although appearing to be benevolent, the Taelons are secretive about their real purpose in coming to Earth, and this book reveals that they have a natural enemy of their own – one of which is also present on Earth, coincidentally on property owned by Jonathan Doors.

Doors' father, on meeting the Taelons, relates a personal experience to Jonathan which explains that the Taelons have been to Earth before, in the 1930s. Although finding the story hard to believe, Jonathan slowly pieces together similarities that make his father's story frighteningly real. Torn between the Taelons and their offer of a miracle cure for his slowly dying wife, and the mental urgings of the Taelons' captive enemy, the Urod, Doors has to make some heart-rending decisions.

James White tackles the second book in the series, *The First Protector*, in a completely different way. Set in Ireland initially in around 300AD, an itinerant scholar and magician by the name of Ma'el, travels the globe in search of knowledge. He gathers to him a young healer, and later a bodyguard as

well, to aid him as servants on his travels. Ma'el's purpose is to study the human race, and the reader gets regular insights to his thoughts as he periodically adds to his report for the Synod. Although beginning with total secrecy, Ma'el slowly reveals more and more about himself and his purpose to his two servants, and their resilience and ability to accept what they learn adds to Ma'el's quandry – he is finding it harder and harder to remain detached.

These two books are far better written than some other spinoffery I've read in the past. This may be only what one should expect from two such respected authors, or it may reflect the fact that I enjoy the TV series anyway and am therefore naturally more sympathetic to these books. Of the two, Saberhagen's is the least appealing and gets bogged down at times as it trundles relentlessly towards an inevitable shoot-em-up ending. I remain unconvinced about Doors' reasons for forming the resistance. White's is straight fantasy, and the author has obviously gone to great lengths researching the history of the period, which gives the whole story a wonderfully authentic feel. A fantasy set in 300AD... with a Taelon! Strange, I know, but it works. I would highly recommend the second book, but think perhaps the first is more for the purists.

Brian Stableford – *Architects of Emortality*

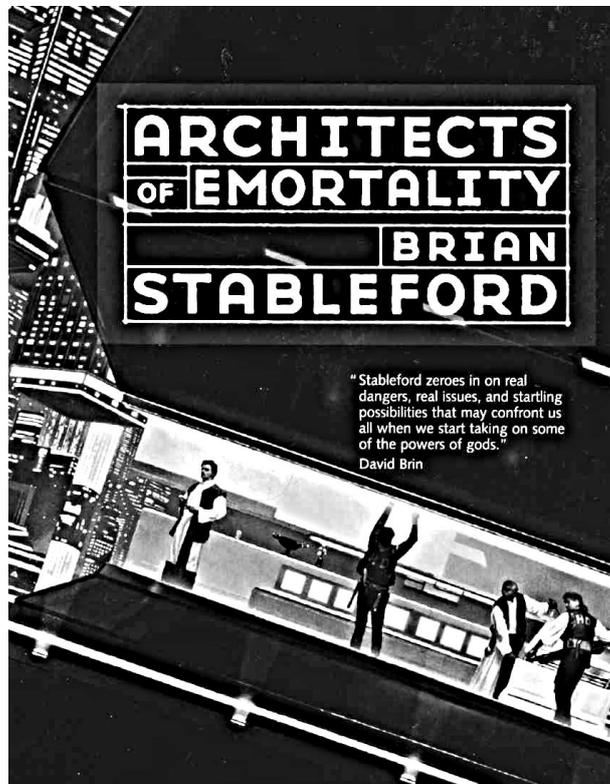
TOR Books, 1999, 319pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-87207-0

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

There is something strange and sad here. A sickness, a canker, seems to have rooted somewhere and needs to be excised. What is wrong? This is a work of daring and powerful science fiction by one of the best British writers working in the field today. A cause for celebration? Yet this book is published in America, and there is so far no indication that either this novel or its immediate predecessor, *Inherit The Earth*, will receive British publication. Why this might be so I would hesitate to guess, but that it is a sorry state of affairs is undeniable.

Stableford, I will admit, is not always an easy writer. He seems to create his characters from the outside, so that while you have no problem observing their actions, hearing their particular voice, it is difficult if not impossible to penetrate below this surface.

Because the author is so free with biological detail you have no doubt that beneath their flesh his characters have bones and viscera but you are never entirely sure if they have what we might call a soul. One doesn't always warm to Stableford's characters. But in a genre whose greatest works are often



noted for their paucity of characterisation, Stableford's work positively shines.

He is also a didactic writer, more likely to explain what is going on with technical detail than to show it with dramatic action. But in a future as fully and as vividly realised as this, as complex in its structure, such explanation is vital if we are to have any hope of understanding the world, and hence of following what is going on. And surely science fiction readers are not put off by the occasional info dump?

These are, I stress, minor points, certainly within the context of science fiction. Balanced against them, the strengths of this book are legion. The novel is an expansion of his story 'Fleurs du Mal', set several centuries hence when nanotechnology has reached the limit of how far it can extend human life, but just as a new realisation of mortality touches the world's aged population a new promise of 'emortality' is beginning to stir. Stableford captures the

emotional balance of this pivotal moment superbly, with the stew of despair and resignation, hope and jealousy it brings in its wake. And in this dramatic moment, a group of old men nearing the ends of their nano-prolonged lives are being murdered, and murdered in a very peculiar way, their flesh

eaten by genetically engineered flowers.

Police sergeant Charlotte Holmes (her superior is Watson) finds herself in the company of aesthete and flower designed Oscar Wilde and one of the new 'emortals' in the search for the perpetrator. The identity of the villain is soon known – Rappaccini, who also goes by the name of Gustave Moreau – but the real mystery lies in why, and how, Rappaccini orchestrates the chase. As the names suggest (and at times

Stableford wears his learning none too lightly) the secret lies in 19th century literature as much as in the genetically engineered world of the story. Stableford does an excellent job of sustaining the mystery, and using it as a means of revealing his world.

The biggest mystery remains, however, why this gripping story is not being published in Britain.

Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell – *Stormchaser*

Doubleday, 1999, 394pp, £10.99 ISBN 0-385-60004-6

Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell – *Beyond The Deepwoods*

Corgi, 1999, 284pp, £4.99 ISBN 0-552-54592-9

Reviewed by Penny Hill

I was a little apprehensive when I started to read these books. The covers looked so promising I was sure the stories would have to be a disappointment. I then discovered the books were illustrated by the authors and I allowed myself to hope that the promise might be fulfilled.

The rite of passage plot in the first story is familiar enough to any fantasy reader – a boy breaks the rules of his restrictive tribe and discovers he is a foundling. He leaves the security of his home and tries to find his own path through the forest. Through many trials and tribulations he finds the wider world and his place in it. The second book details just one of the adventures he has in that wider world with an entirely new cast of characters. Although this may seem routine enough, the expression of these ideas is playful, original and just a little scary.

What sets this series apart from the competition is the vivid and humorously gruesome setting. The deepwoods are based on every nasty nature documentary you ever saw, liberally spiced with magic and sentience just where you would least expect it. There's the bloodoak tree which seems to be a cross

between a boa-constrictor and a venus flytrap, and the rotsucker bird which uses its own digestive fluids to dissolve its trapped prey. This is a dark and dangerous world where everything unknown is a threat to our innocent hero – and he has just stepped off the only path he knows.

As I read these books, I found it impossible to remain an impartial critic. I was swept up into the excitement and adventure of this wonderfully evocative storytelling. There was nothing out of place to jar me out of this glorious world. The interior illustrations, of the same high quality as the covers, complement the text perfectly. The language is precise and witty without ever being obtrusive.

As soon as I finished the first story, complete in itself, I rushed on to the second to discover a whole new adventure. I finished the second and find I am looking forward to buying the third when it comes out. After all, we have now moved off the edge of the map and anything could happen next...

Who are they suitable for? Anyone who likes excitement, adventure, magic, wit and excellent story-telling.

Sheri S. Tepper – *The Gate to Women's Country*

Voyager, 1999, 315pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-648270-8

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This is a new edition of Tepper's most famous – if not notorious – novel. I find it hard to review, knowing that many of the people who read this will already have read the novel and formed their own conclusions. It's a book that invites extreme responses.

For those who don't know it, the novel is set in a post-holocaust region of the US, where women rule. The majority of the men are warriors who live outside the women's towns in garrisons, and boys are sent out to their fathers at the age of five. Those who choose can return by passing through 'the gate to women's country'. At least, this is the apparent situation; the main focus of the novel is the revelation of the truth.

When I first read the novel, I assumed it presented Tepper's vision of a feminist Utopia, flawed only by the steps women must take to protect themselves from male violence. The brief visit to the country of the Holylanders, where men rule in a

violent and repressive way, would suggest this; if Holyland is the only alternative, then Women's Country would seem attractive not only to all women but probably to a good proportion of men.

Re-reading it some years later, I'm not so sure. Now it seems to me that Women's Country is also sustained by violence, even if it's applied in an indirect and Machiavellian way. The women in control, those who know the truth, are either self-deceived, or morally no better than the men. The key question in assessing the novel is whether Tepper deliberately designed the novel this way, or whether she doesn't see anything wrong with what these women do. The downbeat ending suggests that she was very well aware of what the book is saying. Read like this, it's a powerful rejection of the idea that anyone has the right to dominate others, and a portrayal of a society where no one has the hope of achieving their full potential.

Tad Williams – *Mountain of Black Glass*

Orbit, 1999, £16.99, 689pp ISBN 1-85723-748-X

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

In the third part of his Virtual Reality fantasy, Tad Williams has managed to find some cohesion to Otherland as he slow draws the groups of travellers together, allowing the characters to make sense of the artificial worlds they find themselves in.

Paul Jonas (the lone traveller throughout the series) arrives in Ithaca as a beggar and travels to Odysseus' palace, where Penelope recognises him before apparently rejecting him. Whilst walking in the countryside, he begins to piece his identity back together, questioning the simulation around him whilst attempting to understand its logic on the simulation's

terms. He is persuaded to build a raft and travel to Troy, but only after invoking Poseidon's wrath at the outset. Still in Ancient Egypt, Orlando and Fredericks (the gaming partners) find themselves involved in a civil war between the deities. Orlando is temporarily drawn away from the simulation in a temple where he is questioned about the co-existence of god and the devil and their relationship, but is given a stark choice before he returns. On the edge of the war, the Circle, a group opposing the Grail Brotherhood, is trying to work out how to move in between the simulations in a less random fashion.

Trapped within the great temple by members of the Grail, Orlando and Fredericks find themselves in the Troy simulation as Greek leaders. Renie, Xabba and Martine (the adult companions) are still trapped in the grey space, which begins to degrade around them. As the situation becomes more serious, they find a way into a Gormenghastian house that they begin to explore. As they do so, they join up with monks who become their guides and helpers when Johnny Dread kidnaps Martine. After her rescue, she manages to get the group to the city of Troy, although they find themselves with the Trojans. Dread uses his resources, both on- and offline, to begin to understand how to control Otherland in defiance of the Brotherhood.

Williams takes traditional fantasy ideas of the quest updates it within a contemporary setting. The quest for the

magical golden city, and now the mountain of black glass, also becomes a quest for reality – either mental or physical. Paul Jonas links memories of various worlds together, such as the mysterious woman and the twins, but they also remind him of an external reality that involves members of the Grail. He finds common denominators that allow him to start deciding what is real and not, thus enabling him to partially control his own journey.

As they manage to understand the world around them, the travellers manage to challenge the broader structures of Otherland. The series picks up pace in this novel as the characters question themselves and each other, yet the careful orchestration of the stories creates depth to the plot. Williams develops a strong sense of coherence and direction in this volume as he draws the plotlines towards the final volume.

Robert Charles Wilson – *Bios*

TOR Books, 1999, 208pp, \$22.95 ISBN 0-312-86857-X

Reviewed by Robert W. Hayler

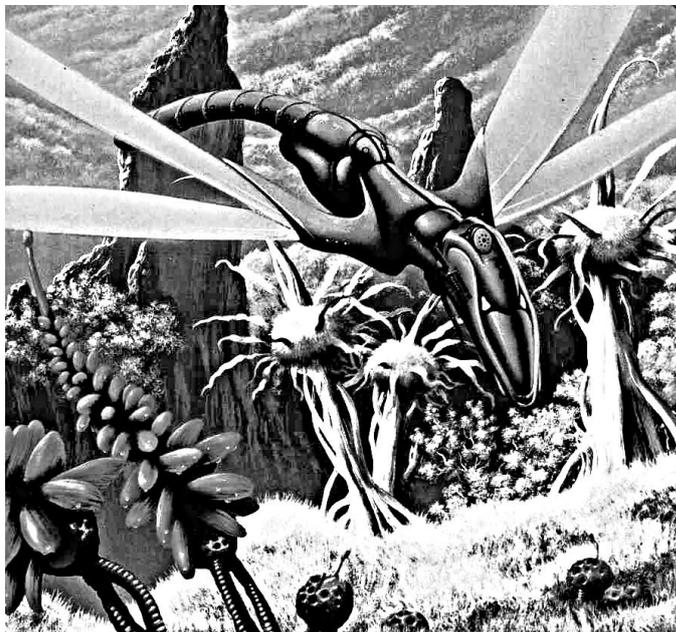
In a conversation in 1977 Philip K. Dick remarked that: "one of the saddest things that's happened in our field... is people coming in to write who are just science fiction fans *per se* – that is, they read science fiction then feed back an eviscerated form of what they've read."^{*}

Robert Charles Wilson's previous novel, the Philip K. Dick award winning *Darwinia*, managed to *just* avoid this kind of criticism by using an erudite selection of reference points from the Bible through to the Hollywood western. This tactic beefed up the wholesale lifting from Wyndham, Dick himself, and so on. Unfortunately in the follow up, *Bios*, any attempt to be clever, engaging or original has been lazily abandoned.

The story concerns Zoe Fisher who, unwittingly modified by biotechnology, is sent to help in the exploration of Isis, a planet with a biosphere utterly hostile to its human visitors. Her presence is politically charged. Some intrigue and romance ensues. Everybody dies.

This is an infuriating novel. Paradoxically, it feels both too short whilst at the same time being full of padding. It reads like an ambitious short story ruined by being bloated up to novel length without a corresponding development of what made it ambitious in the first

^{*}Apel, Scot D. (ed): *Philip K. Dick: The Dream Connection*, 1999, Impermanent Press, ISBN 1886404038 (2nd edition) www.impermanentpress.com



place. The characters are stock and uninteresting: the male and female leads destined to fall in love, the exacting administrator, the scary authority figure who carelessly got on the wrong spaceship in one of Banks' Culture novels and ended up here, a supporting cast of expendables *ad nauseam*. Unsurprisingly, they die in Hollywood-determined order.

Unfortunately, there is little in the rest of the text to distract us from this weakness, as the situations portrayed are just as hackneyed and parade past with wearying pulp predictability. The planet is inadequately described, the understated world-building of *Darwinia* being replaced with tantalising half-ideas thrown away before being developed. The intrigue falls flat due to lack of exposition, the reader is given hints at the larger politics of the situation but has no reason to care. The big moment at which the sentience of the biosphere as a whole is revealed is so heavily telegraphed as to be laughably anti-climactic when it finally arrives. I expected to read the words 'will this do?' in scribbled long hand at the bottom of the final page.

Darwinia was cowboys-save-the-universe high-pulp saved by interesting allusions and some wild Dickian ontology. *Bios* has none of these redeeming features. At some points I actually thought that Wilson might be cynically caricaturing genre types. Cobbled together from copies and fragments it is an eviscerated version of what has come before.

Gene Wolfe – *On Blue's Waters*

TOR Books, 1999, 381pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-86614-3

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

Sequels and trilogies, sequels to trilogies; doesn't anyone write individual stand-alone books any more? This is the first of three volumes which will eventually comprise *The Book of the Short Sun*, itself a sequel to Wolfe's earlier four-part *The Book of the New Sun*. The earlier sequence was set aboard one of the old sf standards, a generation starship (called the Whorl) on the way to a new planet, and this trilogy looks at what happens after it has arrived.

The novel opens with a lengthy 'Proper Names in the Text' and if, like me, you have not read the earlier work you are going to need it to have any hope of keeping track of what is happening. The tale itself is told by Horn; it is actually *The Book of Horn*, as the previous epic was *The Book of Silk*. Horn has, to say the least, something of an idiosyncratic style in

need of a good editor. He spends the first few hundred words moaning about the state of his pens, then, "Reviewing what I wrote yesterday, I see that I have begun without plan or foresight, and in fact without the least notion of what I was trying to do or why I was trying to do it." Horn spends a lot of time commentating on his narrative like this, adding lengthy asides. To be fair to Wolfe he has good story reasons for doing this, and some may find it endearing, but I merely found it irritating and confusing.

New Viron, a settlement on Blue, the destination of the generation ship, is not faring too well and so it is decided that Horn shall search for the legendary Caldé Silk, the hero of the previous volumes, last seen on the Whorl sixteen years ago, to sort it out. So he sets sail across Blue's oceans to find him.

Sometimes science is so powerful it is indistinguishable from magic, and some sf novels – like this one – are indistinguishable from fantasy. It's even got stock plot number one: the Quest. I'm sure that Wolfe's fans will lap this one up but to be honest I found his (and Horn's) style off-putting and, without having read the previous volumes of the *Book of the*

Long Sun, the narrative confusing. There are two planets in the Short Sun system: Blue and Green. As the next in the trilogy is called *In Green's Jungles* its obvious were Wolfe is going next, but I've got a feeling I will not be joining him.

Yevgeny Zamyatin (trans. Mirra Ginsburg) – *We* Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Avon Eos, 1999, 232pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0-380-63321-2

You've read this before. Remember how, in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), the wilderness represented a threatening contrast to the orderliness of the city? It's there in *We* when, thrillingly, chaotically, the primitive jungle bursts through the city's glass wall. Remember how, in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949), a peaceful, obedient apparatchik of the state is driven by love to question Big Brother's regime but in the end falls victim to its inescapable powers and is rendered passive? It's there in *We* when D-503 meets the beautiful I-330 and finds himself unwittingly questioning the all-powerful state he has loved throughout his life, until finally the Benefactor crushingly re-imposes the state's authority, leaving D-503 effectively lobotomised. Remember Ursula K. Le Guin's 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' (1973)? Remember Robert Silverberg's *A Time of Changes* (1971)? Remember the film *THX1138* (1971)? In fact, remember virtually any major dystopian writing of the last 75 years or so, and you are likely to find some trace of *We* threading inextricably through it. Zamyatin's novel has good and deserved claim to be the most influential science fiction novel written this century. *Nineteen Eighty Four* in particular picks up its mood, many of its tropes, even a handful of its episodes.

Yevgeny Zamyatin was a natural rebel. The son of an Orthodox priest in a prosperous provincial town in Tsarist Russia, he joined the Bolsheviks when he went to University in St Petersburg and during the revolution of 1905 he was arrested and sent into exile. In 1913 he was permitted to return to his studies in St Petersburg, and that same year his first novella was published. His second, 'At The World's End', published in 1914, was such a scathing satire on the Tsarist army that he was brought to trial again. Yet when the Russian Revolution brought the Bolsheviks to

power, Zamyatin continued to snipe at authority, as his translator, Mirra Ginsburg, says in a fine introduction, his credo was "the need for heresy, the right to say 'no' to official dogma". That is the spirit which informs his masterpiece, the brittle, jesting satire on the Soviet regime, *We*, which was written in 1920-21 but which was refused publication in the Soviet Union. Translations did appear, however, in England in 1924 and in Czechoslovakia in 1927, paving the way for the wealth of dystopian fiction that followed in its wake.

Set in the distant future, *We* tells of an all-powerful State where everyone lives in glass houses, where, literally, every action is open to scrutiny by the Guardians. The novel takes the form of the diary of D-503, an engineer in charge of building the first rocket ship, which is destined to carry the benevolence of the Benefactor to any other beings that might be on other worlds. But when he meets I-330, D-503 finds his easy obedience to the enforced rhythms of daily life begins to slip. Uncomfortable questions start to come to mind, and other options are presented to him. The breaking down of his comfortable conformity is represented by the fractured language of his diary; broken sentences, bursts of curious imagery, start to intrude on the simple precision of his descriptions. In the end his moment of heresy, his expression of individuality and creativity, is crushed by the State. Yet even this is not so forbiddingly hopeless as Orwell's vision; some streak of humanity might yet remain outside the glass walls of the city.

We is one of the most important works of science fiction written this century, and should be read for that reason. But it is also a gripping, humane and involving story told with extraordinary freshness and vigour, and it should be read also for the sheer pleasure it brings.

Roger Zelazny and Jane Lindskold – *Lord Demon* Reviewed by Tanya Brown

Avon Eos, 1999, 276pp, \$23.00 ISBN 0-380-97333-2

Lord Demon is the second of two novels, unfinished by Zelazny at his death in 1995, to have been completed by Jane Lindskold. As with *Donnerjack* (1997), Lindskold's influence is easily detected: it's unfair to judge *Lord Demon* as simply another book by Zelazny, or to assume that this is the novel Zelazny would have completed, alone, if he'd lived.

The background is vintage Zelazny, with a cast and setting borrowed wholesale from mythology and given a snail interpretation. The characters in *Lord Demon* are demons and gods from Chinese myth. Except, of course, they're not *really* demons and gods; they're beings from another dimension. After a war between chaotic and lawful factions some millennia ago, the losing side broke through into ancient China and fitted themselves seamlessly into the local belief system.

The narrator, 'Lord Demon' himself, is Kai Wren, a master craftsman who specialises in magical bottles containing pocket universes for the magically-aware to call home. Kai Wren is also known as Godslayer: in the war, he was the only demon to have single-handedly slain a god. Now he's peace-loving and solitary, avoiding the company of other demons and confiding only in his human servant, Oliver O'Keefe.

One night, Ollie is killed, and the quest to find his murderer opens up a series of mysteries. Kai Wren acquires a human apprentice, Li Paio, and ventures back into demon society,

embroiling himself in a series of feuds and alliances. Unfortunately, he learns the identity of one enemy just too late to avoid being transformed into a mere human ...

If parts of that plot summary are reminiscent of Zelazny's classic Amber series, maybe it's no accident. There's a number of Ambersque plot elements, and one very obvious reference to *Nine Princes in Amber* that's almost enough to make one suspect the author – which author? – of archness.

Kai Wren, however, isn't a typical Zelazny hero. He makes mistakes, and is forced to rely on others; he has romantic, rather than merely lustful, inclinations, and he's much less egocentric and arrogant. In short, he's more human than most of Zelazny's protagonists.

Maybe it's an indication that Zelazny himself was moving into a different, more mature phase as a writer; it seems more likely, though, to be Lindskold's influence, overlaying Zelazny's plot and characters with themes and motifs of her own. There are elements of this novel which *aren't* classic Zelazny: animated coathangers, the land of lost socks, and a cute puppy called Fluffinella. But reading *Lord Demon* as classic Zelazny is rather missing the point; it's a joint work, and perhaps the saddest thing about it is that it's not a true collaboration.



Particles

Poul Anderson – *Starfarers*

TOR Books, 1999, 495pp, \$6.99 ISBN 0-812-54599-0
The discovery of 'star trails' leads to an expedition across 60,000 light years in search of an extraterrestrial race who may have discovered the secret of interstellar travel. Reviewed in hardback by Colin Bird in *Vector* 203, who was disappointed that Anderson's storytelling and handling of the consequences of relativistic time dilation was too often sidetracked by poor characterisation and clunky dialogue.

Mark Anthony – *Beyond the Pale*

Earthlight, 1999, 527pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-617-02191-5
Subtitled Book One of the Rune, this did not impress Colin Bird at all when he reviewed it in V205, describing Anthony's quasi medieval setting of Eldh as "fantasy world building by numbers" and the story taking a far too leisurely pace for half the book "leaving his characters to wander aimlessly or indulge in endless conversations about court etiquette." *Keep of Fire*, the second volume, is reviewed in this issue.

Tom Arden – *King and Queen of Swords*

Millennium, 1999, 528pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-898-1
Second book of The Orokon, and sequel to *The Harlequin's Dance* (reviewed by Andrew Adams in V200). For Mat Coward, reviewing the Gollancz hardcover in V203, the 18th century setting evoked a mood more of Georgette Heyer than traditional genre fantasy. A richly detailed fantasy, but Arden's leisurely and mannered style, "monumentally camp" in places, may not be everybody's cup of tea.

John Barnes – *Apostrophes and Apocalypses*

Tor, 1999, 349pp, \$14.95 ISBN 0-312-85069-7
The contents are a mixed bag: a baker's dozen stories, one novella length, and seven articles on topics as diverse as a brief history of Luddism to world building by computers, plus the text of a speech to the American Library Association. The range is equally diverse, from the emotionally gruelling 'Gentleman Pervert, Off on a Spree' to the comedy of 'Why the Stars are Always so Bright from Cousin Sid's Farm'. "The strength of this collection is not in the individual pieces so much as the diversity and range of imagination on offer" wrote Gary Dalkin, reviewing this in V203. "I very much doubt if you will like everything here, and you may even object to some stories, but you will also be entertained, delighted and made to think."

Alice Borchardt – *Night of the Wolf*

Voyager, 1999, 454pp, £11.99 ISBN 0-00224717-X
Sequel to *The Silver Wolf*, a werewolf story set in Imperial Rome, which was reviewed by Iain Emsley in V207. Maeniel is the silver wolf, and his transformation from wolf to man is triggered by the proud, beautiful Imona before she disappears in a Roman massacre, while at the same time he is pursued by the warrior woman Dryas, who has sworn to kill him.

Ben Bova – *Return to Mars*

Avon Eos, 1999, 403pp, \$25.00 ISBN 0-380-97640-4
US edition of the sequel to Bova's *Mars*. The UK edition, published by Hodder and Stoughton, was reviewed by John Newsinger in V208 as "an entertaining read, a good example of the bread and butter of the genre."

Terry Brooks – *A Knight of the Word*

Orbit, 1999, 421pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85723-738-2
A sequel, five years on, to the events of *Running with the Demon* (reviewed by Alan Fraser in V203), and the titular knight and demon slayer, John Ross, has lost his faith and, apparently, his magic. But a new, and more powerful demon is on the rise, and Nest Freemark, whose childhood was shattered by those past events, must warn Ross and persuade him to take up his magic once more.

Orson Scott Card – *Ender's Shadow*

Orbit, 1999, 379pp, £16.99 ISBN 1-85723-955-5
This was reviewed in the Tor edition by Andrew Seaman in V207, and is not so much a sequel (or possibly a prequel) to the 'Ender trilogy' as a 'parallel novel' to the first book, *Ender's Game*. The alternative viewpoint from which the story of Andrew 'Ender' Wiggins is re-examined comes from Bean, a feral child from the slums of Rotterdam who, like Ender, is inducted for training as a child warrior in Mankind's war against the Buggers.

Raymond E. Feist – *Krondor: The Betrayal*

Avon Eos, 1999, 418pp, \$6.99 ISBN 0-380-79527-2
Based on the computer game *Betrayal at Krondor*, this is Book One of The Riftwar Legacy, and set some nine years after Feist's *A Darkness at Sethanon*. Graham Andrews, reviewing this in V204, was unconvinced, particularly by the presence of a place called Cheam (but not, sadly, 23 Railway Cuttings) on the map, reserving most of his praise for Geoff Taylor's cover painting.

Parke Godwin – *Lord of Sunset*

Avon Books, 1999, 566pp, \$6.99 ISBN 0-380-81064-6
Despite a few grating anachronisms (like "Mum"), Cherith Baldry (V202) was impressed by this historical epic, told through a multiplicity of viewpoints, which opens with the Battle of Hastings and then goes back to examine the events leading up to the overthrow and destruction of a rich and sophisticated Saxon English culture under Harold Godwinsson.

Patrick Nielsen Hayden (ed) – *Starlight 2*

TOR Books, 1999, 318pp, \$14.95 ISBN 0-312-86312-8
I can only concur with both Janet Barron, who previously reviewed this in V203, and previous editor Paul Kincaid, that this is one of the most impressive genre anthologies around. There isn't a single weak story here, and the range is both impressive and provocative, from Susannah Clarke's reworking of elements of faery and folk ballads in 'Mrs Mabb' to the Sturgeon Memorial Award winner, Ted Chiang's 'Story of Your Life', and Raphael Carter's Tiptree Memorial Award winning 'Congenital Agnesis of

Gender Ideation'. Excellent.

Carol Heller – *The Stones of Stiga*

Avon Eos, 1999, 308pp, \$6.99 ISBN 0-380-79081-5
Third book of 'The Shunlar Chronicles' in which the half-dragon warrior Shunlar returns after two years to her former lover Rath to present him with their son, to find someone has carved death spells into Rath's body, and that there is a threat of war over the city of Kalaven.

Robert Jordan – *The Conan Chronicles*

Orbit, 1999, 510pp, £9.99 ISBN 1-85723-750-1
Chronicles contains three books, *Conan the Invincible*, *Conan the Defender* and *Conan the Unconquered*, published separately and then as an omnibus under the Legend imprint in 1996, but dating back to Tor, 1982. The first two titles were reviewed by Graham Andrews in V190, who thought that while Robert E. Howard would have approved, a 'Law of Diminishing Ripostes' starts to set in after each sword fight and session of serious drinking. Three further stories were collected in a second volume with an essay by L. Sprague de Camp, reviewed briefly by Janet Barron as part of a fantasy round-up in V195.

Guy Gavriel Kay – *Sailing to Sarantium*

Earthlight, 1999, 438pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-671-02193-1
This forms the first part of The Sarantine Mosaic, reviewed by Andrew Adams in V203 who regarded this as a most impressive start, and with the potential to rival Kay's landmark fantasy, *Tigana*. Casius Crispus, a mosaicist from Rhodias (Rome), undertakes a journey to Sarantium on behalf of his partner that also becomes a journey through his life, art, religion, magic and the labyrinthine politics of the Empire.

Fritz Leiber – *Return to Lankhmar*

Millennium, 1999, 454pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-846-9
Third of the four omnibus collections of Leiber's classic stories of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser (to conclude with *Farewell to Lankhmar*, Feb 2000). *Return...* consists of Books 5 and 6, *Swords of Lankhmar* and *Swords and Ice Magic*, with an introduction by Neil Gaiman.

Peter Mann – *The Slayer Files*

Pocket Books, 1999, 95pp, £2.99 ISBN 1-903047-02-1
Literally a pocket book, this purports to be "A Complete and Unauthorised Guide to *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*". The reason it's unauthorised becomes obvious on opening it almost anywhere at random. It is atrociously written, with a flagrant disregard of tense and grammar. The episode guide appears to be for the original three (1997-1998) Warner series, though there's no explanation why the episode numbering changes from 4Vnn in the first season, 5Vnn for the second but 3ABBnn for the third.

Maureen F. McHugh – *Mission Child*

Orbit, 1999, 385pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85723-861-3
Avon Eos, 370pp, \$6.99, ISBN 0-380-79122-6
Reviewed by John Wallace in V204, this is a journey novel, told from the first-person viewpoint of Janna, survivor of a destroyed

Appropriate Technologies Mission on an isolated, inhospitable and almost-forgotten planet. Janna's walk across her world to safety becomes an exploration of her own identity, and that of culture and technology both on and off-planet as Earth reaches out to regain its former, lost colonies.

Elizabeth Moon – *Winning Colours*

Orbit, 1999, 409pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85723-880-X
A third volume in The Serrano Legacy featuring ex-naval pilot, and now private captain, Heris Serrano. Chris Hill reviewed the first book, *Hunting Party*, in V207, and found it enjoyable but "a bit of a curate's egg", with galactic yachts and an aristocratic feudal hierarchy. The second volume was titled *Sporting Chance*, and there seems to be definite pattern emerging in the titles.

Stan Nicholls – *Bodyguard of Lightning*

Millennium, 1999, 298pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85798-558-3
The A-format reissue of the first part of Nicholls's Orcs series. The sequel, *Legion of Thunder*, is reviewed elsewhere in this issue. This was well regarded by Kathy Taylor in V206,

who wrote, "the characterisation, both of individuals and of races, is excellent", although she felt some of the scenes might merit caution in recommending this to younger readers.

Andre Norton – *Scent of Magic*

Avon Books, 1999, 374pp, \$6.50 ISBN 0-380-78416-5
Some rather clumsy editing and an odd use of Teutonic '-ric' name endings marred this otherwise light and enjoyable fantasy for Penny Hill, reviewing this in V203. As the title suggest, this is set in a world where scent and crystal healing combine to form a powerful magic.

Neal Shusterman – *Thief of Souls*

TOR Books, 1999, 253pp, \$21.95 ISBN 0-312-85507-9
A sequel to *Scorpion Shards* (voted by New York Library as 'Best Book for the Teenaged') in which six disfigured souls find themselves transformed and gifted with remarkable powers by a mysterious stellar entity to become the Star Shards. Now only five after their battle with the demons who imprisoned them, they face another terrifying foe, the Bringer, free after thousands of years imprisonment.

Robert Silverberg (ed.) – *Legends*

Voyager, 1999, 352pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-648394-1
Legends brings together stories by eleven major fantasy authors set in their own created worlds, as diverse as Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* and Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*, as well as those of Robert Jordan, Tad Williams, Le Guin, McCaffrey, George R.R. Martin and the editor's own Majipoor, providing both an anthology and a sampler. It certainly worked for reviewer Lynne Bispham (in V203), who on the strength of this resolved to buy Tad Williams' *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* trilogy.

J.R.R. Tolkien – *Farmer Giles of Ham*

HarperCollins, 1999, 127pp, £12.99 ISBN 0-261-10377-6
A 50th Anniversary edition of Tolkien's short tale, graced with Pauline Baynes' original illustrations including two colour plates, edited and introduced by Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond. This edition also contains the first publication of the original manuscript version of the story, Tolkien's notes for a sequel and notes on the text.

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