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# Vecto<sup>n</sup>s

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The Critical  
Journal of  
the BSFA

# Vector

THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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COVER: Brian Stableford. Photographer unknown.  
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**Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial**
**The Viddy from the Horrorshow**

So, once more, *A Clockwork Orange* is in the cinemas in Britain. Although it's always difficult to sift truth from rumour in Stanley Kubrick's career, the word is that he was so fed up of being accused of causing real life violence with the film back in the seventies – to the extent that he received death threats (imagine: I'm going to kill you for depicting violence) – that he withdrew the film. And so in Britain, uniquely in the world, the film was unavailable through the director's own actions.

Warner zealously guarded their rights – suing any cinema who dared to show it. And so anyone who wanted to see it was reduced to grubbing around with under the counter stuff, or US video tapes, or trips to Holland. And whilst it wasn't available, like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Driller Killer* and a number of other banned films, it acquired a kudos completely out of proportion to its actual quality. Film after film has gained extra publicity through banning or protests – *Dogma* was Kevin Smith's biggest grossing title to date, *The Last Temptation of Christ* was probably a flop, but took more money than it would have done as a result of the controversy, and the list goes on. Had Kubrick not banned it, then perhaps the film would have sunk from sight as did so many movies of the early 1970s.

Rumours of Kubrick thinking again about *Orange* surfaced around the time of his death. After his death there were rumours that Warners could lift the ban, or that it would remain in place as long as his heirs survived. Or something.

So, now I can see it legitimately on the big screen – having seen it on video about a decade ago – is it worth a look? I'm afraid to say, not, but then I suspect I have a growing blindspot for

Kubrick – *Eyes Wide Shut* perhaps opened my eyes to his self-indulgence. The violence is still disturbing in parts, more so than many a more violent piece made since. I hadn't remembered how Yorkshire Alex was, and in some ways the 1970s fashions have aged better for the end of the 1990s than the end of the 1980s. But, still, I found it a confused tedious production, which left me cold rather than shocked or gratified.

Colin and Mitch take a more positive view in their piece in this issue, as we take a look at British sf of the 1970s. Chris Hill, Paul Kincaid and myself discuss the top novels of the period, and Chris Hill takes a longer look at the early works of Brian Stableford. And there are plenty more delights beside.

\* \* \*

What isn't a delight is the shock news of the death of John D Rickett. JDR was one of the three people who encouraged me to take the leap from reading sf to being something akin to a fan, but please don't hold that against him. In letters, in phone calls, in APAs, in person and eventually on email he was determined to take sf seriously as literature, and encouraged me to do so, whilst regaling me with the world views of his friends Spidey and Spidess, and with Nature Notes from Snaresbrook. Or complaining to me about typos in Vector – as he did in V210.

It was through his urging that I read Louis de Bernières, years before Captain Corelli's Mandolin. He was the first person I would turn to when I needed to find out anything about Borges, and he once provided a beautiful translation for me when I couldn't locate an existing one. I still owe him a pint for that; one of many debts I cannot repay him.

by Andrew M. Butler, High Wycombe, Spring 2000


**LETTERS TO VECTOR**

From Kev McVeigh, Milnthorpe, Cumbria:

I want to pick up on a couple of points in Vector 209, in the discussion on Wyndham between Andy Sawyer, Maureen Kincaid Speller and Andrew M. Butler. Firstly I want to say that it has sent me off to reread Wyndham for which I thank you.

In the discussion you ask Andy Sawyer about Wyndham's politics; perhaps a passage from *The Chrysalids* might shed a little light. It comes in chapter 6, where David's Uncle Axel delivers what amounts to an extended authorial rant about the validity of the 'true image' which the novels society places so much importance on. Quoting an explorer, Marther, he asserts that the evidence: 'does not confirm the view of the Right Wing Church Party.' This lecture lasts some five or six pages, and David comments, 'he laboured it rather a lot,' after which Axel asks: "'You understand, don't you, Davie, why I've been telling you all this?'" I always took that question to be equally addressed to the reader, that Axel spoke for Wyndham, and thus that phrase 'Right Wing Church Party' is pointed and clearly sets Wyndham on the Left.

Andrew's comment on *The Chrysalids* – the 'heroes need to

massacre their own families' – begs expansion. In *The Chrysalids* the narrator David is forced to flee his family, as Andrew says, but Wyndham goes to great lengths in the early chapters to identify the Stormal family with society as a whole. Their village grew around their house, both are named Waknuk; Joseph Stormal is not just David's father, he is the magistrate, preacher and major landowner and explicitly the most powerful man around. Defying him is defying society.

I'm less familiar with Wyndham's other novels, but one of the interesting facets of *The Chrysalids* is that although it has a small community as its focus, and thus fits the 'domestic' interpretation of 'cosy', and Waknuk is so insular that Sophie's family can live in secrecy within two miles, there is also, through Axel first and then the Zealander, a clear picture of global catastrophe and the universality of the Tribulation. This reinforces the identification of the Stormal family with society at large.

Is it not also fair to say that the close identification of family and society is generally a right wing philosophy, and reaction against society (regardless of how that society views itself in terms of right and left) is a left wing trait?

As far as *The Chrysalids* goes, therefore, I feel that it is clear that John Wyndham was a left wing writer as much as Wells before him and MacLeod today.

**From Katherine Roberts:**

I feel I must take issue with your reviewer Stuart Carter's comments in Vector 209. In his review of Garry Kilworth's *Shadow Hawk*, he states his opinion that Garry Kilworth was 'afflicted by literary synesthesia, writing a juvenile for an adult audience', and then goes on to say how disappointed he was in the book because of this.

Certainly reviewers are entitled to their opinions, and I applaud honesty when reviewing a book that did not come up to scratch. But to suggest that *Shadow Hawk* did not deliver because

the author made the mistake of writing for adults in a 'juvenile' style is not only insulting to Garry Kilworth himself, but to all those hard working children's writers such as J K Rowling, Philip Pullman, Ian McEwan, Diana Wynne Jones, Louise Cooper, and many others who regularly produce fantasy that is tightly written, exciting, satisfies on many levels, and cannot in any way be called juvenile in the manner Stuart Carter suggests.

In fact, Stuart Carter's whole concept of 'juvenile' seems to be typical of many adults, suggesting something childish, beneath them, and somehow substandard. Where this comes from, I'm not sure. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines 'juvenile' as 'young, youthful, suited to or characteristic of youth.' To me, this definition suggests something fresh, innocent, exciting, energetic, something not affected by adult cynicism or pretensions. This is borne out by the remarkable range of fantasy published for children, including many books that would not find a slot on the more blinkered adult genre shelves. While there are certainly bad children's books published (just as there are bad adult books published), to suggest a book is bad because it is written in a style 'too young for adults' needs further qualifications, and Stuart Carter hardly seems the person to do this if he does not read the very works with which he's seeking to make comparisons.

#### Stuart Carter responds:

My review of Garry Kilworth's *Shadow Hawk* resulted from me coming to his work entirely free of pre-conceptions, good or bad, and I wrote what I genuinely thought of the book. The front end contained a very impressive list of previously published books by Mr Kilworth, which showed that he was obviously an established writer of some note, however (as my review showed) I personally didn't rate *Shadow Hawk* as being a good example of the genre. I

apologised within the review for my comments about the book being 'juvenile', acknowledging that I was over-generalising with regard to other juvenile fiction, but my main complaint about *Shadow Hawk* was that the book employed a narrative style which, as an adult, I found superficial and rather simplistic. I took it as given that the language and structure of a 'juvenile' book must be of a slightly different nature to that of an 'adult' book and that this narrative structure would necessarily be (for the most part) slightly less complex. This is not to say that the production of a 'juvenile' book is any less creative or demanding than an 'adult' book or that 'juveniles' are somehow worth less than proper 'adult' literature.

My intention was to imply that the two do involve slightly different narrative strategies and considerations of their target readership's knowledge and experience, and that Garry Kilworth's writing in *Shadow Hawk* was decidedly unclear as to its target audience.

Once again, I certainly didn't intend to denigrate any of the excellent 'juvenile' writers out there, but simply used a comparison that made perfect sense to me at the time and which, I do agree with Katherine, was not an entirely fair one.

*The Editors add: We've been thinking about running a forum on Children's, Teen's, Young Adult's and juvenile fiction for a while, and this seems a good opportunity for any interested in taking part to drop us a line at any of the editorial addresses. Katherine Roberts, we note, is the author of the excellent Song Quest.*

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.

## The Loneliness of the Long Distance Biologist

The Early Science Fiction of Brian Stableford – A Retrospective

by Chris Hill

The career of British sf writer Brian Stableford can be divided into two distinct phases. The earlier is from 1969, with the publication of his first novel *Cradle of the Sun*, lasting until the publication of *The Gates of Eden* in 1983. After that Stableford published no new novels until the late eighties with *The Empire of Fear*. This article is concerned with this first period.

*Cradle of the Sun* concerns a quest to find out who is causing the slow decline of the human race (and also of the rats that have become the only other intelligent species), sapping them of their will to advance. The book is somewhat better than the ones that came immediately after and already has the central icon of most of Stableford's fiction: the loner as reluctant hero.

The next book, *The Blind Worm* is less impressive. In a far future Earth, the human race is reduced to a few enclaves and much of the planet is overrun by the Wildland, plant life which has evolved a hive-mind. A small group, including the self-styled ruler of the human race, John Tamerlane, engage on a quest to link the equivalent entities to Wildland in four dimensions together. The novel is a fix-up of stories written while Stableford was at school and it shows. Overall it lacks cohesion and is probably the weakest of all his novels.

The next few novels are fairly routine. The first two volumes of the *Dies Irae* trilogy (*The Days of Glory*, *In the Kingdom of the Beast*) are *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* recast in sf tropes. However the final volume, *Day of Wrath*, throws the pattern away and this lifts it above the other volumes in the trilogy. In it, Mark Chaos, previously one of the more villainous characters, is given the power to remake the universe in his own image (a concept examined to a different conclusion in Ian Watson's *Black Current* trilogy [1984-1985]). Ultimately Chaos turns down the chance to be God in his own creation and chooses to restore the universe to

its original state.

To *Challenge Chaos* (1972) bears the same relationship to the Orpheus myth as the *Dies Irae* trilogy does to the Homeric epics. *Chaos X* is a world that has a dark side lodged in hyperspace ('ultra') where the normal laws of physics do not apply. Craig Star Gazer goes on a quest to rescue his lover from the self-styled ruler of this underworld, King Fury. As with the *Dies Irae* trilogy, Stableford makes no effort to disguise the origins of the story (even to the point of having a background character called 'Richard Orpheus').

All of these novels have a dry narrative style, reminiscent of Cordwainer Smith, which at times sits uncomfortably with the basic adventure/quest structure of the plots. One feels that if Stableford had been writing during the 'pulp' era he would never have survived. He cannot help but be an *intelligent* writer, not content with just telling the story, but also considering how the situation that generates the story came to be. Alas, these early novels can seldom bear the weight of this examination.

Stableford does not really get into his stride as a writer of note until the publication of the first of the *Hooded Swan/Grainger* books, *Halcyon Drift*. The narrator is Grainger (he has no first name) a starship pilot. When his two-man spaceship crashes on a barren world, killing his engineer, Michael Lapthorn, Grainger is marooned for two years. He is rescued by a shipping company searching for a fabled lost starship and a hefty fine is slapped on him for diverting them from their mission. Thus he is forced to work for Titus Charlott, a researcher for the library on New Alexandria, a man Grainger has worked for before and despises. His new, experimental starship, the *Hooded Swan*, is crewed by people almost guaranteed to get on Grainger's nerves. The designer and Captain, Nick delArco, is a nice man, but too weak

to be an effective leader. Eve Lapthorn, the pilot he usurps, is the sister of Grainger's dead engineer and constantly tries to fit Grainger into the image that she has from her brother's stories. Johnny Socoro, the engineer, is the grandson of the person that taught Grainger how to be a pilot and is eager to be a hero.

Grainger is the archetypal Stableford hero: the loner forced into the company of others, reluctantly doing the right thing in spite of his own desire not to get involved. In the golden age of Hollywood he would have been played by Humphrey Bogart, although, unusually for sf at the time, he is also a pacifist. But from the beginning of the sequence his desire for solitude is impossible to fulfil. In his two years of exile on Lapthorn's Grave, he has picked up a parasite (although a symbiote would be a fairer description), a creature that lodges in his mind and copies the patterns in his brain. In effect it is an identical copy of Grainger's self, existing codependently, which can 'talk' to Grainger inside his head. The mind parasite wants complete joining, a full symbiosis, an idea that is more frightening to Grainger than anything, despite the parasite's insistence on its inevitability:

They quote Confucius as having said that if rape is inevitable, lie back and enjoy it. Well, lie back by all means, if you can't do anything else. But you can't and won't enjoy it, if rape is what it is. That's the beginning and the end of it. (*Halcyon Drift*, p. 151  
UK Pan edition).

It is the internal conversations between the two which contain most of the humour of the stories, as well as providing the opportunity to study Grainger's character.

The six novels in the sequence follow Grainger through a number of biological mystery stories. The individual novels are in themselves good sf stories; Stableford's obvious enjoyment of the process of inventing biological systems is evident. He has also developed a whole vocabulary for the imaginary science and engineering of faster-than-light starships, but, unlike many writers, he does not attempt to explain them but melds them into the background, leaving the reader to deduce the meaning from context.

What is particularly interesting about the stories is the development of Grainger's character and those around him. By the end of *Swan Song*, he has, however reluctantly, bought his ticket for his return journey to the human race. He gradually becomes reconciled to the residence of the mind parasite, especially when it helps 'tune-up' his physiology so that he is a more efficient human being, although he never overcomes his dislike. He accepts his responsibility for the other members of his crew and their presence in his life:

I didn't really know whether Nick and Eve would want to sign on with me, and I didn't know any way of asking them that wouldn't sound absurd. But they solved the problem for me. They asked me. They had no intention of letting go.  
(*Swan Song*, p. 156 UK Pan edition).

Incidentally, the Grainger books are the first written in first-person, a mode of narration that suits Stableford's rather sardonic storytelling style.

In 1975 Stableford published what is one of his finest single novels, *Man in a Cage*. A faster-than-light space drive has been invented, but in all tests flights the pilot has been driven insane by the experience. So the authorities hit on using Harker Lee, a schizophrenic, a man already mad by normal definitions.

The book runs several narratives at the same time: MADMAN'S DANCE, a look inside Lee's mindscape during his return flight; *Titan Nine*, a straightforward narrative, told in the

first person, of the events leading up to the launch of his flight; and *Cage of Darkness*, Lee's autobiography, which, with its unique use of personal pronouns gives an insight into Lee's state of mind.

*Man in a Cage* is a difficult novel, requiring patience to retain understanding of the story. The last chapter makes uncertain the preceding events. Did Lee actually survive the flight with his sanity (relatively) intact, but lost any thread of reason on the second flight? Or is apparent survival of the first flight just another psychotic episode? Even now I am unsure what the correct interpretation is, or even if there is one. It is a clever novel, falling somewhere between Philip K Dick's paranoid fantasies and Christopher Priest's examinations of reality, although comparisons with Barry Malzberg's *Beyond Apollo* are inevitable.

The next major sequence is the Daedalus series. In essence these are similar to the Grainger books; a series of biological mysteries.

A hundred years ago Earth used huge amounts of resources to send seven million people out into space in colony ships. Political and economic problems at home caused the colonies to be neglected, almost forgotten. Now Earth is sending out the Daedalus, a re-contact ship designed to give ecological and bioengineering aid to some of the colonies.

In these books Stableford uses the idea that colonising another planet is not just a case of 'taking over'. Instead the native ecology will eventually reach some new state of balance with the invaders. Unfortunately that may be detrimental to the long-term survival of the colonists.

The Daedalus books are not, overall, as successful as the Grainger books. The narrator of the stories is Alexis Alexander, who is in charge of the scientific team and believes strongly in the importance of the colonies. The other principle characters are less well-defined. With the exception of the diplomat, Nathan Parrick, the assistant pilot, Karen Karelia and the unstable languages 'talent' Mariel Valory the rest are pretty much ciphers. The later books are rather weaker than the earlier ones and one cannot help but feel that Stableford is starting to get a little bored of the concept.

However, particularly interesting are the discussions that start and end the series, between Alexis and his son, Peter. In these short pieces Peter and Alexis debate the rights and wrongs of the colonisation programme. Peter believes that the colonies were a criminal waste of resources and should never have been launched in the first place, let alone wasting more resources on re-contact. Alexis believes that the colonies are important in themselves but even if they were not, Earth did not have the right to abandon them.

...What's the use of a new world – a hundred new worlds – when we can't even look after the one we've got?

...There'll always be problems on Earth,\* said the man simply. He didn't want to argue.

\*But we don't always have to turn our backs on them.\*

\*We can't wait for Utopia,\* said the man. \*It's like tomorrow – forever in the future.\*

(The Florians p. 7 Hamlyn UK edition).

This is the central debate that is still going on about space exploration. While one feels that Stableford's heart is with Alexis one is not left with the impression that he feels that Peter's points are irrelevant.

Only the first volume of a concurrent series, *The Realms of Tartarus* (*The Face of Heaven*, 1976) was published in the UK. The full trilogy was only published in the US in 1977 in one volume as *The Realms of Tartarus*.

In this the majority of human beings have deserted the surface of the Earth. With the help of the immortal alien traveller, Sisyr, in a plan taking 11,000 years to complete, the surface of the Earth is enclosed within an artificial shell. The majority of the human race have emigrated to this platform, leaving only those who disapproved of the project behind. The only light on the Underworld is provided by electric bulbs in the 'ceiling' and the only water is waste washed down from the Overworld. The hostile conditions on the Earth's surface cause an accelerated evolution, leading to cats and rats developing intelligence. While most of humankind have forgotten the very existence of the original surface of the Earth, one man starts having dreams about conditions on the surface, causing his two sons to investigate. This becomes the catalyst that reawakens complacent humanity to their origins.

*The Realms of Tartarus* contain some fascinating ideas on the human and ecological cost of a Utopia. Sisyr himself is a study in the possible needs of an immortal race – if you have immortality how do you give your life meaning? Unfortunately the book also suffers from some dull patches and does not really end – it just meanders to a fairly arbitrary halt.

Fairly minor singletons from around this time include *The Last Days of the Edge of the World* (1978), an enjoyable, but unexceptional, children's fantasy novel and *The Mind Riders* (1976) a novel about mentally-controlled holographic boxers. This features the classic plot of 'old pro returns once more to the ring to restore his self-esteem'. *War Games* (1981) is a story of a future war which turns out to have different motivations than is initially apparent.

A stronger singleton from this period is the intriguing *The Walking Shadow*. Paul Heisenberg is the latest popular cult figure. In front of a huge audience he disappears, leaving only a perfect, indestructible silver statue behind. He reappears some years later to find that millions of people have also 'time-jumped' after him. He is now seen by many as the new messiah, destined to save what remains of the human race after a nuclear war.

Like H G Wells's time traveller, Heisenburg makes successive leaps further forward in time, observing the gradual disappearance of the human race, and the victory of the 'third-phase' life form that replaces them. *The Walking Shadow* has much in common with some of the earlier novels: the enigmatic alien observer/catalyst (*The Realms of Tartarus*), the huge, planet-covering single life form (*The Blind Worm*), the approaching last days of the human race (*Cradle of the Sun*). The later parts of the novel have an elegiac melancholy as the number of 'jumpers', the only survivors of the human race, gradually drops as many either die or vanish completely. The ending is enigmatic, but not without an element of hope.

*The Castaways of Tanagar* is another re-contact story, but it

reverses the central concept of the *Daedalus* books. In this Earth's only known colony rediscovers the Homeworld and sends a ship to try and surreptitiously advance its post-holocaust industrial revolution. Stableford examines the social future of the human race and considers whether a humanity recovering from a nuclear war would actually want to return to its earlier, and destructive, technological high point. It is also one of the few novels I have come across that actually takes into account the fact that the most easily accessible natural resources have been exhausted, severely restricting the possibilities of technological renewal.

The last two books of this period are both more adventure-oriented. It is difficult to judge the quality of *Journey to the Centre* given that the readily available version is one heavily revised for republication in 1989 as the first volume of a trilogy. Still, as it stands it is an entertaining exploration of a hollow artificial world (cf. Frederik Pohl's *Gateway*). *The Gates of Eden* is a biological mystery story in the 'Grainger' and 'Daedalus' mode as a xenobiologist investigates a deadly paradise planet.

After 1983 Brian Stableford published no science fiction until the late 1980s. He emerged from the interregnum as a more assured and mature writer, winning particular acclaim for his vampire novel *The Empire of Fear* (1988), and his 'Werewolves of London' trilogy. Although he had published a handful of short stories in the early part of his career, it was now that he also started to make his mark as a writer of strong short stories, finally winning a long-deserved BSFA Award for his novella 'The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires' (*Interzone* 91/92 – 1995).

On many occasions, Stableford has been quick to belittle his earlier writing, dismissing most of it as hackwork. In this he is doing himself a grave disservice. Some of the early novels suffer from hurried writing and an attempt to write to a pure 'adventure' format that does not suit his style. However, many of the novels, particularly the *Grainger* and *Daedalus* books, *The Gates of Eden* and *Journey to the Centre* are good, intelligent entertainments while *Man in a Cage* and *The Walking Shadow* can stand their own against the best that British science fiction of the 1970s has to offer. While much of his work carries an air of cynicism about it, it is balanced by an essential humanity. Like writers such as Gregory Benford and Greg Egan he points out that outside the light and warmth of the fireside, it is a hostile universe. Unlike Benford and Egan, he is less quick to deny humanity its place by the fire.

Note: I would like to thank Brian Stableford and Bob Wardzinski (of *The Talking Dead Books*) for helping to fill the holes in my collection and making this as complete a retrospective as possible.

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- Critical Threshold* (DAW 1977)
- Wildblood's Empire* (DAW 1977)
- The City of the Sun* (DAW 1978)
- Balance of Power* (DAW 1979)
- The Paradox of Sets* (DAW 1979)

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO WE CONDUCTED A POLL TO FIND OUT THE BEST BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS OF THE LAST FIFTY YEARS. THE RESULTS APPEARED IN VECTOR 201, AND AT EASTERCON 1999 THE BSFA HELD A NUMBER OF PANEL ITEMS TO DISCUSS THE RESULTS, AND WHAT THE MERITS OF THE NOVELS VOTED ON. THE FOLLOWING IS AN EDITED AND REVISED TRANSCRIPT OF THE THIRD OF THESE PANELS.

## The Best of British III: The 1970s

**Andrew M. Butler:** We continue our discussion of British science fiction with the 1970s, what we might call the long 1970s, roughly 1972 or 1973 to 1982, from the end of *New Worlds* as a regular publication to the first publication of *Interzone*. We've examined the cosy catastrophes of John Wyndham, which we redefined as catastrophes within a domestic sphere against a backdrop of a Britain emerging into a new world and domestic reality after the Second World War, and the New Wave of the 1960s, a kind of formal experimentation best seen at short story length. During the 1960s a distinctively British voice was emerging, perhaps a pastoral voice, with a sense of irony and a self-awareness of what was or could be done with the genre. Now if the 1960s was an explosion of science fiction in Britain then, according to what Brian Stableford said in Vector 200, the 1970s marked a period of retreat: "The seventies have, inevitably, suffered the sad fate of seeming very dull and flat by comparison, devoid of any such epoch-making turning-points", culminating in the emergence of filmed 'sci-fi' and the fantasy explosion. Paul Kincaid, was he right?

**Paul Kincaid:** No, I'd say it was the opposite. I think it's interesting that the starting and ending points of the period under discussion are identified with magazines. And magazines are short story markets. In the period between there were no obvious, visible, regular short story markets. *New Worlds* staggered on until the second half of the 1970s, on an increasingly erratic schedule, and then collapsed, having produced about ten issues over eight or so years. *New Writings* continued throughout the whole period, collapsing at exactly the wrong point as it had bought a story of mine, after number 30 (1978), but was never very significant in terms of identifying a voice within British science fiction.

**Chris Hill:** I collect them but only really now with a sense of completing than any strong attachment. There are some Chris Priest stories, Keith Roberts, some Brian Aldiss, but take that out and it's very dull. If you read the editorials, it's trying to be sparkling and exciting, but the stories themselves aren't.

**PK:** We tend to identify science fiction a lot more than we realise with short fiction. They set the mood, they set the tone. In the 1970s there was no readily identifiable point for this, but it was actually a boom time for novels: it was a wonderland of science fiction as far as the novel was concerned. As Colin Greenland said in the discussion of the 1960s: 'In science fiction, as in pop music, most of the sixties actually happened in the seventies'. And it's true: an awful lot of the mature development of what started in the 1960s actually came along in the 1970s. Starting in 1970, Chris Priest's first novel *Indoctrinaire*, Ian Watson's first novel *The Embedding* (1973), Robert Holdstock's *Eye Among the Blind* (1976), Garry Kilworth's *In Solitary* (1977), at the end of the period Chris Evans's first novel, *Capella's Golden Eyes* (1980). That's an impressive list of impressive, top-class writers. At the same time there are quality writers like Roberts, Josephine Saxton, Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, all continuing to produce highly rated novels during this period. This was a time when there was good stuff out there, it was just coming out in novel form.

M. John Harrison is another one who debuted in this period, from *The Committed Men* (1971) to *In Viriconium* (1982), which just fits into our period. It's a body of work comparable to Priest's at the time. *A Storm of Wings* (1980) is a beautiful novel; it's the first novel by Harrison that reveals his ability to write absolutely gorgeous language. I don't think it's his best – I prefer his short

stories like 'Egnaro' [1981] and 'A Young Man's Journey into Viriconium' because there's an intellectual complexity in them that is stronger and deeper than in the novels.

**CH:** Part of the problem is that there's no easily recognisable 'big novel' of the period that everybody talked about; like *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) and *Dune* (1965) in the sixties–

**PK:** We had *The Dispossessed* (1974) in the 1970s.

**CH:** But it's not talked about in the same way as *Neuromancer* (1984) is.

**PK:** It was in the 1970s and the 1980s; you ask a collection of science fiction fans to choose the best science fiction novel ever and they'd name *The Dispossessed* in the top three.

**AMB:** But that is moving away from the British remit. Can we characterise this period by one British science fiction novel?

**PK:** If so, probably *Crash* (1973). I think it's the novel of Ballard that's had the most impact, at the time, and Ballard is archetypically the British science fiction writer of the time, even though *Crash* isn't really science fiction. It set a tone for the period.

**AMB:** Which reinforces Colin's paradox that the archetypal writer of the 1960s actually defines the 1970s. The urban disaster trilogy of *Crash*, *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High-Rise* (1975) very much define the 1970s, which perhaps makes a mockery of my characterisation of the British or English voice as being pastoral.

**PK:** You could have an urban pastoral, I think.

**AMB:** Isn't that a contradiction in terms?

**PK:** Pastoral isn't necessarily rural, pastoral is a sense of place, a sense of location, of what is there on the ground seeping into the consciousness of the characters, ideas and structure of the novel. That can happen within a city as much as in a rural setting.

**Penny Hill:** Pastoral specifically means, 'Of the fields'; I'd accept there is a fictional voice which is aware of that sense of place, but we can't use the word 'pastoral' for that.

**AMB:** Despite their urban setting, that trilogy is about Nature, in the sense of getting back to that other thread of British science fiction, that of the process of evolution, or indeed devolution in the sense of descent into savagery – in the *Lord of the Flies* (1954) type environment of *High Rise* and the forbidding quasi-nature reserve of *Concrete Island*.

**PK:** You can almost see *Concrete Island* as an echo of *Lord of the Flies*.

**CH:** In the stricter sense of the word 'pastoral' you do have a lot of activity: some of the Michael Coney stuff, Richard Cowper, some of Bob Shaw's stuff, although I do feel that he has a more international tone.

**PK:** And *Mythago Wood* (1984) comes outside of our period, but the roots of it are clearly visible in what Robert Holdstock was writing, particularly in *Earthwind* and in the stories in *In the Valley of the Statues* (1982).

**AMB:** Nature intrudes into some of those novels to such an extent that you wonder whether they aren't better read as Fantasies rather than science fiction. I think there is an association of science

fiction with the city and fantasy with rural landscapes.

**PK:** But if you do that you wipe out *A Dream of Wessex* (1977), *The Road to Corlay* (1978) and most of D G Compton as science fiction.

**CH:** Talking of *A Dream of Wessex*, I see that as the first of Priest's major novels; there's a direct line of connection between it and *The Extremes* (1998).

**PK:** It could be started in 'An Infinite Summer' (1976), which appeared in Peter Weston's *Andromeda 1*, but primarily that was it. But if we're going to talk about Priest we need to mention *Inverted World* (1974), one of the finest works of the imagination, albeit atypical of Priest's writing. That's yet another example of a damn good science fiction novel being written at the time.

**AMB:** Perhaps we should begin to focus on the 'top three', and begin to ponder that this is actually a top five or so. Whilst they weren't very high up overall, there are still half a dozen really popular novels. We've already mentioned *The Road to Corlay*, and joint third Arthur C Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973).

**CH:** I think that's very atypical of British science fiction of the time.

**PK:** But there's a whole thread of science fiction that we didn't have time to touch on when we were talking about the New Wave, that alongside the experimental there was a lot of very traditional science fiction being written and this continued into the 1970s and beyond. We ignored one of the most significant novels of the 1960s, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) – we didn't even mention that.

*Rendezvous* seems very American in scope, but you can also trace some of the tropes back to Olaf Stapledon, say, but it's still very common in Britain for there to be that traditional science fiction – you've got Bob Shaw as well.

**CH:** You're in severe danger when trying to trace a pattern through the decades of coming up with a weak literary theory. There's a serious danger of missing out the stuff that doesn't fit the straight line.

**AMB:** Chris Priest raised that from the audience in the 1960s discussion: part of the *New World* project inevitably included an exclusion of writers who didn't fit their version of science fiction. Inevitably in telling the story of science fiction, we lose certain subplots in our attempts to make sense of it.

The other novel in third place is D G Compton's *The Continuous Katherine Mortonhoe* (1974), which I think is one of the great underrated novels of the decade by one of the great underrated writers of the decade. Forget the originality of *The Trueman Show* (1998) and *Ed-TV* (1999), that depiction of a whole life on television is there back in *Mortonhoe*. It's an account of a journalist who has cameras in his eyes – cyberpunk ten years before the event – who has an assignment to film a woman who is dying of cancer, and this footage is broadcast live on TV as a soap opera, as a docu-soap.

**PK:** He handles the moral issues in there with a deftness that is very rare in science fiction. Although that moral deftness is quite common in English science fiction – it's there in Priest, Kilworth, Holdstock, Evans, Cowper, Coney, and Compton. It's one of the defining characteristics of British science fiction. It's hard to pin down, but there's a sense of the moral worth of characters and how we defame that worth and undermine the individual worth. That's exactly what *The Continuous Katherine Mortonhoe* is about; it's a wonderfully subtle novel.

**AMB:** The way he handles it is to ping-pong between the viewpoints of Mortonhoe and the cameraman, so at no point do you really know who to sympathise with; the cameraman could be seen as a paparazzo, driving a woman to her death, but because the story is in part told from his point of view, you are

forced to empathise with him, as well as her. That's typical of Compton's novels in general: he's very deft at the switch of viewpoint characters. He does the same in *Chronicles* (1970), UK *Hot Wireless Sets, Aspirin Tablets, the Sandpaper Sides of Used Matchboxes, and Something that Might have been Castor Oil*, 1971) and the last paragraph of each chapter in *The Steel Crocodile* (1970; UK *The Electric Crocodile*) become the first, from a different viewpoint, of the next. It's as if he takes the formal experimentation of the New Wave and adds plot, characterisation, emotion, love and empathy.

**PK:** In a formal sense it looks like a exercise in dislocation, the shift in viewpoint, the use of the same phrasing to establish one character and then to shift to another character – compare *Report on Probability A* (1968) – but it's actually an exercise in moral sympathy and it brings you into the moral viewpoints of the character. It's doing two seemingly opposite jobs at exactly the same time.

**AMB:** That's parallax, isn't it? Fixing in space using two viewpoints – parallax being a key word of the 1970s paranoid culture, say in Alan J. Pakula's film *The Parallax View* (1974).

Let's move up the league table to John Brunner, in second place, and *The Sheep Look Up* (1972). A lot of novelists who split the vote between three or four novels didn't do very well overall, but Brunner managed both.

**PK:** Again it was a novel which set a tone for something that was only going to become noticeable or visible a decade later – again it's cyberpunk *avant la lettre*, it's establishing many of the modes, approaches and attitudes of cyberpunk long before the sub-genre.

**CH:** Brunner has the distinction, with Clarke, of being the only British writer to win a Hugo award for best novel, *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), although that may say as much about American tastes as the quality of British science fiction. There's four books from this rough period that are considered together – *Stand on Zanzibar*, *The Jagged Orbit* (1969), *The Sheep Look Up*, *The Shockwave Rider* (1975).

**AMB:** *The Shockwave Rider* posits something like a computer virus, perhaps another prefiguring of cyberpunk. These, again, are all disaster novels.

**PK:** But it's not obviously a disaster novel – you know there's a disaster going on, but you are concentrating on the atmosphere, events and feelings.

**CH:** And the way in which individuals are affected by the aftermath of the disaster. You as a reader are aware of the catastrophe, but the characters aren't necessarily – it's a continuation of their lives as far as they're concerned.

**PK:** It's a disaster in the way that most things happen: it's slow, so it's part of a degrading every day life.

**CH:** Again, that's prescient, because that's the sort of thing which is now making front page news. Of course, there was a fair amount of environmental science fiction being written at about that time.

**AMB:** As we said in an earlier discussion, this British concern with environmentalism comes very early – it's there in Wyndham in the 1950s.

And so to the top of the chart, Michael Coney's *Hello Summer, Goodbye* (1975).

**CH:** I read that for this discussion, and I have to say I was quite blown away by it. On the surface it's a fairly straightforward coming-of-age story, on a planet with an eccentric orbit – rather like the *Helliconia* trilogy (1982-5), at a late-nineteenth century technical level; at the same time the world is basically dying. The élite are aware of this going on, and a lot of the seemingly random events which have been going are part of a master plan allowing

the ruling élite to survive. The novel is about the hero's reaction to the adult world. In around 220 pages you have coming of age, a war, romance, the end of the world and in the final paragraph a tantalising hint that something else is going on as well. 1990s writers would be incapable of doing this in less than three books. In fact that's typical of the 1970s, aside from Brunner you'd be hard pressed to find more than a handful of British novels that are over 250 pages in length. The 1970s is the last gasp of the short novel – and they're so much better for being short as well.

**PK:** There's an important linking point which only occurred to me when you were describing the novel: the influence of Brian Aldiss, in the structure, in the internal references and echoes within the book. On a personal level, whilst I think it's a charming novel, I'm absolutely astonished it got that vote. I don't think in any way it is the best novel of the decade, I think it's just simply one of a body of great works.

**AMB:** It placed so high because so many people placed it as their favourite, whereas the other books we've talked about varied in positions between people's choices of their own top five.

Let's move to talk about the position of female writers. So far we've only mentioned Josephine Saxton.

**PK:** She goes through bursts of activity and then disappears from the scene entirely, before coming back again and so on. She's actually writing the whole time, but it's publishing tastes as to whether she appears or not. She is far and away one of the best writers of science fiction, male or female, that we have in this country. Her best novel, *Queen of the States* (1986), falls outside our period, her early novels, *Vector for Seven* (1970) and *Group Feast* (1971) are very difficult. She is a writer to be reckoned with. She is also practically unique in being the only significant British female science fiction writer of this period. There's also Angela Carter.

**AMB:** In some senses she's coming to sf from the outside.

**PK:** A significant portion of her work does fall squarely within sf and fantasy. There's also Doris Lessing, if we'd consider her to be British.

**AMB:** I believe it was Saxton who was the first to rewrite fairy tales in feminist – for one of the early 1970s anthologies, *Andromeda or Aries* – which Carter was to do in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).

**PK:** It's a device she uses a lot in her short work, but not her long work, aside from *The Travails of Jane Saint* (1980).

**CH:** If we take the period up to the start of *Interzone*, then Gwyneth Jones will scrape in, with *Divine Endurance*?

**AMB:** That was 1984, but there are a number of Gwyneth A. Jones books for juveniles, from *Water in the Air* (1977) onward, and two Ann Halam books, *Ally Ally Aster* (1981) and *The Alder Tree* (1982).

**PK:** We must talk about Alasdair Gray's *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), another writer who came to sf from the outside, and did it with superb panache. There were a lot of writers in this period who were beginning to use science fiction elements and tropes in works which were as bizarre and wonderful as *Lanark*. In the listing of his body of theft throughout the novel, he includes a number of science fiction writers. He was, and probably still is, a friend of Colin Kapp.

**AMB:** Gray takes us into the 1980s, and it's worth noting that the most popular book of the 1980s was Priest's *The Affirmation* (1981). Paul, I'd imagine that you might have to say something about that?

**PK:** It's actually difficult, given that he's just published two of his best books with *The Prestige* (1996) and *The Extremes* (1998), but before that I was convinced that he would not top *The*

*Affirmation*. I think that it's a marvellous piece of work, that is probably as daring as science fiction was able to get in the period. There is no moment in the whole of British science fiction that is as alienating as the moment when you realise that the vast manuscript that Philip Sinclair has written is compiled entirely of blank pages. It captures all the moods and tropes that we've talked about as being English science fiction of the 1970s. The landscape is vital to the structure of the story and also to the imagination of the characters and the idea of dreams, thoughts and feelings is almost externalised in order to make the sense of person the point on which the whole novel revolves. This is joint number one for me in terms of my favourite of the period.

**CH:** At the same time as that you've got Ian Watson doing something entirely different from anyone else.

**PK:** *The Embedding* came out in 1973, *Inverted World* in 1974 – there was something in the water at that time.

**CH:** You pick up an Ian Watson book and you've no idea what you'll find between the covers. *The Jonah Kit* (1975) I loved, but I could really follow *The Martian Inca* (1977), although I could see why it is considered to be important. In a genre which can occasionally be hidebound, he's just springing ideas all over the place.

**PK:** The biggest danger with Watson is that he's too prolific with ideas, and wastes an awful lot of them. At the start of his career he couldn't write a novel without flinging in something new on each page.

**AMB:** He's superb short story writer, where they are more of a sprint, which perhaps bucks the trend for the best fiction of the period to be novel length. *The Very Slow Time Machine* (1979) is astounding. Chris, you're a big fan of Brian Stableford, whose ideas on the 1970s started us off.

**CH:** There are two Brian Stablefords working in the 1970s.

**AMB:** Brian and Brian M.?

**CH:** Yes, the entertainments which are frankly quite derivative, the Dies Irae trilogy is a rip-off of *The Odyssey*, and the Hooded Swan or Grainger sequence, which are great fun and which I turn to to re-read when I want to relax. Then there's the biological science fiction which is incredibly popular now, but Stableford was ahead of the game. Then you've got *Man in a Cage* (1975) which is an incredible novel; they've discovered a system faster than light which drives you mad. One thread of the novel deals with enlisting a schizophrenic character into the test programme to see what would happen if you sent them, the alternate chapters deal with his internal mindscape while making one of the journeys. You think it's telling you the story of what happens to him when finally does make the flight, but in fact it is what happens to him when he makes a second. It's probably the most difficult novel he's ever written, but as good as anything written during the period.

**AMB:** Would that be your choice for the book of the period?

**CH:** It would certainly be high up, in the top two or three. There is also *The Walking Shadow* (1979) which sold rather well in its first edition but never got a second, which is his homage to Olaf Stapledon in whom he has a great interest. It's a series of snapshots, into the future from a small group's point of view.

**PK:** I don't know Stableford's book, but your description of it reminded me very much of Ian Watson's 'The Very Slow Time Machine', in that travel into time in Watson's case and space in Stableford's, has become inextricably bound with madness and dislocation from our own time and space. It also crops up in a lot of the science fiction of the period. There's a sort of mental shutting down that we have to do in order to move on to

anywhere else.

**AMB:** It's another exploration of inner-space.

Paul, you've mentioned *The Affirmation* as one of two favourites, so what was the other?

**PK:** One that I suspect Chris is going to violently disagree with: Keith Roberts's *The Chalk Giants* (1974). It is to my mind the best novel that Roberts ever wrote, again a matter psychological distortion and of madness being the only way into the future. The British version – The American version loses the first two stories and all the linking narratives – depicts a panic as a nuclear war approaches. Our main character is in a car, trying to get away from the city, heading for a place he visited and remembers fondly, the West Country. It's impossible to know whether he ever gets there, because you then get a series of (probably) hallucinations, in which he envisages both life in this rural enclave in which he is ritually and consistently humiliated by a woman who becomes the multi-woman which is Roberts's favourite device. He sees her again and again in different societies, including an early Christian one. Roberts sees the novel as an apology for writing *Pavane* (1968), which he sees as a profoundly anti-Catholic story. But you never actually know what is real and what is his hallucination, but you get an image of how the world will be shaped, probably across a period of centuries. There are also echoes of the way our own society has worked in the past, which can't be escaped, and that everything, even the shape of the land, is also the shape of his mind. The whole thing is so complex, so richly intertwined, so open to possible

interpretations that has to stand alongside *The Affirmation* as one of the finest novels of the period.

**CH:** I don't have a problem with *The Chalk Giants* as a collection – it's something that he does on at least two other occasions in *Pavane* and *Kiteworld* (1985), but for me on a personal level, those two work better for me better as a whole.

**PK:** They are more coherent. What I like about *The Chalk Giants* is that it is tied together by mental incoherence, by his delusions. That's also true of *The Affirmation*.

**CH:** But I do like that one. I suspect we'll have to agree to disagree on that one.

**PK:** Yes.

**AMB:** Well, if our panelists don't want to talk about it, then perhaps we ought to pause there, and close our consideration of the 1970s, with *The Affirmation* pointing one way into the 1980s and 1990s.

*Paul Kincaid is the author of a number of articles on Chris Priest, most recently V207 and V209. Chris Hill, the BSFA Awards administrator, is the author of an article on Brian Stableford also to be found in this issue. Special thanks to Penny Hill for her intervention on 'pastoral'.*

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# The Return of



by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

VIDDY WELL O MY DROOGIES – A CLOCKWORK ORANGE IS BACK. SO POUR YOURSELF A DRAFT OF THE OLD MOLOKO PLUS AND GET READY FOR OVER TWO HOURS OF SPILT RED, RED KROOVY AND LASHINGS OF IN-OUT IN-OUT ALL LEFT WITHOUT RAZDRAZING BY THE CENSORS. VESCHS AND CHILOVECKS, RE-INTRODUCING A CLOCKWORK ORANGE BY MALCHICK KUBRICK. HORRORSHOW.

In the UK *A Clockwork Orange* has always been a cause scandale and the source of much speculation. Famously the film was withdrawn from circulation by its creator Stanley Kubrick, and screenings were raided to enforce the reclusive director's edict. For years its cult status has increased due to its rarity – clandestine fourth generation copies are closely guarded, or Dutch subtitled videos sold under the counter for hugely inflated prices. Apocryphal stories circulated – the film was withheld because of death threats to Kubrick's family, because of copycat gangs, potential censorship or media hysteria. It was never cut by state censors, the BBFC, despite concerns over the film's alleged glorification of violence – a fact that should have automatically allowed showings once the self-imposed ban on the film had been lifted by Kubrick's estate following his untimely death. However its reputation was such that a thirty-year-old film was deemed to be dangerous enough to warrant a re-rating. Fortunately it was, after much debate, certified uncut and considered suitable for

audiences over eighteen years of age. What a new generation of filmgoers will make of it is anyone's guess – the trailer alone is so extreme in pace, colour and escalation it could be viewed as either exhilarating or totally bemusing.

**From Book To Script:** Kubrick's adaptation of the book remains remarkably faithful, crucially in the adoption of Nadsat as the choice of language, Burgess's slang adaptation of Russian vocabulary (for example horrorshow is a bastardisation of *khorosho*, Russian for good). Where the film departs significantly from the book is in its decision not to shoot the final chapter. Kubrick was not aware that this existed until after principal photography had commenced as many copies of the book did not contain the closing segment. On discovery he took the decision to go with his original script, a controversial move, perhaps but a wise one. The ending of the original always felt a bit of a cop out anyway and would have certainly had a detrimental effect on the

tone of the film that would have sat uneasily with gleeful celebration of delinquency. Another alteration was McDowell's rendition of 'Singin' In the Rain' accompanying a beating, which was improvised on set and stayed in because it appealed to the director's macabre sense of humour.

**Making:** Kubrick once again pushed forward film technology by demanding exceptionally wide lenses that provide much of the visual feel, turning straight lines into curves and allowing for extremities of expression. The fluidity of the camerawork and the sometimes outrageous length of the back-tracking shots are pure Kubrick but their assurance is remarkable for pre-steadicam days. As usual any hand-held work was shot by Kubrick himself, notably the rape and murder scenes. Alex's suicidal leap, shot in awesome point of view, was achieved by a simple yet heartless technique – Kubrick loaded cameras with film and threw them out of a window, until the required shot was obtained. For the sound he insisted that all dialogue was all recorded on location, facilitating the need to create specialised highly directional microphones to record speech in adverse environments – the scenes underneath the bridge were recorded with traffic thundering overhead. The design of set and costume is exemplary, creating a world clearly recognisable and yet distorted and subverted – an authentic alternate future.

**Notoriety:** The film is split clearly into three phases – freedom, incarceration, release. The chief source of its notoriety is the first third which sees Alex and his droogs' unbridled freedom to perpetrate crimes for kicks. This is the film's most subversive move – Alex is intelligent and articulate, he creates violence and terror for a bit of twenty-to-one. There are no social reasons for his behaviour, he doesn't even need the money he steals, he takes it because he can.

**Music:** Fresh as the day it was made, the Moog soundtrack remains one of the most coherent and wittily produced. The strains of Ludwig Van's Glorious Ninth compressed into a few minutes of manic synthesiser work may make purists blanche, but

is complementary to the pop-art visuals and perfectly reflects Alex's day-glo world of excess. Music is as much Alex's reason to live as anything – it gets him into bed with teenage girls and allows him to live his daydream ultraviolet fantasies. But ultimately when his capacity to hear Beethoven is taken from him he is at his lowest ebb. Beethoven is seen as inspirational, uplifting and creative but it also provides a backdrop to atrocities, reflects fascism and distorted übermensch sensibilities. It is these dichotomies that litter the film – freedom is essential in a civilised country but comes at a price, Alex has a right to freedom but that in turn affects the liberty of others. Ethics is a tricky business with no definitive solution.

**Film As Film:** Part of *A Clockwork Orange's* success artistically lies in its denial of reality – it celebrates film as film. This is not to say that you do not relate or emot to Alex but that the grandiose *mise-en-scene* remains uniquely filmic. Allusions to film and the filming process are sprinkled throughout the running time – in some respects this is to criticise what you see, there is no definitive film reality. When Alex is forced to watch a series of

atrocities and snuff footage it is clear that a number of the sequences are staged, some of them 'actual', but to Alex's drugged mind they are the same – the film is attacking the audience's viewing process in deciding what is real. To some extent this renders all film as falsification, Alex's reaction to film is beyond actuality and moral considerations. If *A Clockwork Orange* seeks to turn our relationship with the screen into something deeper than passively accepting its signs and meanings (the complicit act of watching was, of course, foremost in the voyeuristic films of Hitchcock such as *Rope* or *Vertigo* and reached their nadir in Powell's scopophilic nightmare *Peeping Tom*) it is in Alex's daytime fantasies. Note that the act of watching against your free will is detrimental to your health – it certainly was for McDowell who suffered very painful eye injuries as a result of the forced viewing scenes – that doctor you see with the eyeglasses is real!

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## BUT, I WANT TO LOOK AT THE SCREEN. I'VE BEEN BOUGHT HERE TO VIDDY FILMS AND VIDDY FILMS I SHALL – Anthony Burgess.

# Barding the Future: Poets as Protagonists in Science Fiction

by Steve Sneyd

Shelley spoke of the poets as "unacknowledged legislators." In early societies, the bard had great social significance in a variety of functions, which included confirming the status of rulers, acting as a living repository of the collective memory in oral societies, having the power to curse or bless others, and acting as an ambassadorial intermediary, protected by their poetic rôle which let them move freely between hostile, even warring warbands or peoples.

That there is, at some level, a ghostly after-echo of this almost sacred, and certainly socially vital, lost rôle for poets is perhaps one reason that they appear in protagonist rôles in modern science fiction. The writer perhaps sees the important rôles once held by poets as potentially recurring in the future; or, in the case of alternate history, never having died out, as so many other social structures and forms tend to cyclically appear and disappear down the long waveforms of human history.

Jacob Bronowski, the distinguished commentator on social, scientific, and cultural history, spoke of poetry as being "species specific": an inescapable human characteristic which can, therefore, be expected to persist into the future, as it has existed

throughout the recorded past, for as long as the species remains recognisably human.

So the sf writer who gives a poet a key narrative rôle in his or her envisioning of the future is not in any way making excessive demands of the reader's ability to suspend disbelief. It is possible to speculate beyond this, as to the benefits of casting a poet in a protagonist rôle. The ability to move freely between social levels, and even between hostile communities, already mentioned as a feature of the bardic rôle in past societies, offers the writer huge benefits of flexibility, too, in a narrative of the future – an ease of penetration of different milieus which in fiction set in the present is most easily achieved by the private eye.

My most recent instance – and also a near-ultimate in turning poets from unacknowledged to acknowledged legislators – is the time-travel/alternative universe in contact with our own utopian sf novel *The Republic of Dreams: A Reverie* by Garfield Crimmins (1998). The République des Reves, a country which has means of contacting our current reality, but is itself in a parallel 1930s, is a "bardic democracy", its rulers elected from among its poets, its capital Pois Poeton (City of Poets). The protagonist (who bears the

author's name) has a doppelgänger, one of the poets, who is a double-agent tasked to infiltrate the Republic's bitter enemy, the League of Common Sense, and finds he must assume his rôle to protect this paradise of erotic surrealism where life and literature are indistinguishable.

A much earlier – and in many ways more convincing – instance is Robert Heinlein's classic collection *The Green Hills of Earth* (1951). Spaceship crewman Rhysling, blinded in an engine room accident, makes a tenuous living by his performing his poems and songs round the spaceports of the Solar System before sacrificing himself to save another spaceship from destruction. (This protagonist gave his name to the awards for sf poetry voted annually by members of the Science Fiction Poetry Association since 1978.)

There is a considerable sub-category of sf novels of the alternate history kind in which the early nineteenth-century Romantic poets Shelley, Keats, and Byron appear as protagonists or key characters, so many in fact that only a few examples will be instances.

It's first worth considering why these poets have such appeal as plot figures. Firstly, they themselves made resounding claims for poetry – the unacknowledged legislator quote from Shelley is representative. They have reader appeal as archetypes of the passionate, doomed poet, who led dramatic lives (including, in Shelley and Byron's cases, busy and colourful sex lives), and who rebelled against oppression of various kinds (again particularly the latter two) in a way which appeals to the rebel in us all. They were all interested in scientific development and had an enthusiasm for the future and the changes they saw it bringing, characteristics which are of particular appeal to the science-fiction writer. In addition to their poetry (particularly Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* [w. 1818-19, p. 1820], and Byron's 'Darkness' [1816]) and that of those associated with them (Mary Shelley's prose novel *Frankenstein* [1818], the vampire story written by Byron's personal physician, Polidori [1819]) can arguably be found the beginnings of the modern genre. Using them as characters is a salute to the pioneers in some sense.

They also have the particular benefit of being familiar, as names at least even to those who have not read their work, or much of it since school, to just about every reader, and that familiarity is a great benefit to the writer since those reading the work have at once the comfort of feeling they begin on known ground. There is also the benefit that, by associating the work with figures like these with an unchallenged place in the literary pantheon, the writer of sf is in a sense obtaining literary credibility by association, enabling him or her to reach people who would not normally wish to associate themselves with science fiction. These motivations, and others like the pleasure of writing about figures who may have been heroes of childhood or adolescence, may not be clearly present to the writer's consciousness, but they help us make sense of the frequency of appearance of these Romantic poets in sf.

Hence we have the appearance of a cloned Keats in, and the use of titles of Keats' epic fragments for, Dan Simmons' far-future Hyperion novel series. Shelley, Byron, and the others present at the Swiss Villa Diodati when the challenge to write a horror story gave birth to the 'proto-sf' works mentioned above, appear in Brian Aldiss' *Frankenstein Unbound* (1973). A time-slip hurls future American Joe Bodenland into an encounter with the Villa Diodati group, as the events of Mary Shelley's novel unfold in 'reality' around them. Aldiss is himself a published poet, and has included poetry in several of his novels, most extensively in the psychedelic war story *Barefoot in the Head* (1969).

Tim Powers, in *The Stress of Her Regard* (1989) sets his novel's narrative of a final conflict against the stone-based race of antediluvian nephilim agelessly controlling – and infecting – humanity, in the era of the Romantic poets, with Keats, Shelley, and Byron all intimately involved in, and their historical lives providing a framework for, the struggle.

In another, less focused and less convincing, Powers novel,

*The Anubis Gates* (1983) a ka or spirit double given fleshly form of Byron plays a minor rôle, while the central character is a modern academic literary critic, Brendan Doyle, who having travelled back to the early nineteenth century in the entourage of an immortality-seeking millionaire, and become embroiled in an epic struggle against an undead Egyptian priest involving a cast of thousands including artificially deformed beggar armies, centuries-old secret societies and so on) in the process finds himself forced to assume the rôle of a minor Romantic poet, an American living in Britain, William Ashless, and even writes his poetry (on which he was the main expert, back in the twentieth century) until, paradoxically, it becomes clear that Ashless-as-poet existed only because Doyle had studied, and so could become, him. An intriguing sideways look at the paradoxes of literary remembering which illuminates an otherwise mish-mash, if vividly page-turning, book.

A final instance of this subclass of poet-protagonist novels, albeit one that is somewhat marginal as the poets concerned lack real plot centrality, but is of interest because of the daring extrapolations involved in its alternative history, is William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's steam-punk novel of a computer-run nineteenth century Britain, *The Difference Engine* (1990). Lord Byron, as head of the Industrial Radical Party, has become Prime Minister, and, as with so many real-life socialists in power, ends up defending the state against his former associates: in this case Shelley, having led a Luddite uprising, is publicly said to be dead although in fact he lives on in exile on St Helena, under the identity of Napoleon I.

Other real poets appear as protagonists. William Blake's own Prophetic Books created figures which have many aspects of alternative universe and genre characters, so it is not surprising that a variety of sf authors have set novels in universes which draw on Blake's Myths. But in Ray Faraday Nelson's *Blake's Progress* (1975) Blake himself is a protagonist, a struggling one facing all the temptations and corruptions which would inevitably beset a poet whose power-fantasies became realisable as he himself is turned all-but-all powerful avatar, within vast cross-time conflicts involving such alternative histories as a modern Ptolemaic Empire stemming from Cleopatra's decisive victory over Rome, and a world in which the Aztecs with their religion of mass human sacrifice conquered Europe. (This book was revised and expanded with a greater rôle for Mrs Blake as *Timequest* [1985].)

Another actual poet who appears in genre novels is Edgar Allan Poe, most notably perhaps in *The Black Throne* (1990) by Roger Zelazny and Fred Saberhagen. Annie (heroine of Poe's poem 'Annabel Lee') draws to her world E.A. Poe as a child, along with his twentieth-century 'counterpart' Edgar Allan Perry. Her kidnapping and the search for her, involves these two protagonists in a journey through alternative worlds created in the adult Poe's poems and fiction.

Zelazny, who was a published poet himself and who made use of extracts of Amerindian ritual poetry, Hindu religious verse, and the ancient Egyptian 'Hymn to the Sun' of Akhenaton in various contexts in his fiction, also has several protagonists, who are fictional rather than historical poets, most notably Callinger in *A Rose for Ecclesiastes* (1969). This fêted future poet, whose intellectual arrogance has made him contemptuous of his own species, takes up the challenge of translating what is regarded as the untranslatable – the sacred books preserved by the dwindling remnants of a Martian race busy willing itself to extinction. After using poetic methods to achieve the translation, he impregnates a temple dancer, is told that she and the unborn child must be put to death, and uses his reworking into the High Martian tongue of the Biblical Book of Ecclesiastes to make holy mockery of the Martian deathwish. He is victorious, and the hybrid child is allowed to become their new beginning – a beautifully written, if in some ways simplistic, study of the poet's healing rôle in mediating between species, and balancing love, death, knowledge, creation, and ultimately salvation.

Samuel R. Delaney uses poet-protagonists extensively. In *The*

Jewels of Aptor (1962), there's the wish fulfilment of poet as master adventurer; the one-armed bard Geo is central both to the action and to the discovery of the meaning of the mysterious jewels in this science fantasy of a voyage to a mutation-ridden post-atomic waste island to rescue the child who holds the key; in *Dhalgren* (1975) the poet-protagonist alone fully understands, and is able to encapsulate in a vast poem-cycle, the mysterious human interactions of a vast decayed city.

In his Nebula Award-winning *Babel 17* (1966) Delany takes the theme of poet as healer, mediator, and discoverer of hidden meaning to perhaps its ultimate. The protagonist, Rydra Wong (an implicitly symbolic homophone name – Righter of Wrong) is a former cryptanalyst, turned poet (the poems ascribed to her in the book were written by Delany's then wife, published poet Marilyn Hacker). Her society is at endless war with another, very similar, the split born of ethnic divisions which travelled with humanity to the stars. There is also acute internal division between the rigidly hierarchic and disciplined class of Customs (the 'straights', to use the jargon of the era when the book was written) and Transport, the anarchistic, undisciplined, hippy-like crew of spaceships, merchant or pirate, who form an out-group everywhere.

Faced with devastatingly successful acts of enemy sabotage, preceded by transmissions, apparently instructing them in an incomprehensible language, officialdom persuades Rydra to take on the task of translating that language, codenamed *Babel 17*. In the process of breaking the language code by poetic techniques, Rydra also brings Customs and Transport together in a new understanding, 'cures' the saboteur, and, ultimately, makes possible an end to the interstellar war via the special understanding implicit in her decoding of *Babel 17*. (Delany draws strongly here on the Whorfian theory of language, i.e. that its form determines worldview and mindset). In its picture of poet as *gestaltmacher*, as shamanistic outlaw healer moving irresistibly to social centrality, as ultimate mediator, empath, catalyst ambassador between apparently irreconcilable cultures, the book has its naivities: with a heart of gold it glosses over genuine differences of class and economic interest of which behaviour patterns are only surface reflections, in ways characteristic of counterculture optimisms of its time. It is nevertheless fascinating as probably the most developed instance yet in science fiction of this particular view of the positive rôle possibilities of poet-protagonist.

At a relatively less sophisticated level of narrative and character, the poet is again communicator, intermediary and healer of social discord in the person of Jacinth in an sf work by feminist linguist Suzette Haden Elgin, *At The Seventh Level* (1972, reprinted within her *Communipath Worlds* [1980]).

In complete contrast, Tom Disch explores the situation of poet as outsider, victim-observer of a situation outwith his control, where his gift of language permits witness and memory but not alteration, except to the extent that testimony is itself of value for future possibility of change, in *Camp Concentration* (1968). In this near-future story, Louis Sacchetti, a Catholic who doubts his faith, a minor poet whose poetic gift he fears has left him, defies the draft to a brushfire war in Malaysia. In view of his age and marital status, he could have avoided the draft legally, so there is a clear implication that he has chosen the martyrdom of prison in hopes of some escape from circumstance and in search of a return of poetic inspiration. He feels himself not so much prisoner, despite the unpleasant, bullying surroundings, but selector of a better place in which to create to his fuller poetic potential.

Then Sacchetti is suddenly moved to another, oddly luxurious, underground prison, Camp Archimedes, where he is offered

privileges in exchange for keeping a diary of his contacts with fellow inmates. It soon becomes clear that they are the subjects of experiments with a modified syphilis germ, codenamed pallidine, designed to produce genius level intelligence, but with the side effect of speedy, agonising death via a failure of the body's immune system (the book appears now frighteningly prophetic of AIDS, both in the symptoms described and, near the book's end, when the female psychologist escapes after anal relations with one of the inmates, in the recounted sexual mode of transmission to Sacchetti then discovers that he, also, has been injected with pallidine. The book is very 'talky', the vocabulary ornate, even given the journal format and the protagonist's poet status, but is genuinely compelling in its picture of the way the inmates use an elaborate alchemical cover for their plotting against the guards and experiments to achieve an escape via mind transfer from inevitable death. However, aside from one prose-poem section of the journal as Sacchetti fugues from the apparent failure of the alchemical attempt to achieve the elixir of life which has ostensibly killed Mordechai, leader of the inmates, and a few quotes from his own poems, Sacchetti's poet identity plays little part other than the implied explanation of his original draft refusal. Nor does Disch enable us to see any real development in his writing insight as the germ supposedly raises his intelligence to genius level, although we are told of his writing a black humour verse epic of Auschwitz in record time.

So there is an element of arbitrariness in the choice of poet identity for the protagonist, or at any rate it seems somewhat manipulatively willed, as if the reader would be led to greater sympathy and identification with a poet given this Faustian 'gift' of intelligence growth gift-wrapped in a short-term death sentence than we would with some other type of person.

The ironies of a situation in which poets believe their creative powers give them mastery, but find themselves to be thoroughly mistaken, are again interestingly explored in *The Dramaturges of Yan* (1972) by John Brunner (another sf novelist who wrote poetry, including it within several of his works). Gregory Chart, poet-dramatist, and Marc Simon, poet, each in their different ways believe they understand and control the situation on the alien planet, Yan, whose natives, apparently separate individuals, retain, as poem scraps, fragmented cultural memories of a greater past. These they wish to exploit, Chart in the creation of a planet-wide performance play, Simon for his own poetic creations. In fact, both are being manipulated by a collective intelligence which subsumes the 'individuals' of Yan, in pursuit of its – ultimately devastating – plan to convert the planet into a giant spaceship to explore the universe.

The poet-protagonist of Greg Bear's *Queen of Angels* (1990) is again a creative individual apparently in control, but actually manipulated, although in this case by subconscious memory of childhood trauma. Brilliant, fêted black poet Emmanuel Goldsmith murders eight of his acolytes for no apparent reason; in this future of the Binary Millennium, while a space probe achieves Al, a white tyrant rules Haiti through vodun, Hellcrown vigilantes torture criminals with their own memories, and the megadwellings of LA's rich contemptuously dole the poor a mirrored-down ration of second-hand sunlight, the investigation reveals that the early abuse which lies at the root of Goldsmith's poetic gift has also triggered his apparently meaningless crimes.

Finally, a handful more instances help further illuminate the varied ways in which sf novelists have used the poet figure, whether shaping future society's meaning via the structuring power of language, or as outsider, victim, doomed rebel.

Jules Verne's posthumously published *Paris In The Twentieth*

## ...an epic struggle against an undead Egyptian priest involving a cast of thousands including artificially deformed beggar armies and centuries-old secret societies...

Century (w. 1863, p. 1994) has as protagonist a young poet attempting without hope to rediscover a place for his art within a future where the market rules as thoroughly as it does in reality today.

In Allen Ashley's *The Planet Suite* (1996) the protagonist, an unsuccessful poet in his teens, fulfills adolescent dreams when he takes part in a grand tour of the Solar System, but as manipulated rather than manipulator.

Frederick Turner, who has written two final epic poems, turns in the novel *A Double Shadow* (1978) to a decadent future Mars where status wars entertain a bored aristocracy; two of the book's key female characters, unable to arrest the conflict between their males, briefly appease the demons of that stressful helplessness, and attempt to make sense of their experiences, by shaping them into poems, namely Cleopatra, incestuous sister of one of the central duellists, Narcissus, and the geisha-like Rokujo.

Two instances draw on the traditional importance of poetry in Chinese culture in a future context, although in both cases the poet influences events via his poems rather than in a more directly protagonist rôle. In Kim Stanley Robinson's *Antarctica* (1998), in which Wu Li, initially a poet in the manner of Whitman, is influenced by the South Polar wastes into becoming the quantum geomancer and feng shui master Ta Shu, attempts to understand his minimalist verses trigger plot developments. Book 5 (*Beneath The Tree of Heaven*, 1993) of David Wingrove's Chung Kuo series of a future Chinese-dominated world city features the catalytic effects of the poems of Mars-based Kan Jiang.

Finally, to indicate that the poet-protagonist rôle need not be played by a human being in sf, in Gwyneth Jones's *White Queen* (1991) and *North Wind* (1994) the central figure of the poet-princess Clavel is an Aleutian, a race of alien invaders of Earth.

A number of the examples I have cited – Aldiss, Disch, Brunner and Zelazny – are published poets. Indeed, many writers of prose also have ambitions to be poets. In many cases these are ambitions frustrated and set aside without fulfilment, either because the economics of making a living as a writer have

demanded concentration on the saleable – fiction – or because they have been deterred by the critical parameters and exclusivities of literary criticism and its élites, which have persistently ignored or denigrated genre themes.

Including a poet as protagonist in fiction provides an opportunity to quote that character's poetry, which is in fact written by the author, and is hence an opportunity to introduce, Trojan Horse-like, his or her own poetry to the wider readership of a work of science-fiction prose, many of whom would never choose to read poetry in isolation but will accept and read it in a fictional plot context.

One final general point is of interest: the majority of examples of the poet-protagonist in science fiction to be discussed come from American authors. It may be that British writers, as a generalisation, tend to feel a sharper division between poetry and prose (experiments with the prose-poem, to illuminate this point, tend to be commoner in America than in the UK), or there may be a connection with the way the idea of the poet as bard lived on in the American consciousness, via the soaring visions of Walt Whitman, into relatively recent times with the bardic utterances of Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg, without such grandeur of self-assigned rôle as voicing the essence of a people, even a whole continent, being seen as ludicrous in the way (except perhaps briefly for the late 1960s, early 1970s counterculture movement) it would in the UK.

One of Hermann Goering's sidekicks is reported to have said "When I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun." When it comes to sf writers, the equivalent has often been "When I hear the word poet, I reach for my plot."

Note: my thanks to K.V. Bailey and Steve Jeffery for suggesting some of the instances discussed.

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STEVE SNEYD IS A POET BASED IN HUDDERSFIELD – EDs

## Dragons in Fantasy Fiction: An Incomplete Bestiary

by Sandra Unerman

### Introduction

Dragons have changed. A dragon story used to be one in which the hero faced the most dangerous and the most evil enemy imaginable. The interest lay in the hero, in his courage and capacity for rising to this supreme challenge, and in the mechanics by which he did so, rather than in the dragon itself. Such stories found in European folklore, in Beowulf and Spenser, tell us little about the dragons, except to show how great a threat they provide. Recent fantasy fiction contains many dragons whose character and function vary, and even though they still draw recognisably on the old traditions, they are portrayed in much more detail than in the past. Oriental dragons have always been different from the western variety, and knowledge about them may have helped authors open up new fictional possibilities, but direct influence is not easy to find. I have not undertaken a comprehensive survey of dragons in modern fiction: I doubt this would be possible, since there would be so much material to cover, but I have read a considerable number of dragon stories, enough to notice various developments and draw some conclusions.

It is not surprising that there are far more fictional dragons now than forty years ago. There has been far more genre fantasy published, and it may be that there is also more room for fantastic creatures in other fiction. Some of the new dragons are more successful than others, more notably vivid and deeply memorable. This is not always in direct proportion to the strength of the novels

in which they appear, though the better the writing, the better the chance of an impressive dragon. Authors write about the dragons of their own imagination, or those which fulfil a need in their imagined worlds, yet the result is not a random diversification. Trends can be observed which reflect changes in culture and ways of seeing shared by us all, readers as well as writers.

### Talking Dragons

St. George's dragon does not talk and neither does the dragon in Beowulf. Fafnir speaks to Sigurd but only after he has received his death blow. In *The Hobbit* (1937), Smaug is in many ways a traditional dragon, but his presence is more individual and memorable, and the words he speaks make at least as much impact as his physical presence. He is cleverer and more eloquent than almost anyone else in the book, though never sympathetic. The dragon in John Gardner's *Grendel* (1971) does nothing but talk. He does not fight, and the events of the novel do not reach his death, but his presence and Grendel's feelings about him are continually referred to, though he appears in only one scene. He lectures Grendel about philosophy and the futility of life: his voice is that of an old, old man but his physical presence and his anger when Grendel picks up one of his jewels are still overpowering. *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (1993), by Michael Swanwick, contains a dragon, Melanchthon, which talks Jane, the central character, into helping him into escape and later into an attack on the powers that dominate the nightmare world in which they live.

The dragon appears to be one of the strongest presences in this world, the one least subject to transformation, although in the end, this turns out to be as misleading as everything else Jane has experienced.

#### Sociable Dragons

Traditional dragons tend to be solitary. At least, the hero seldom encounters more than one, even if there are others in the background. At the other extreme, Graham Edwards's *Dragoncharm* (1997) is set in a world of dragons. The principal characters are dragons and the story is told from their point of view. As a result, the dragons must display a variety of personalities and emotional reactions which makes it difficult for them to impress the reader with full draconian power. As they fall romantically in love, or experience insecurities, it is difficult to remember that they are dragons at all.

*The Dragon and the George* (1970) and its sequels by Gordon R. Dickson portray a community of sociable dragons, set in a world of humans, magicians and talking animals. The dragons observe their own traditions and squabble among themselves. Perhaps they are less capable of change than the humans, though they have the sensual pleasure of being able to fly. The dragons are noisy, aggressive and covetous, but what sets them apart is the way they take these qualities to extremes, not that they are fundamentally different from humanity. They show us another level of the violence and the direct emotional expression of the medieval society in which the main characters find themselves, and in which they prefer to stay, by contrast with the 20th century civilisation from which they have come.

#### Flying Lizards

Some dragons are wild animals, as dangerous as a lion or a crocodile but not supernatural, or capable of conscious thought. This approach is most fully worked out in Peter Dickinson's *Flight of Dragons* (1979), a spoof natural history. The story describes the solitary and dramatic life cycle of flying, fire-breathing lizards, now extinct, which once nested on gold and died out in the Iron Age, killed by men with swords. Pern, the world of Anne McCaffery's *Dragonflight* (1969) and its sequels is inhabited by dragons which can be tamed and ridden. They bond telepathically with humans and have some degree of intelligence, but their relationship with their riders and their impact on the reader is more like that of splendid war horses than that of independent and powerful creatures. The dragons of Jane Yolen's *Dragon's Blood* (1982) are savage fighters, dangerous to approach but still capable of developing a mental bond with a human. They are also under the control of the humans of their world, bred to fight one another to sustain a gambling industry.

#### Ineffectual Dragons

There are not many of these, perhaps because they are too much of a let down of the readers' expectations. But the dragons of the Harry Potter books are a minor nuisance, too savage to be made into pets but not difficult to deal with. The evil against which Harry and his friends must struggle takes other forms. In *So You Want to be a Wizard* (1983) by Diane Duane, the search of the apprentice wizards for a stolen talisman leads them to the underground lair of a dragon, the Eldest, who is beginning to lose his memory. They trick him into giving up what he has been set to guard and help him to hide. This dragon is frightening despite his weakness, like a decaying weapon which might slip out of control.

#### Comic dragons

Comic dragons go back at least as far as Kenneth Grahame's *Reluctant Dragon* (1898) and depend on a reversal of the expectations created by the reader's knowledge of traditional dragon stories. Grahame's dragon could fight, but prefers to make a friend of the boy who is not afraid of him. The only bloodthirstiness is that of the villagers, for whose sake St George

and the dragon stage a fake fight. Roger Zelazny takes this idea even further, in a short story, 'The George Business' (1980), a tale which might also explain the similarities between so many local legends about fights with dragons. In Terry Pratchett's *Guards! Guards!* (1989) the reversal of expectations is more complicated. The swamp dragons are as aggressive and destructive as any traditional dragon, but they are also very small and liable to blow themselves up. In Susan Price's *Foiling the Dragon* (1990), Paul, a performance poet, is kidnapped and taken to another world, where he has to help pacify a dragon with a passion for poetry. The dragon is murderous and terrifying, but Paul's encounters with it are also funny, as he struggles to remember his own writings and tries to explain how limericks work. He becomes even more frightened when he learns from Zione the Sorceress that the dragon has eaten all the other poets appointed as its bard.

#### Unbeatable Dragons

Some dragons are very close to the traditional model, but their function is different. Instead of the enemy whose defeat can bring about a happy ending, they provide a foil for the humans in the story, whose behaviour is worse than theirs, usually because the dragons are acting according to their nature but the humans have a choice. In *Guards! Guards!* the big dragon makes itself king of the city and demands tribute both of treasure and of a maiden to eat once a month. We feel horror not so much at this as at the people of the city as they start to come to terms with these demands. Those who struggle against this outcome engage our sympathy, but none of them fits the traditional model of the hero. The dragon is driven off in the end, but not defeated. In *Foiling the Dragon*, the people of Dragonheim claim the protection of their dragon against the threat of the oppressive kingdom next door. The king's uncle is as murderous as the dragon, but more deceitful and the dragon wins the battle. His anger at the deceit almost leads him to destroy both kingdoms, though the main characters, Paul and Zione, find a way of buying him off. At the end of the story, he is as dangerous as ever, though Paul and Zione have both escaped.

#### Werdragons

Men who turn or are turned into dragons are not a recent development. Fafnir was once a man. But in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981), the transformation is involuntary, gradual and disabling, although the dragon bodies are beautiful and fascinating. In this book, the dragons are humans trapped at many levels, not creatures with an existence of their own. In *The Dragon and the George*, Jim Eckert finds himself in the body of a dragon, but after a few struggles, his mind remains his own. We are left in no doubt that Jim's human identity is the true one and the one to be preferred. Matters are more complicated in Joanne Bertin's *The Last Dragonlord* (1998), where dragon and human souls occupy one body but have separate identities. But the dragon soul remains asleep for most of the time, while the human one is alive, even while the human is occupying the dragon shape. At the far extreme from *Lanark*, transformation into a dragon is an expression of freedom and power in Ursula Le Guin's most recent *Earthsea* story, 'Dragonfly' (published in the *Legends* anthology edited by Robert Silverberg).

#### Noble Dragons

These dragons are wiser than humans and worthy of admiration, even though they may still be dangerous and destructive. In Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* books, the dragons understand the true language of creation and their friendship is much to be desired, although not easy to attain. In the first two books their role is limited and their nature is not fully discussed until the fourth book, *Tehanu* (1990), where a story is told that dragons and humans were once the same species. The ones who remained dragons were those who valued freedom and wildness more than knowledge and the power to make things. It would be simplistic to suggest that the dragons provide a model of an alternative way

of life for the humans of Earthsea. But the characters of the novel are drawn increasingly to think about the dragons, as they suffer the flaws in the society in which they live. The story is told by a woman and in this book the link between the women of Earthsea and the dragons seems greater than that of the men, even though (or perhaps because) the women cannot be wizards. In 'Dragonfly', this link and the contrast with the male power of the wizards are developed even further. Perhaps the dragons express a vision of extreme values, which are important to the human psyche, although not many can go to the same limits or would even wish to try.

In Barbara Hambly's *Dragonsbane* (1985), the hero is summoned to kill a dragon which is threatening the kingdom. But it slowly becomes clear that the real danger comes from an evil sorceress, who is only defeated with the dragon's help. This comes about after he has offered help and accepted healing from the heroine, Jenny, who is nearly tempted by him to leave her lover and become a dragon herself. In the next book, *Dragonshadow* (1999), both dragons and humans fight domination by demons and both are left unhappy. The dragons in these books also make the humans reflect on the limitations in their lives, but the relationship between the two is more balanced than in Le Guin's world. The humans envy the dragons their beauty and their ability to live in the moment, but it turns out that what the two have in common matters more than the differences. A further sequel is promised, so it will be interesting to see how these themes are carried forward.

#### Reflections

What, in the literary sense, makes one dragon more successful than another? Some books give a strong sense of both the personality and the physical reality of dragons. Both come through strongly in *Foiling the Dragon and Guards! Guards!* but I found it difficult to feel the power of Jim Eckert as a dragon in Gordon R. Dickson's books. This is partly because the dragons in these books are not presented as creatures with an overwhelming presence but as clumsy, rash and faintly ridiculous, and partly because Jim's thoughts and behaviour do not change enough when he is in dragon shape. In *The Last Dragonlord*, all the interest lies in the romantic and political complications of the characters' human lives. The business of turning into a dragon adds to the plot, but not much sense of the dragons as dragons comes through.

Dragons whose direct appearances in a novel are limited can make a greater impact than those which are on stage all the time. The dragon makes two brief appearances in *Tehanu* but these and the thoughts of others when the dragon is not present give a powerful sense of a huge, extraordinary and glamorous creature. The reader is given more direct descriptions of Michael Swanwick's dragon, and both its speech and its appearance add much to the total atmosphere of *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (1993). But Jane's reactions to the dragon also have a powerful effect, particularly her despair when the dragon will not speak to her.

The dragons whose powers are limited like those of wild animals can still have a powerful presence. Jane Yolen's dragons conjure up a world with an atmosphere both exciting and repellent, like being in the audience for bear baiting or cock fighting. The animal dragons are also interesting, because of what they show about changing attitudes to real animals and to biology. Peter Dickinson's book, for example, could not have been written pre-Darwin and succeeds in combining the appeal of scientific studies about dinosaurs with the stranger appeal of dragon folklore and literature.

The unbeatable dragons suggest that readers today find it harder to be convinced by the outright downfall of evil. A happy ending is still appreciated but it is easier to swallow if the dragon lives to fight another day. Maybe it is also easier for the main characters to retain our sympathy if their victory is not overwhelming. In particular, the image of the male hero whose

success comes from killing things is no longer so attractive. A number of stories make fun of the knight in armour who tries to tackle a dragon in the traditional way. Susan Price and Gordon R. Dickson do so, as does Tolkien in *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1949). In Barbara Hambly's books, a recurrent concern is with the gap between reality (in her imagined world, not the reader's) and romantic expectations built-up from ballads about dragon slaying. But the contrasts do not all go one way: the dragons are more interesting than the ballads allow, as well as more dangerous.

The appeal of the noble dragons is less easy to pin down. It may be easier for readers today to accept wisdom and superhuman power in creatures whose appearance is frightening and grotesque, than in those who are beautiful and superficially more like ourselves. In other words, we prefer appearances to be deceptive, at least in fiction, and we find it easier to believe in wisdom and nobility in non-human guise. Le Guin's dragons, for example, might be compared with Tolkien's elves. In *Tehanu*, it is the dragon which rescues the humans, although in Barbara Hambly's books, humans and dragons help one another: the dragons have more power and beauty, but maybe the humans have more flexibility and endurance.

#### Conclusion

A dragon enthusiast might be afraid that the proliferation of dragon stories over the last half-century would weaken their power or confuse the image of the dragon. I do not think this has happened. Where the dragon has a significant function in the development of a story and the author has imagined the look and feel of the creatures with sufficient force, today's dragons are as fascinating as ever. Because it is now possible for dragons to fulfil different roles from the traditional one, and to embody different extremes, we can hope that there will be many more powerful dragons remaining to be written about.

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## Cognitive Mapping 18: Scientists

by Paul Kincaid

Despite the name, science fiction is not, in general, about science. It is about our confrontation with the other, with change and the effects of change. Such change may be triggered by scientific advance, but it is more likely to be the result of war, alien encounter, distance in space or time, technological innovation or any of a dozen other causes.

If we trace science fiction back to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and the fabulous voyages that followed, up to and *Gulliver's Travels*, it was a time of disconcerting change in the familiar world order. The Reformation and the subsequent religious persecutions rendered the old beliefs and certainties not only unreliable but positively dangerous. Explorers were discovering entire new lands, first the Americas and, later, Australasia, which held the promise of strange beings, fabulous wealth (El Dorado) and a potential home for the utopian communities that had sprung up in a time of political uncertainty. Such political uncertainty was brought to a head by a series of wars throughout Europe, including the English Civil War, which overthrew the old order and ensured that even when, for instance, Charles II was restored to the throne, the monarchy would never again have the same divine right. These were primarily social and political changes, and they found literary reflection in social and political satires. Science was part of the change, of course, but however much the paradigm shifts initiated by Copernicus or Galileo might overthrow our settled view of our place in the universe, this was primarily of political or religious significance and was of less immediate effect for most people than the religious wars of the time. Although the importance of science was beginning to be recognised – in Charles II's foundation of the Royal Society, for example – when scientists did appear in the literature of change it was not as instigators or even instruments of this change, but merely as another social body to be satirised. Swift's reduction of the Royal Society to the (literally) unworldly Laputans in *Gulliver's Travels*, who are so bound-up in their idiosyncratic speculations that they cannot even engage in normal human intercourse, is typical.

Their outward garments were adorned with the figures of suns, moons, and stars, interwoven with those of fiddles, flutes, harps, trumpets, guitars, harpsichords, and many more instruments of music, unknown to us in Europe. I observed here and there many in the habit of servants, with a blown bladder fastened like a flail to the end of a short stick, which they carried in their hands. In each bladder was a small quantity of dried pease or little pebbles (as I was afterwards informed). With these bladders they now and then flapped the mouths and ears of those who stood near them... it seems, the minds of these people are so taken up with intense speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the discourses of others, without being roused by some external tacton upon the organs of speech and hearing... And the business of this officer is, when two or more persons are in company, gently to strike with his bladder the mouth of him who is to speak, and the right ear of him or them to whom the speaker addresseth himself.

*Gulliver's Travels* (1726) – Jonathan Swift

And luck. And serendipity. A breeze blowing Galvani's frog legs against a railing and closing a circuit, a hand getting in the way of cathode rays, an apple falling. Fleming. Penzias and Wilson. Kekulé. Scientific breakthroughs involve combining ideas no one thought to connect before, seeing connections nobody saw before. Chaotic systems create feedback loops that tend to randomise the elements of the system, displace them, shake them around so they're next to elements they've never come in contact with before. Chaotic systems tend to increase in chaos, but not always. Sometimes they stabilise into a new level of order... And if a chaotic situation could be induced instead of us having to just wait for it to happen... It's just an idea, but it accounts for why dozens of scientists could experiment with electrically discharged gases and never discover X rays.

*Bellwether* (1996) – Connie Willis

ability to control the minds and bodies of men.' This is a not uncommon assessment in science fiction, and in any battle between Art and Science the majority of science fiction writers are likely to come down on the side of Art.

In Harness's tale the scientist is perpetually surrounded by brutal security guards, and is clearly thus linked with an unfeeling authority. Occasionally, therefore, the scientist will take on a

As the Industrial Revolution and the impact of Darwin's Theory of Evolution gathered pace, however, the ability of scientific discoveries and technological developments to affect everyone's lives became obvious. This is when science became such a potent force for change that the literature of change became truly science fiction. Books began to appear that examined the power now in the hands of scientists such as Dr Frankenstein or Dr Jekyll, although the main focus was still on the social effects of the technological revolution as presented in novels such as *Hard Times* (1854) by Charles Dickens.

Science fiction is, above all, the literature of the Twentieth Century, because it is in this century that the pace of change has accelerated beyond the ability of most of us to keep up with it. Even so, the scientist, when he has appeared, has tended to conform to one of two patterns established by popular fiction from at least the middle years of the nineteenth Century onwards. In one avatar he is the lone hero – the solitary inventor who conjures up the actual backyard spaceship, the downhome eccentric whose front porch is a gateway for interstellar trade in 'The Big Front Yard' (1958) by Clifford Simak in *Back to the Future* (1985). In the other he is the megalomaniac villain – in science fictional terms, the mad scientist plaguing the world with death rays, deadly viruses (*The White Plague* [1982] by Frank Herbert) or dinosaurs (*Jurassic Park* [1990] by Michael Crichton). Although generally driven more by obsession than intentional evil, the mad scientist is still the most popular image of the scientist as villain that sf given the world.

The villainy of science is, perhaps surprisingly, a commonplace in science fiction. In 'The Rose' (1953), a stylised but beautifully choreographed version of the conflict between Art and Science (C.P. Snow's two cultures), Charles Harness has his representative of Science proclaim: 'In the final analysis Science means force – the

Science means force – the ability to control the minds and bodies of men.' This is a not uncommon assessment in science fiction, and in any battle between Art and Science the majority of science fiction writers are likely to come down on the side of Art.

In Harness's tale the scientist is perpetually surrounded by brutal security guards, and is clearly thus linked with an unfeeling authority. Occasionally, therefore, the scientist will take on a

different but still sinister role, not a mad scientist but a hidden presence. In Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) or Don DeLillo's *Ratner's Star* (1976), for instance, they occupy remote bunkers, the scientists subject to a near-military regime as secretive organs of government. Bunkers such as these are, of course, survival capsules and the scientists in them may survive the apocalypse to become a manipulative presence after the fall, as in Piers Anthony's *Battle Circle* trilogy (1968-75). They are also a version of the ivory tower which, as in Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969), demonstrates the isolation or, indeed, alienation of the scientists detached from human issues and concerns. In some stories, such as 'Human History' (1996) by Lucius Shepard or *Beggars and Choosers* (1994) by Nancy Kress, the bunker may be transposed into a space station, but the scientists are no less chronically isolated and may end up literally playing god, as they do in Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light* (1967).

Few of these, of course, are scientists in the way science is normally practiced. But science as a communal endeavour, as a matter of theorising and testing and refinement, does not lend itself to the hero-figure, or the dramatic and often violent action demanded by romantic, popular fiction – which is what science fiction is. Sometimes a more realistic portrayal of the scientist, the laboratory, the scientific process can meet the needs of the story, as it did, most famously, in Gregory Benford's *Timescape* (1980), and also in Ian Watson's 'The Very Slow Time Machine' (1978), in 'Radiance' by Carter Scholz (1995) or in Rafael Carter's subtle presentation of a story as if it were a scientific paper in 'Congenital Agenesis of Gender Ideation' by K.N. Sirsi and Sandra Botkin' (1998). In the main, though, as a basic scientific literacy has become more widespread, it has been writers from outwith science fiction who have made most use of the scientist. The scientist can be a historical figure, as in John Banville's *Doctor*

*Copernicus* (1976) or *Kepler* (1981), Russell McCormack's *Night Thoughts of a Classical Physicist* (1982), or the curious mix of scientist and theologian in the 17th century Oxford of Iain Pears's *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (1997) although more often it will be a contemporary figure, as in Banville's *Mefisto* (1986), William Boyd's *Brazzaville Beach* (1990) or Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997). What these and other contemporary authors have seen is the way science works as metaphor. The study of ape behaviour in *Brazzaville Beach* provides a reflection of human behaviour; the researches of the science journalist who narrates *Enduring Love*, his little knowledge of a lot of things, acts as a model for his cold and prescribed actions.

But a literature whose effects are so often achieved by reifying metaphor naturally shies away from the purely metaphorical. We, as readers of science fiction, need to trust the newness that sets off the story, so we have to assume the science is not only real but actually means no more than it says. Which isn't to say there is no metaphor in sf, only that in the main science itself does not provide that metaphor. Only Connie Willis, working in the pattern of Pamela Zoline's 'The Heat Death of the Universe' (1967), has consistently used science as a way of reflecting the behaviour of her characters, cleverly redoubling the image by using the behaviour of her characters to model the scientific theory. It is a device she has used variously in stories such as 'At the Rialto' (1989), 'The Schwartzchild Radius' (1987) and *Bellwether*. In this last, the research of the two central characters into fads and chaos don't just feed into each other, they also provide a satirical metaphor for the way their research establishment is run. It is one of the few instances where a scientist doing science has a place in science fiction.

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# First Impressions

## Book Reviews edited by Steve Jeffery

Note: All novels marked: are eligible for the 1999 BSFA Award for Best Novel. All collections and anthologies marked: contain stories that are eligible for the 1999 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction.

### Poul Anderson – *Genesis*

Tor, 2000, 253pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0-312-86707-7

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

"Breathes there the fan, with soul so dead/Who naught by Poul Anderson has read?" (with sincere apologies to Sir Walter Scott)

The shorter a Poul Anderson novel, the better: *The High Crusade*, *Tau Zero* and – one of my guilty Ace double favourites – *Let the Spacemen Beware!*. Like many other writers, Anderson gets a bit carried away by the exuberance of his own verbosity at tome-length: *Orion Shall Rise*, *The Book of a Million Words* – sorry, *The Boat of a Million Years*. But *Genesis* reverts to his frugal best. (Part of this novel appeared in *Far Futures* (1995, Tor), edited by Gregory Benford.) I'm not mad about the title though; *Mourning Becomes Electric* or *Let the Timermen Beware* might have been more like it.

More importantly, however, nary a plain English word is wasted. Anderson in skaldic mode would make Eric the Pink wince: "Mayhap 'twould help if the chronicle of the Gods were set briefly forth... Parts you have heard, Gratillonius, but not the whole nor in orderly wise" (*The King of Ys: Roma Mater* p.302). "Seventeen hundred years ago a thing occurred that lived in people's memories for generations, until lifeways changed too much for them to make too much sense of it" (*Genesis*, p.64) –

now that's the real good old stuff.

Anderson's Prime Directive epigraph comes from Tennyson: "To follow knowledge like a sinking star/Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." Christian Brannock and Laurinda Ashcroft are the novel's more-than yet all-too human protagonists. These two uploaded human-computer (or is it the other way round?) hybrids can roam the cubic light years at will – but not always their own wills. Meanwhile the "galactic brain" is approaching maturity, and Gaia has deep-laid her plans for cooking up a new improved Earth out of the lukewarm leftovers of the old.

*Genesis* has more thinky bits to the page than the Collected Words of L. Ron Hubbard, even. I believe it was E.H. Bates who wrote, somewhere, that too much critical analysis can destroy the living tissues of a story. In dissection, the vital magic is lost – like cutting up a bird to find out how it flies.

The not unexpected ending harks back to Sir Walt: "Breathes there the man... /Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd/As home his footsteps he hath turn'd/From wandering on a foreign strand?"

### Poul Anderson



### GENESIS

**J. G. Ballard – *The Drowned World***  
**Kurt Vonnegut – *The Sirens Of Titan***

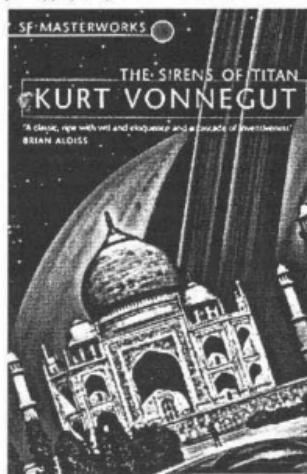
Millennium, 1999, 175pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-883-3  
 Millennium, 1999, 224pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-884-1

Reviewed by Paul Billinger

Two more re-issues in Millennium's SF Masterworks series. Both published 40 years ago (Ballard 1962, Vonnegut 1959) so there is great potential for them to have dated badly. Happily they have not.

*The Drowned World* has a setting that, if anything, is more relevant and topical today. Global warming – as a result of a series of violent and prolonged solar storms diminishing the Earth's ionosphere – has caused catastrophic problems with the seas, and the temperature, rapidly rising. The book is centred on Karen, a member of a scientific mission recording the changes in the flora and fauna of this new world. Around him are other scientists, the military and the few remaining inhabitants of the drowning cities. As the waters continue to rise Karen and the others must decide whether to continue moving North or to remain around a sunken city, which we infer is London, to await the consequences.

The characters are all passive, only reacting to the events around them, never leading. Rather they are there to focus the reader on the effects on the landscape/seascape around them and on what remains of civilisation. It is this description of the drowning of the world/society that is the strongest aspect of the book – the images of the submerged city, with its iguanas, alligators and sunken tombstones, remain vivid



long in the mind. A haunting, powerful book.

*The Sirens of Titan* is very different, being almost entirely character driven with the world only sketched in. It is not, however, any less powerful. It tells the story of Winston Niles Rumford, who – as a result of flying his space ship into a chrono-synclastic infundibulum – only appears on Rhode Island for an hour every 59 days. The seriously rich Malachi Constant is one of the few to be invited to meet Rumford on his re-materialisation, where Rumford, who can see the future, tells him he will travel to Titan, but via Mars, Mercury and Earth again. It is these travels of Constant that form the core of the book, especially the tragic events that occur on Mars.

It is remarkable that a character-driven book which deliberately goes out of its way to make them unpleasant and unsympathetic – as soon as you start to like one of them events will conspire to reverse it – succeeds so well. By the end of the book you care deeply for them, with all their human failings, and the outcome is truly moving. A book about everything, and nothing, both comic and tragic, but mainly about us.

Two very different books both of which stand up well against anything being published today, their timelessness being a sure sign of excellence.

**John Barnes – *Finity***

Tor, 1999, 303pp, \$6.99 ISBN 0-812-57143-2

Gollancz, 2000, 303pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-06891-4

Reviewed by John D. Owen

On first acquaintance, John Barnes's *Finity* seems to be part of that rather despicable current trend, retreading old sf stories in modish finery for young fans who have never encountered the originals. In this case, the book I was reminded of as soon as I began reading was Philip K. Dick's classic *The Man in the High Castle*, with perhaps a nod or two to Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, both stories involving worlds where the Nazis won the Second World War. Fortunately, Barnes uses this basic premise as a launch pad, rather than as a lynch pin for the whole story, spinning off into a miasmic and often confusing tale of parallel worlds galore, where the prime question to be answered is: where is America?

There is, however, something very old-fashioned about Barnes's story. The plot propels things along at a frantic rate, and there is little character development as such. Indeed, the circumstances of the plotline dictate that nominally the same people can appear but with different characteristics at different times, depending on which 'universe' they are from. For

example, the hero Lyle Peripart's own fiancée, Helen, switches suddenly from being a loving intelligent historian to being an all-action trained killer (fortunately for him, since he is about to be assassinated at the time). For anyone else, this would put rather a crimp on a relationship, but Lyle scratches his head and carries on, taking everything in his stride. (Although he does rather draw the line at the more adventurous bedroom antics of the 'new' Helen.)

Barnes lapses a few times into fairly heavy 'infodump' mode (often using some fairly clumsy set-ups to give him the excuse to expound the physics of his multiverse), and generally writes as though trying to pastiche a 1950's sf novel – which perhaps he was. The action rolls along, until the very end, when it kind of fizzles out rather than coming to any conclusion or climax. *Finity* is a reasonable enough book, though with insufficient depth to satisfy this reader. Like most of Barnes's work I've encountered before, *Finity* is high on pyrotechnics, low on memorability.

**Hy Bender – *The Sandman Companion***

**Neil Gaiman and Yoshitaka Amano – *Sandman: The Dream Hunters***

Titan Books, 2000, 274pp, £13.99 ISBN 1-84023-150-5

Titan Books, 1999, 128pp, £25.00 ISBN 1-84023-128-9

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

So, in the end, what is *The Sandman* about? 'The flippant answer', says Hy Bender, borrowing an often paraphrased quote, is 'about two thousand pages'.

Another answer, from Mikal Gilmore's introduction to *The Wake*, is 'a work that aspired to stand as a genuine, fully-fledged mythology...a secret history of the unconscious'. There are many

other answers, though the one I keep coming back to is that *The Sandman* is a story, or a series of stories, about stories, and the power they hold for us.

For those, like myself, who have read but not been particularly diligent to date about collecting the whole series, this book should carry a warning: '*The Sandman Companion* can seriously damage

your credit card". About halfway through the Companion, I realised that to fully appreciate the complexity and wit of Gaiman's masterwork, and the detail with which Bender (and Gaiman, in a series of interview discussions throughout the book) walk you through it, would really require the remaining volumes, a large table, and a large supply of Post-it tabs.

Hy Bender has written a number of the *Dummies* books about the Internet and it shows in the structure of this book, particularly in the odd, but rather charming, 'overview' section 'getting started with Sandman' and a brief introduction on 'the purpose of this book'. However, the structure does rather lend itself well to something like the Companion, with short sections and box-outs panels on related topics, illustration and techniques and comments from Gaiman's artists and collaborators, although Bender has thankfully resisted the temptation to set the reader summary revision tests at the end of each chapter.

After the brief overview, the second and main part of the book is a volume by volume walk-through the ten books that make up *The Sandman*, from *Preludes and Nocturnes* to *The Wake*. Here, Bender (in "some things worth noticing") and Bender and Gaiman together, in a series of interviews, take us through a close examination of the myriad textual and visual cross-references within and between stories and episodes, pointing out the wealth of literary, historical and mythological allusions that transformed a monthly comic into something unique. If there is one criticism, then these interviews, transcribed from recordings over a number of days, might have

benefited from a little more 'creative' editing, as both parties have a tendency to re-use the same phrases: "Yes, and I loved that bit where...", which becomes a little fan-boyish after a while. But that's really a minor niggle.

Particularly fascinating is the section on scripting, and the sheer level of detail that Gaiman puts into these (having never worked on one before, and having asked Alan Moore for some pointers). If you want to see an example, look at both the story and the script for 'Calliope', both included in *Dream Country*, which are almost directorial in its control of viewpoint, angle, props and background.

For collectors, I suspect that the Companion might also become collectable in itself, for a number of rare or previously unseen illustrations taken from posters, covers, roughs and alternate artwork for the *Sandman* series and merchandise (figurines and trading cards). Valuable too for the useful Appendices, which give the credits for the whole 75 issues and other related stories, as well as a bibliography of sources of other information, reviews, critical articles and other works by Gaiman in and outside the *Sandman* universe.

Gaiman has always delighted in fairy tale as story telling in its purest form. His collaboration with artist Yoshitaka Amano in *The Dream Hunters*, a Japanese fairy-tale of a fox who falls in love with a monk, and bargains with the Dream King to save the monk's life, is an absolute delight; the clarity and transparency of Gaiman's re-telling perfectly matched to Amano's full plate pen and watercolours. The result (there is no other way to describe this book) is beautiful.

### Alfred Bester – *The Deceivers*

ibooks (Simon & Schuster), 2000, 268pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-671-03889-3

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

The standard take on Bester's later works, after his return to science fiction in the seventies, is that they're nowhere near the standard of the two fifties' works which made his name, *The Demolished Man* and *Tiger! Tiger!*. *The Indian Giver* suffered from confused plotting; *Golem 100* was hobbled by the absurdity that a protagonist had never noticed she was blind because she saw through other people's eyes; and *The Deceivers*, according to the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, was virtually ignored on its original publication in 1981. But is it time for a rehabilitation?

Sadly, no. *The Deceivers*, although billed as a space opera for the late twentieth century, reads rather like an alternate version of *Tiger! Tiger!* and *The Demolished Man*: a fifties vision of what the future solar system might look like, with casual violence, people with facial tattoos, and mining colonies on Callisto. It's true that the cyberpunks of the eighties pillaged this imagery for their works, just as Delany had done for *Nova* twenty years earlier, but the difference is that they updated it to engage with their particular zeitgeists; *The Deceivers*, by contrast, simply repeats it,

as though Bester had no awareness that his material was no longer original and hence could not have the same impact. And without the imagery to distract the reader's attention, the limpness of the narrative, the perfunctoriness of the characterisation, and the implausibility of his premises are glaringly obvious.

A possible clue to why this should be so is given by the Afterword which completes this edition: a memoir of Bester by his long-standing friend Julius Schwartz, which focuses to some extent on their time together in the US comics industry. One realises from this how much Bester's earlier work was shaped by comic values, and why it had such an impact alongside Campbell's more technocratic, allegedly more 'realistic' approach, but also why Bester's later work is generally so disregarded: because it was still informed by those same values, which had no purchase in the more sophisticated world of the seventies and eighties. One is left with the uneasy feeling that, stripped of the nostalgia which fogs our memories of the two classics, *The Deceivers* is what they are 'really' like.

### Ben Bova – *Venus*

Tor, 2000, 382pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-87216-X

Reviewed by Robert W. Hayler

Picture the scene. Hull integrity is in danger of being compromised and the only option is a dangerous EVA. It's time to suit up and endure unimaginable winds and the prospect of a drop into the impossible depths of the planet's soupy, corrosive atmosphere. Something goes wrong: the platform gives way; your comrade slips. You get one last glimpse of his wild-eyed stare before the scream fills your ears and you scramble to turn off your

helmet radio...

Always gets the nostrils flaring that one, doesn't it? Well, variations on this scene and other pebble-smooth favourites are available for your easy enjoyment in Bova's new page-turner *Venus*.

The set up is by the numbers. Alex, favoured son of the very rich Martin Humphries, has died during an expedition to Venus.



Humphries offers a huge reward for the return of his son's remains. Van, his hated younger son, is forced into taking up the challenge but really has to go to prove to his dad and to himself that he has the right stuff. A ship is crewed with expendable red-shirts, some scientists hitch a ride, and off they go. Adding to the dangers and complications that await them on Venus is Lars Fuchs, mysterious asteroid miner and sworn enemy of Humphries senior. Fuchs not only has an eye on the prize for himself but also has personal reasons for wanting to twist the knife.

The character of Van is a neatly drawn version of the traditional sf writer's wish fulfilment stand-in: young, rich, gets to do some science, have adventures, win the girl etc., while the supporting cast are careful not to do anything surprising. Fuchs can be quite interesting but his transformation from hard, to hard-but-fair, to a bit soft really is stagy and, as a device used famously

at the end of part two of a very well received sf film trilogy is called into play, becomes amusingly camp. The real (morning) star here is Venus herself and whenever Bova's extrapolations as to what she is like take centre stage the book feels more engaging and accomplished.

Attentive readers might be remembering with puzzlement my castigation of Robert Charles Wilson for using almost exactly the same collection of genre types in his recent novel *Bios* (Vector 209). I deny hypocrisy, the difference is this: while *Bios* was a disaster caused by Wilson's laziness, *Venus*, although corny for similar reasons, is the work of a consummate professional. Like an old joke told by Bob Monkhouse, you might be embarrassed if others see you enjoying it but the delivery can't help but make you smile.

### **Stephen Bowkett – *Dreamcatcher***

### **Jenny Jones – *Shadowsong***

Dolphin, 1999, 115pp, £3.99 ISBN 1-85881-652-1

Dolphin, 1999, 116pp, £3.99 ISBN 1-85881-708-0

Reviewed by Penny Hill

These two stories are the first in a new children's series called 'Dreamtime'. There is no indication which should be read first and they hold entirely self-contained adventures, although thematically linked by the threat and promises of dreams. *Shadowsong* has as its villain the King of Dreams, a malevolent Sandman, whereas *Dreamcatcher* explores native American beliefs and stories in a modern setting.

In both stories the underlying plot is the same; teenage protagonists become involved with and committed to seemingly benevolent adults but discover they have been trapped and try to break away. They are aided by an aspect of the relevant myth – a giant Dreamcatcher device and an aspect of Orpheus respectively.

Despite this similarity, I found *Dreamcatcher* to be unconvincing and uninvolved whereas *Shadowsong* was very effective. I could accept the English school setting of *Shadowsong* but not the idea of an American rich kid slumming it on the streets in *Dreamcatcher*, and also found it hard to suspend my disbelief at the ending, where I felt a few necessary difficulties were

swept under the carpet.

I also expected to have problems with the character of the King of Dreams in *Shadowsong*, because of the power of Neil Gaiman's interpretation of the Sandman, but actually found that it added resonances instead of contradictions.

These books have been beautifully designed, but sadly *Dreamcatcher* needed a little more editing. I spotted a typo on the back cover and the timing of a significant plot event changes from eight years ago to five years ago in less than ten pages.

I have read and enjoyed other books by Jenny Jones but this is my first experience of Stephen Bowkett. I would say that the series has got off to a rather uneven start. Whether I read any more will depend on who the author is. Unlike *The Web* series (variously reviewed in Vector 206, 207 and 210) the lack of an overall plot does mean that each book stands or falls as an individual work, rather than filling a place in a series. Of course, later books may contradict this by drawing the series together.

### **Ray Bradbury – *The Halloween Tree***

Earthlight, 1999, 181pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-671-03768-4

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

*The Halloween Tree* is a children's horror fantasy. I'd guess it was aimed at about eight or nine year old boys, the age and sex of the main protagonists. I'd also guess they'd be disappointed in reading it.

In some ways the book is designed for that audience. It's short with large print, and the story is broken up into a lot of short chapters. The illustrations are in a sort of dark comic book style, with lots of sweeping movement and stylised figures. I suspect there are too few of these illustrations though. The prose, which for an adult is the redeeming feature of the book, might be less accessible for that reading age. In places there are a lot of long sentences. Selecting at random I found one of twenty-seven words and another of forty-two words, which I suspect is too high a reading age for the vast majority of this age group. Generally the vocabulary is appropriate, with the few unfamiliar terms guessable by context. For an adult though the prose is glorious. A wonderfully flowing evocative stream full of images that sing of times past and present.



The main reason the book may disappoint its intended audience is the plot and characterisation, or lack of both. The plot is very threadbare. Eight boys go out trick or treating on Halloween. Another boy, Pipkin, is swept up by a magical wind. The eight, accompanied by their guide Mr Moundshroud, try to find him. This quest takes up the rest of the book and is educational in an obvious but not too boring way. At each stop Mr Moundshroud lectures the children on its significance on the development of the ideas and customs of Halloween. There are some well-described visuals and dully nothing happens. They just miss or can't reach Pipkin and move on to the next stop. This could have been a fantastic non-fiction book. The history is interesting and the prose marvellous, but I don't think it works as a novel. The characterisation is virtually nonexistent so there is no one for the audience to identify with and eight year olds demand more plot and action than this provides.

**Chaz Brenchley – *Feast of the King's Shadow***

This is 'The Second Book of Outremer', and new readers should start with the first (*Tower Of The King's Daughter*). This book starts with your standard small band of intrepid heroes and heroines preparing to make a desperate journey across the deadly Sands, the tribal lands of the hostile Sharia (oops, sorry, Sharai – how come the Muslims are always the Bad Guys? One of these days I'll read a fantasy with a Muslim hero...) They learn to tell the difference between ghuls, 'ifrits, and djinns (ghuls are mindlessly nasty and dismember people, 'ifrits are intelligently nasty and dismember people, and djinns are inscrutable and only occasionally dismember people). Hundreds of thousands of security guards die horribly (thankfully, offstage). One of the girl heroes, who is young enough to pass for a ten-year-old boy when she crops her hair and dresses up as a tribesperson, despatches

Orbit, 1999, 648pp, £7.99 ISBN 1-85723-745-3

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

**Chris Bunch – *The Empire Stone***

Although Chris Bunch is not a newcomer to the genre, this reviewer has not read any of his previous offerings: The Seer King Trilogy or his collaborations with Allan Cole. I was, then, looking forward to this "spectacular new fantasy epic" as the cover blurb promises.

The Empire Stone of the title is a huge gem which legend says "brings untold power and wealth" to its holder. Down on his luck and needing a way out of his current life-threatening situation in Sennen, the dwarf Pierol of the Moorlands is commissioned by a powerful sorceror to seek the gem, which is rumoured to be in the distant city of Restormel. Thus begins a quest which proves infinitely more dangerous to Pierol than if he had stayed and sorted his problems at home.

This is actually pretty standard fantasy quest fare, but for the most part is engagingly written and inventive. Bunch creates a colourful land through which the diminutive Pierol stumbles, using his incredible luck and skills as a jeweller to get out of one tight spot after another. It is difficult to decide whether the author is writing a serious tale or not as there are several quite light-

several of the Sand Dancers, the world's deadliest fighters and sworn warriors of Marron (it's French for 'chestnut'), the guy who's carrying the Plot Token. We get to find out what the country of the djinns is like. (It's hot.) At the end of the book, I was still having trouble remembering which of the girl heroes was which (er, one of them has two husbands, and the other one has two djinns).

I'm sorry if this sounds rather jaded. It's actually a very well-written book of its kind (for instance, the detail about how to ride camels are extremely convincing), and mercifully contains fewer entrails than Book One. However, I find it hard to care about any of the main characters, or any of their trials and tribulations. It's a pleasant diversion of a book; nothing deeper or more significant. And I think that's rather a shame.

Orbit, 2000, 359pp, £10.99 ISBN 1-85723-963-2

Reviewed by Vicki Lee

hearted moments stirred, seemingly haphazardly, into the mix. Most of these moments revolve around the fact that most women, in Bunch's invented world anyway, think that dwarves are good in bed. It is also interesting that these sequences are often appallingly written; for example, at the end of the book when Pierol is finally alone with the girl he has dreamt of throughout his travels...

It's no good, folks, having re-read a scene to give you an example I find I simply cannot inflict it on you! Suffice it to say that banal, trite and embarrassingly pathetic are words that spring to mind.

It's a shame that these scenes, and there are a good deal of them scattered throughout, spoil a story that bundles along and is basically fun. The writing is competent right up until another woman thinks 'bed the dwarf', and one can only assume that hormones or somesuch confuse the author's judgement until the scene is over.

I've mixed feelings about recommending this one. It's a good read for the most part, but seriously, tediously flawed in too many places.

**C.J. Cherryh – *Fortress of Owls***

Here Cherryh's 'Galasien' sequence goes into a third volume, following *Fortress in the Eye of Time* and *Fortress of Eagles*, and there is obviously still a long way to go before the whole design will be finished.

The central character, Tristen, is the 'Shaping' of the mage Mauryl Gestaurien, a reincarnation of an ancient and powerful wizard lord. Part of what fuels the book is the tension between what Tristen once was – and he retains the power and the destructive potential of his earlier self – and what he is now, diffident and naive, wondering at a world in which he is still less than a year old, unquestioningly loyal to his king, Cefwyn.

The action follows Tristen as he begins his rule of a province under Cefwyn, alternating with the affairs of Cefwyn's court as the king attempts to manage his unruly northern barons and the country's religious leaders, and deal with insurrection in the neighbouring country, of which his wife is Regent. To some extent this book is darker than the one before, as events draw that



Voyager, 2000, 406pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-648391-7

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

much nearer to crisis, and as Tristen questions himself, his eventual destiny, and whether he is truly free or shackled by the spell that created him.

When I reviewed the previous volume I commented that it was a bridge between one section of the story and the next. I'm now not sure that this criticism was justified. The sequence is developing into a very large design, not only in the scope of events, but also in the depth of detail that Cherryh provides. There's a strong sense of place and of history, a highly complex political situation, and a wide range of characters. Each book must take events further; there's too much to be encompassed in one volume, or even the neat divisions of a trilogy. At the end of this book there are major developments in both the court and Tristen's province, and almost a 'cliff-hanger' ending.

If you like fast action, or want the story to be wrapped up by the end of the book, then this probably isn't for you. But if you appreciate a depth of realism and the

development of complex events, I'd recommend it highly. The book begins with a historical overview which helps new readers find their feet, as well as an index of people, places, etc. which I

found invaluable. Even so, if you're new to the sequence, I'd suggest starting at the beginning; too much has gone before to make it easy to pick up the story here.

### Arthur C. Clarke and Stephen Baxter – *Light of Other Days*

Tor, 2000, 320pp, £24.95 ISBN 0-312-87199-6

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

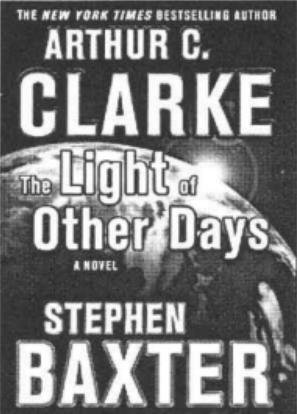
Despite the title (and the dedication to Bob Shaw), this is in no way a continuation, expansion or development from Shaw's classic 'slow glass' story. This will come as a relief to many of us who would not want to see a near-perfect story tampered with, but it is also a pity since slow glass was such a wonderful and original idea and no-one since Shaw has found any way of using the notion. What Clarke and Baxter have come up with is a distant-viewing device that feels rather conventional in comparison, using wormholes in space and what they call 'wormcams' (if I was to give this review a title it would be 'A Can of Worms', since Clarke and Baxter go overboard with wormthis and wormthat: there's a 'wormworks' and even the asteroid that threatens Earth is called 'wormwood').

At the centre of the web is Hiram Patterson, a bullying Rupert Murdoch-type businessman who originally sees the wormcam as a way of boosting his cable news network: getting news quicker with fewer staff. One person at one central location can open an unseen eye on any part of the globe at that precise instant. Of course, once the technology is available, its use cannot be restrained like that. The wormcam, even in this limited form, changes the way we live: we are given glimpses of it unmasking criminals, spying on governments, prying on individuals and displaying celebrities in the nude. The effect upon our most fundamental conceptions of privacy and morality is devastating. But though the authors are very good at showing the wide array of consequences, sometimes surprising, neither has Bob Shaw's ability to make such consequences the heart of a humane and emotionally wrenching story, rather they are touched upon without ever touching us. The moment the story threatens to get too close to our humanity, some new technological innovation is added to the mix. For a start, there is a planetoid heading straight for Earth. Larger than the asteroid that wiped out the

dinosaurs and completely inescapable, it promises the end of humanity not in our lifetime, but near enough in the foreseeable future to affect behaviour, bringing a sense of hopeless purposelessness.

The writing styles of the two authors blend together well. They share a fascination with the way things work over and above their effects; they share a delight in the wonders of technology rather than conventional literary interests in character and setting; and above all they share a taste for the grand gesture and the big set piece (the two finest moments in the book come when wormcam technology is used to sweep back through history, first of all following one human face back through the generations to a Neanderthal ancestor, then going back further through all the generations of life on Earth to the earliest slimemold and then beyond). But one key element stops me identifying Baxter as Clarke's natural successor: Baxter's trademark desire to destroy the planet (which crops up not once but twice in this book) sits uneasily with Clarke's dream of transcendence. That these views of humanity's history and future contradict each other can be fudged through most of the novel, but they can't help making the ending feel like an unsatisfactory compromise.

Nevertheless, this is a bravura performance, the best thing to come from Clarke in many years and a clear demonstration of Baxter's continuing improvement as a writer. It's a novel packed with enough ideas to fill the entire output of many another science fiction writer, and there are moments of sheer unadorned wonder. It raises many issues that are left unsatisfactorily unresolved, touches on others that deserve closer attention, and in places feels as if the two authors aren't in as close harmony as they might be, yet it still thrills and amuses and delights, it still plays with stirring ideas and carries us along with the pleasures of good storytelling.



### Philip K. Dick – *A Scanner Darkly*

Jack Vance – *Emphyrio*

Millennium, 1999, 217pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-847-7

Millennium, 1999, 208pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-883-X

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

Two more books are resurrected for justified 'SF Masterwork' branding. Both novels are by prolific American writers – both Californians – with decade-spanning careers; both started writing in the magazines, and both saw their first novels published in the 1950s. Which is not to say that these books have a great deal in common.

*Emphyrio* was originally published in 1969, one of three Vance books to appear that year. The planet of Halma is a strictly controlled society; its craftsmen produce beautiful artefacts under the jurisdiction of guilds, but machinery is forbidden. Ghyls Tavoke rebels against this system when his father is executed.

The *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* describes Vance as "a landscape artist, a gardener of worlds" and there's no doubt that it's the splendid world-building – of a kind perhaps more usually associated with fantasy – that immediately leaps out of this book. *Emphyrio* and its people are beautifully realised, exotic and alien, a perspective that's enhanced by the occasional footnote to

explain some arcane aspect of society or language. You even have to admire the inventiveness behind a particularly grisly method of execution by "banishment".

*A Scanner Darkly* dates from 1977 (although actually written in 1973), late in Dick's career when his prodigious output had slowed down substantially. Here we are resolutely down-to-earth in the world of drugs: the buyers and sellers, and the law enforcement agencies that try to stamp them out. Bob Arctor is a narcotics agent who goes undercover to track down the source of Substance D. It's a dangerous occupation, one where he must keep his identity secret even from his colleagues, and this is accomplished through the use of a "scramble suit" which gives the wearer an indistinct – in fact, hallucinogenic – quality. Arctor can trust nobody, not even himself.

Unlike *Emphyrio*, this is a resolutely non-fantastic world. Dick originally sought a mainstream publication for the book and the scramble suit is one of the few sf trappings in a novel that could

almost be set in a contemporary – then or now – Los Angeles. Wrenched very much from personal experience, it's the dark side of drug-fuelled existence. Vance's world is full of exotic vivid colour; in Dick's it is the menacing vision of hallucination. Ghylls Tarvoke sets off on a literal journey; Bob Arctor descends into his own

mind.

These two very different novels give a sense of the breadth of vision that sf has to offer. *Millennium* are once again to be congratulated for returning them to the attention of readers.

### David Drake – *Queen of Demons*

*Millennium*, 1999, 662pp, £6.99 pbk 1-85798-823-X

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

*Queen of Demons* is the sequel to *Lord of the Isles* and like its predecessor is a heroic epic fantasy. The style and overall structure is similar to that of Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series, but faster paced. In both series a group of adolescents from a small village become involved in the magic and politics of the wider world, split into groups and have separate but ultimately intertwining adventures. However, unlike the later books in that series, the plot of *Queen of Demons* is relatively self-contained and it comes to a satisfying resolution.

One of the pleasures of Drake's writing is his ability to produce believable, well-rounded characters. Garric, one of the original group, is rounding out well in his progress to becoming the Lord of the Isles. It is interesting to see him grow spiritually as he considers the nature of kingship and his responsibilities. The characterisation of Ilma is excellent; although to fully appreciate her motivations it is necessary to have read the previous book. Her loathing for her past actions and her fear of what she is still capable of drive her to her duty to make amends. Sharina and Cashel remain believable and interesting and there is a nice contrast between the very different places they become stranded in.

### C.S. Friedman – *This Alien Shore*

*Vision*, 1999, 364pp, £6.99 pbk 0-00-648375-3

Reviewed by Chris Hill

When the human race discovers faster-than-light travel there is an unfortunate side-effect: genetic damage to the crew and passengers (sometimes advantageous, often not). Earth abandons its colonies, but some time later is re-contacted by one that uses rifts in space to travel to distant Habitats. They offer to re-open trade between Earth and its lost colonies.

All this happens long before the books starts. Jamisia Shido escapes from her Earth-local Habitat when it is attacked by corporate raiders. She quickly discovers that they are after some specialised software in her head and so she goes on the run.

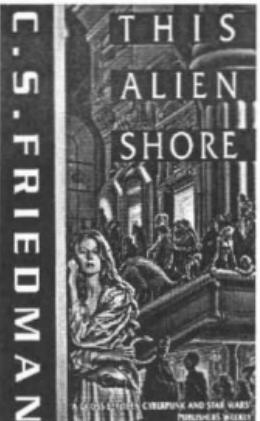
Meanwhile a deadly computer virus is sweeping the space habitats, destroying the minds of pilots. Who is responsible and does it have anything to do with Jamisia's quest?

Initially, I was not sure about *This Alien Shore*. It seemed terribly derivative Space Habitats à la Banks, pilots guild with stranglehold on interstellar travel à la Dune, protagonist on run with experimental software in head à la lots of cyberpunk). But gradually I warmed to it.

There are some nice ideas here. There is some quite intelligent extrapolation of the evolution of computer software for example.

One of the minor characters from the first novel, the shallowly characterised sprite Mellie has gone and several new characters are introduced. The most interesting of these are Zahag and Royhas. Zahag is an ape that has been given the power of human speech. Much to his credit David Drake has made a genuine attempt to ensure Zahag retains the behavioural and cultural patterns of an ape, rather than producing a pseudo-human. To my limited knowledge of ape behaviour he has succeeded admirably.

Some of the battles towards the end of the previous novel had been a little 'comic-like', with Garric being the superhero that would inevitably triumph. In contrast the battle sequences in *Queen of Demons* seem much more real, and echo the fear and horror that can result from it. Drake continues to portray magic well, emphasising both its difficulty and the moral and physical risks associated with its performance, from Cerix who loses his legs, to the King who believes that in order for him to win anything is permissible. The book ends with an extract from *Servant of the Dragon*, the third book in the series. The first two are well worth searching out to read, and I look forward to the next.



### David Gemmell – *Hero In The Shadows*

Bantam Press, 2000, 328pp, £16.99 pbk 0-593-04435-5

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

*Hero in the Shadows* is the latest offering from this best-selling British fantasy author, and is a welcome return to the life of one his best known characters, Waylander the Slayer.

When Gemmell re-visits one of his previous characters, it is

The characterisation is interesting and Friedman avoids the easy option of making the pilots' guild the villains, instead focusing on the political set up of the organisation. Also the motivations and methods of the protagonist are not always heroic.

There are faults. It suffers from the same problem that many 'split-narrative' stories suffer – there seems to be very tenuous links between the two stories. Effectively there are two narratives set in the same background with a single linking event at the climax of the novel.

Friedman tends to over-explain characters' motivations and reactions – too much tell, not enough show. I also feel that it is, at over 550 pages, too long. Shortening it by perhaps 100 pages would not have taken much, just some tidying up of the clumsy narrative and perhaps removing some of the rather superfluous sections from the viewpoint of minor characters.

Overall, though, I enjoyed it. I have not come across Friedman before, but on the strength of this I would say she is a writer to watch. A bit better editing and this would have been this year's *To Hold Infinity*, but alas it falls short of that target.

often difficult to fit the latest events chronologically into the greater scheme of things. Suffice it to say that this book is set in the latter years of our Hero's life and his current circumstances need no explanation by the author, except, that is, towards the

end of the story. At the start of this tale, then, Waylander the Slayer, the fearsome Drenai warrior of many previous tales, is a landowner of fabulous wealth in the city of Kydor known only to the locals as The Grey Man.

Returning home with Keeva Taliana, a resourceful young woman he has rescued from the clutches of bandits and certain death, The Grey Man is disturbed by an unholy mist that forms around the ruins of the once great city of Kuan-Hador as they pass. Something is stirring, and The Grey Man must return to his vast library to seek answers.

Matze Chai, a rich merchant travelling to see his old friend at Kydor, is confronted by bandits. These are seen off by his bodyguard and his Rajnee swordsman Kysumu, and in the process one of these bandits, Yu Yu Liang, joins the group. Yu Yu is a puzzle – a former ditch-digger turned bandit who carries the

sword of a Rajnee, something that should not be possible as a Rajnee sword destroys itself on the demise of its owner. He earns his way and deepens the mystery when the group is attacked by demons who appear out of a sudden mist. The magical barriers behind which the evil sorcerers and their half-man, half-animal meld-beasts were banished are failing, and demons again seek dominance of the land they once terrorised.

Over the years one has come to expect solid, action-packed storytelling from David Gemmell and this book is no exception. The return of Waylander will please all his fans, and for once he produces a strong and likeable female character in Keeva Taliana – which adds a little balance to his storytelling.

Gemmell's fans will need no encouragement to read this book, but it might also prove a useful book to start with if you've not read his books before. It's all in there – read and enjoy.

### Julia Gray – *Isle of the Dead*

Orbit, 2000, 410pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85723-678-4

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

In the land of Tirok any children displaying signs of inborn magical talent are forcibly removed from their parents and trained to take part in rebuilding the ruined Temple of Qara under the direction of the Council of Archivists. According to prophecy, only if the Temple is restored for its former glory will the wrath of the gods be averted and the land of Tirok continue to prosper. Sayer, who, with his twin sister Aphra, was taken to Qara at the age of eight, is immensely proud of his role in the great undertaking. He is a seeker, one whose particular magical talent enables him to locate the missing stones of the Temple that were displaced about the land when the building was first destroyed. His skill, and the fact that he is a protégé of the powerful Archivist Halion, has brought Sayer many privileges, and he is content with his lot. It is only when his sister falls victim to the plague and is banished to the Isle of the Dead that he begins to

question the dictates of the Council and to discover facts about Tirokan society that cast doubts upon everything that he has ever believed in.

*Isle of the Dead* is an unusual fantasy. The story, if handled differently, could almost be science fiction, for the magical talents displayed by those who possess them seem to reside in the power of mind and could be described in 'scientific' terms of telepathy or telekinesis, but the atmosphere of the book, the depiction of the land of Tirok, with its supposedly vengeful gods, place it in the realm of fantasy. Sayer is also an unusually passive hero for a fantasy; things happen to him rather than he himself initiating the action. However, his gradual discovery of the truth behind his society and his coming to terms with the realisation that his whole life has been dedicated to a lie make for an interesting, and different, read.

### Peter F. Hamilton – *The Naked God*

Macmillan, 1999, 1174pp, £20.00 ISBN 0-333-68791-4

Reviewed by Paul Billinger

And so it ends. The final volume in Hamilton's *The Night's Dawn Trilogy*, a massive undertaking, both in scope – the nature of the human soul – and in physical size, weighing in at 3,127 pages, 5kg and 7 inches of shelf space. To contemplate devoting the time and effort to embark on such a journey is daunting. Now the series is complete we can decide if it's worth starting and I am pleased to report that it is.

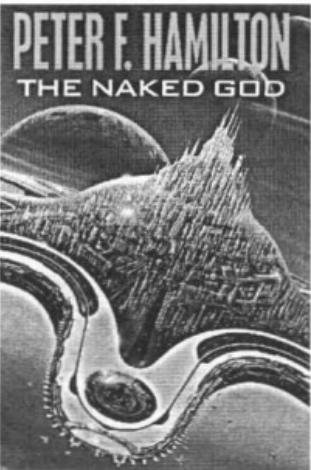
This book picks up the story directly from the end of *The Neutronium Alchemist*. If you're new to the series then stop now and go back and take that first step – *The Reality Dysfunction* – as this is one long, multi-stranded, narrative and one that is difficult to join mid-journey. The most enjoyment will be gained from reading them in sequence.

Louise Kavanagh, after escaping from the Possessed, is on her way to Earth to meet her fiancé, the Captain of the Lady Macbeth, and sort of hero, Joshua Calvert. She finds out that one of the most twisted of the Possessed, Quinn Dexter, is already loose in Earth's domed cities and using an underground religious sect to gain control of the population, for many complex reasons including taking brutal revenge on those he considers the cause of his suffering. Meanwhile Joshua, hoping for a break after his adventures with the renegade scientist Alkaid Mzu, is persuaded to

head off across the galaxy in search of the Sleeping God, an alien artefact that the Kiint, one of the few alien races humanity has made contact with, have hinted may allow the human race to deal with the consequences of possession.

Around these strands are woven many others, such as the campaign to liberate Mortonridge, which takes a very unexpected twist, and the fate of the living habitat Valisk, lost in a void isolated from normal space. All these plot strands are handled with a deft touch and although some, for a time, fade into the background, the author's skill as a storyteller ensures that they are never lost, you are always clear where you left them and how other events may have influenced them. This handling of the multiple strands is made possible due to the strong, well-defined characters, with the weakest of all being Joshua who comes over as the stereotypical macho starship captain.

For a book of this size it is surprising to find that it never drags, always moving along at a frantic, but controlled, pace. The use of language is economical and always smooth and the book never feels padded. My main criticism is that the resolution seems too fast, too quick and easy, although the events leading up to it are far from this – particularly the suffering on Earth and Mortonridge – but is still satisfying as a conclusion and does not detract from the



excellence that has gone before.

A journey that is worth making leading to an exhilarating mix of space opera and horror and a series I can fully recommend. Don't be put off by its size or from only reading some of the

author's earlier works (the writing and characterisation is much better here). This will be recognised as one of the best sf trilogies of the nineties.

### **Harry Harrison – *The Stainless Steel Rat Joins the Circus*** **Harry Harrison – *Bill the Galactic Hero***

Gollancz, 1999, 269pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-575-06866-3  
Millennium, 1999, 160pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85798-905-8

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Many moons ago, in the village of Lochee, there was a public library. This red-brick edifice, with its attached swimming baths, wash-house and bath-house had been donated to the people of Lochee by the Cox brothers, owners of the local dark satanic mill. Seventy years or so after the first opening of this magnificent building, a pre-teen boy accompanied his father to renew the family library books. While the father browsed the Zane Greys, the boy, bored by the meagre offerings in the children's section, would search out the yellow spines of the science fiction books (ten years would pass before an enlightened librarian gave it its own section). Yellow, of course, for Gollancz. [Editor's note: starting in May, Gollancz are bringing those nostalgic yellow covers back, this time as a range of trade paperback classic reprints.]

That boy grew to be this reviewer and one of those yellow-covered books was *Bill, the Galactic Hero*. Now thirty-five years later, I find myself reviewing it. These books were to show me that for quality, you had to know the author's name, and Harry Harrison was one of the first names that I knew.

For those whose education was unfortunate enough not to include *Bill, the Galactic Hero*, the plot begins with our young hero being 'called up' to fight the war with the Chingers. This meagre plot gives Harrison an excuse to lampoon all sorts of

institutions from the Army through bureaucracy to garbage disposal, taking in along the way the whole rest of mankind...

But is it funny? Well, it was thirty-five years ago, and it still is. Even though some of the things that it's being funny about have changed dramatically, even though some of the jokes have become worn. If you've not read it, then this is your chance.

Those yellow spines included *The Stainless Steel Rat*. This made a little less sense to me as a ten-year old, (obviously not mercenary enough), but more sense later when I re-read it. Those of you who remember Slippery Jim with fondness needn't worry about this volume. Jim is back, as slippery as ever and into nineties stuff like computers and banking with as much gusto as he can muster. Oh, the twins have grown, but Angelina is as fabulous as ever. If you liked those then, then you'll probably like this now.

The old formula of quickwitted repartee, nimble fingers and devious double- and triple-crossing are used to good effect here as James Bolivar DiGriz cons his way to the heart of the banking scam to end all banking scams.

I have not been too impressed with the 'Bill' follow-ups that Harrison has collaborated on recently, and I wasn't really looking forward to reading this book, but I was wrong. Not only has Harrison kept up, but he's kept the feel of the early books.

### **Michael P. Kube-McDowell and Mike McQuay – *Isaac Asimov's Robot City***

ibooks, 2000, 448pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-671-03893-1

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

"Dull isn't so bad," she said wistfully. "Dull has its good points." – maybe, but dull is not what you're after in a novel.

Many years ago, in a time when Lara Croft was only a glint in some programmer's eye, computer adventure games were text only and damn frustrating. They were also somewhat lacking in literary values. Whilst reading Isaac Asimov's *Robot City* those days suddenly came flooding back to me. Not only were these two novels, slapped back to back under one cover, originally published in the era of text adventures, they read like a walk-through of one as well.

*Book One: Odyssey*, written by Michael P. Kube-McDowell, starts with a man waking up in an escape capsule with total amnesia, not even remembering his own name. He assumes it is Derec, the name sewn onto his space suit. Getting nothing from arguing with the capsule's computer, he is soon rendered unconscious again for his own safety. Waking again he finds that he has crash-landed on an asteroid full of mysterious robots excavating the interior for no obvious reason. We get lots of walking down corridors, descriptions of weird robots and unfathomable machinery and puzzles for Derec (and us) to solve, often involving getting round those pesky three laws of robotics; yep, it's definably computer text adventure territory. However it is all so lifeless, with lumper prose clodded together. Then, when

the plot eventually does start to come to life, we have possibly the most ridiculous coincidence I've ever seen, and that had me come spluttering to a stop, shaking my head with disbelief. Once you know the author is going to cheat to that extent, any interest in how he is going to solve the puzzles he sets up goes straight out of the window. Reading the thing becomes about as interesting and fulfilling as chewing through soggy cardboard. Derec eventually gets off the asteroid and ends up, with a woman called Katherine, in the Robot City of the title. The first book ends on a cliff-hanger, when the only other human in the City is found murdered, but luckily we can plunge straight into the sequel. If we are sufficiently masochistic.

*Book Two: Suspicion*, written by Mike McQuay, has the humans trying to avoid the murder rap and reaching an accommodation with those pesky robots. The last few lines of Book Two are gag-inducingly awful.

These are a reprint of earlier material and, unlike the previously reviewed new *Foundation* series by the killer 'B's, were actually originally written whilst Asimov was still very much alive. He also adds an introduction to both books in this volume and, unlike myself, seems to have liked them. I seemed to remember enjoying Asimov's early robot stories when I read them several years ago, but these two pale imitations are just terrible.

### **Paul Levinson – *The Silk Code***

Tor, 1999, 319pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0-312-86823-5

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

This is Paul Levinson's first novel, although his protagonist – New York forensic investigator Phil D'Amato – has featured in a number of previous short stories. A version of the first part of the four sections of *The Silk Code* was itself first published as a short

story ('The Mendelian Lamp Case', *Analog*, April 1997). It's all too often the case that a short story expanded to novel length displays nothing new in the longer form, or that the original story remains the strongest section of the novel. Neither flaw applies to this

book, but it is rather unbalanced.

This is a detective novel based around a science-fictional premise of biotechnological warfare. Levinson also invents new histories and myths to lay the foundations of this natural science; in fact, it's the second section of the novel, set in the eighth century, which is the most powerful – a haunting story which leaves you wanting to know more without seeming incomplete. Despite providing the basis for the modern-day plot which makes up the majority of the book, such clues as exist are all contained within this section; a minor plot linkage is brought out during the denouement but no more is forthcoming.

The main plot features several seemingly disparate puzzles to which the hero needs to find the link in order to solve – indeed, to identify – the main crime. Fresh corpses which appear to be Neanderthal are found in New York, London, and Toronto. Murders are committed through stimulation of deadly allergic reactions. Rumours abound about secret societies, ancient wisdom and mistaken identities. Throughout all the mysteries runs a skein

of silk: silk worms (with a supporting cast of moths and fireflies), silk weaving patterns, silk as a protective talisman.

There's a lot of information to deal with in this novel, and the plot has a lot of pace although it sometimes seems simply to be going nowhere fast: introducing more information, more plot developments, more characters and more mysteries which need somehow to be woven into a coherent story rather than creating a serious tangle and leaving loose ends. Leaving aside the inevitable metaphors, there is an imbalance here with the first two sections running as self-contained stories no matter how much they set up the events of the later part of the novel. Almost too much happens in the opening section, while the third and fourth sections seem too designed to keep us guessing right up until the point when D'Amato works it all out.

Silk can be rough and raw as well as smooth and seductive. *The Silk Code* has engaging characters and an intriguing plot; but the thread is uneven and you may not want to wear it next to the skin.

### Roger Levy – *Reckless Sleep*

Gollancz, 2000, 345pp, £10.99 ISBN 0-575-06899-X

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Like Michael Faber's *Under the Skin* (reviewed last issue) Roger Levy's sf debut raises all sort of echoes: from the virtual reality worlds of Tad Williams' *Otherland*, the future war psychosis of Lucius Shepard's *Life During Wartime* and Michael Marshall Smith's *Spares*, to the chilling breakdown between a fully realised fantasy world and reality somewhere between Priest's *The Affirmation* and Rona Jaffe's *Mazes and Monsters*.

Coincidence or confident sfnal self referentiality? What are we to make of the fact that one of Far Warrior poet Jon Sciler's volumes is titled *Neverwhere*?

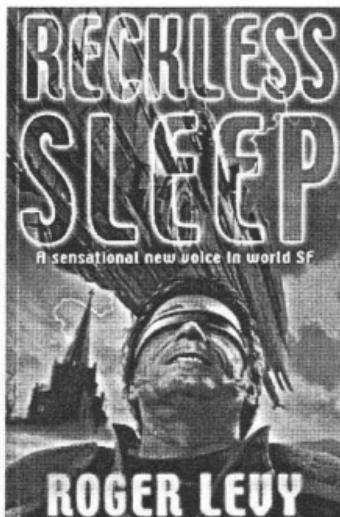
Can a first novel hold up to this? Almost. Something has happened on the would-be colony planet of Dirangasept, a last hope outreaching from a poisoned, dying Earth. The first settlement colony was almost entirely wiped out and a second, military 'pacifying' force, 'Far Warriors', remotely bllinked to state-of-the art groundside 'autoid' fighting machines, fared even worse. The survivors' reception, back on Earth, was both hostile and vicious, and they themselves carry curious stigmata of their virtual combat wounds. Many have drifted into the flagellant religion of the Final Church led by the charismatic Father Fury, as a form of atonement.

Jon Sciler is one such, working in a gang trying to contain and fill the chasms that appear in the streets of London as the Earth shakes itself apart. Volcanic ash and polluted smog hang in the air; no-one goes outside anymore

without a mask. A mistake costs Sciler his job, at the same time he is introduced to Chrye, a psychsupport student studying the effects of bLInker technology. And then Sciler is approached as a test subject for a virtual fantasy role-play game, a game that takes bLInker technology and the creation of the fantasy world of Cathar to a state that is indistinguishable from reality.

Just what is Cathar, and what is its purpose? Is it being developed as an escape from the awfulness of the waking world, or is it something more sinister? And why are Far Warriors being recruited to test it out (and why are so many of them dying so shortly after the 'deaths' of their characters)? It seems some of the Far Warriors may have brought something back with them from Dirangasept. And if that weren't problem enough, there is the psychotic Hickey Sill, a corrupt paciforce officer, who start to take an extremely unhealthy interest in Chrye, the outcome of which provides one of the graphically nasty moments of Levy's novel.

Levy's debut is assured but tries perhaps too hard – a fault of many first novels – to be too many things at once: sf thriller, fantasy, dystopia and romance. The ending is oddly anticlimactic and the short closing epilogue, meant to be reassuring, rather too twee and contrived. Up to that point, though, this is an intriguing, if uneven, novel and a good promise for the future.



ROGER LEVY

### Juliet Marillier – *Daughter of the Forest*

Tor, 2000, 552pp, \$25.99 ISBN 0-312-84879-X

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

*Daughter of the Forest* is a reworking of the legend of six brothers who were turned into swans, and could only be returned to their human form if their sister wove six shirts for them out of nettles, remaining completely silent while she worked at her task. In this retelling, the sister, Sorcha, is the narrator, and the magical nature of events is placed within the context of her childhood and growing up, and of the background of war that influences domestic events.

I'm not an expert in the history and culture of early Ireland, where the beginning and end of the book is set, but the background comes over with a strong sense of authenticity, and realism in the physical detail as Marillier describes places and people. Where I felt the book is less successful is in the central section where Sorcha is taken to Britain. I couldn't help asking myself what this household with names derived from French was doing on the Cumbrian coast in a country named Britain but ruled

by an Anglo-Saxon king. Again the writing is good enough to make the setting come alive, but it doesn't correspond to historical reality, and so the book fails to relate Sorcha's experience to the wider world around her. Another problem in the same area is that – although in historical or fantasy writing there must always be a compromise in dialogue between what is authentic and what is readable today – I found the speech of Lord Richard, otherwise a satisfyingly nasty villain, far too modern to fit into its context.

That said, I found the book compelling to read. Sorcha herself is an attractive central character, and her six brothers are well differentiated, rather than being a group of indistinguishable victims. Especially interesting is Finbar, the brother who at the end

of the story is returned to human shape except for one swan's wing. The other characters are also strongly realised. The Fair Folk appear as remote and ambiguous, offering help but at a price, and mysterious in their ultimate purposes.

Though the book ends happily for Sorcha herself, not all the issues are resolved. The breaking of the spell doesn't result in a return to life as it was before; the characters have been changed by their experience, and there are other problems to be solved. It's also suggested that the whole of the action has been stage-managed by the Fair Folk, for a reason that no-one yet knows. There's plenty of material to fuel the other two volumes of the trilogy, and I'm looking forward to them.

### L. E. Modesitt – *Colours of Chaos*

*The Colours of Chaos* is another episode in the Saga of Recluce 'starships' 'n' sorcery' series in this world where White magic is bad and Black is good. It's a direct sequel to *The White Order*, continuing the story of junior White wizard Cerryl while interlocking with *The Magic Engineer*.

The book has well over 800 pages, and I have to say that too many of them are tedious. Modesitt's system of magic is incredibly well put together, but he's far more interested in the minutiae of it than I was. When I reviewed *The White Order* I complained that Cerryl spent far too long in the sewers of the White city of Fairhaven learning how to create and control Chaos fire. Senior mages of the White Guild (it's not called 'The White Order' in the text – an Order serving Chaos is an oxymoron!) act more as facilitators than instructors to their junior charges, so each mage-in-training has to learn to do things by him – or herself. Therefore we have to follow Cerryl virtually day-by-day as he continues to learn his craft as a gate guard and then as a Fairhaven city patroller. All the time Cerryl has to deal with the politics and plotting of the other White mages (where his romantic relationship

Orbit, 2000, 832pp, £7.99 ISBN 1-85723-957-1

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

with the Black healer Leyladin counts against him), success in this being the only way to stay alive, since leaving the Guild would be a certain way to end up dead!

The second half of *Colours of Chaos* covers the events already described in *The Magic Engineer* from the White point of view. That book told the story of the Black engineer and mage Dorrin and his adventures on the continent of Candar and the large island of Recluce combating the Whites, so if you've read *The Magic Engineer* you'll know the outcome as the Whites face Dorrin's sail-less ships and crossbows without bows. The book at last becomes interesting as you try to work out how Modesitt will engineer Cerryl's survival whilst maintaining his integrity and his relationship with Leyladin. (Well, maybe two out of three isn't bad!)

Modesitt has attempted an interesting exercise in these two books in showing life in the world of Recluce from the opposite viewpoint (or almost – he obviously couldn't bring himself to go that far), but for me he would have succeeded much more if he'd collapsed them both into one.

### Michael Moorcock – *Behold the Man*

### Daniel Keyes – *Flowers for Algernon*

The twenty-second and twenty-fifth books respectively in Millennium's excellent SF Masterworks series are both expansions of award-winning shorter works: Keyes collected a short fiction Hugo for 'Flowers for Algernon' in 1960, whereas 'Behold the Man' novella incarnation earned Moorcock a Nebula in 1967.

Both novels are true expansions rather than using their shorter predecessors as the opening section of a longer work, and maintain essentially the same plots. Moorcock's Karl Glogauer travels back in time to Palestine in the early years of the first millennium ready to witness the momentous events that are about to unfold, only to discover that the protagonists are not all exactly as portrayed in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Keyes' Charlie Gordon has an IQ of only 68, but submits to radical surgery already pioneered on a mouse by the name of Algernon which offers the potential to raise him to genius level and beyond. His diary, which initially comes complete with crude spelling and grammar, charts the rapid increase of his mental faculties together with all the problems this brings.

Although Keyes went on to add a Nebula to his award shelf for the novel

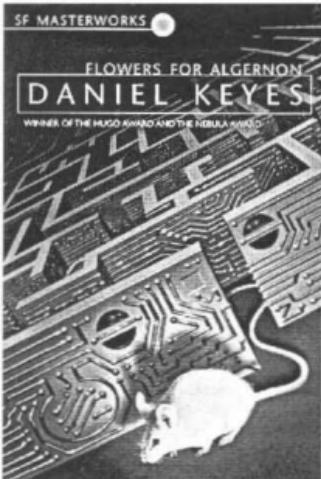
Millennium, 1999, 124pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85708-848-5

Millennium, 2000, 216pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85723-938-4

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

version of *Flowers...*, it's Moorcock's novel that seems to better sustain the addition of the extra words (it's also the less substantial expansion of the two, starting life as a 55-page novella whereas Keyes's longer novel had its genesis in 26 page novella). Both books allow space to develop the factors that make their protagonists what they are with particular attention to formative events from childhood and adolescence, but for Charlie these memories that return with increasing IQ are couched in the third person – the rest of the book is first person – which somehow contrives to lessen its powerful emotional impact, as does the decelerated rate of change that inevitable comes with the greater page count. The slower pace seems to benefit Moorcock's Glogauer, as he comes to terms with the world he finds and we learn about the motivations of a man who might make this journey and follow it through to its seemingly inevitable conclusion (about which it's perhaps worth noting the back-cover gives what some might regard as altogether too much information).

But for all that the intensity of Keyes's story is diminished in this longer form, it



remains pretty powerful stuff. Commentators seem unable to avoid the word 'moving', and with justification. Moorcock may not have been the first writer to take a time traveller to The Holy Land but

he casts new light on a familiar scene through his tortured hero. The original shorter versions still warrant attention but both books undoubtedly deserve their place on the Millennium list.

### Eric S. Nylund – *A Signal Shattered*

Avon Fes., 1999, 378pp., \$23.00 ISBN 0-316-97514-9

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

In *Signal to Noise*, the prequel, Jack Potter made first contact with Wheeler, who offered him an exchange of technologies, giving him advanced DNA and a gateway to travel through space in exchange for literature. Jack set up a company to exploit the potential of the DNA with his friends, Zero and Isabel, who had used the DNA on themselves. When Jack managed to contact another civilisation for Wheeler, he saw how destructive his trading partner was and refused to find further people for him to use, resulting in the Earth's destruction.

Jack and his group of survivors become involved in a plot to sabotage the base. Whilst hunting the saboteur, he becomes involved in a computer duel with Reno, a double agent, which nearly results in his death. Contacting Zero, who has developed the DNA even further, Jack realises the side effects of the technology given to him and refuses Zero's offer of help. Instead he becomes a middleman for Isabel in exchange for life support. On his way to meet Zero, Jack contacts Gershom and offers to trade technology with him but finds Gershom's price too exacting. Instead he offers to meet both Wheeler and Gershom on the

Moon, only to escape from both of them and hide.

Nylund has simplified his novel to the point where previously strong characters act as incidental adjuncts to the thinking behind the novel. Jack remains the central character, but dominates the novel to the detriment of the other characters who become props. Nylund tries to link science to Zen thinking with Kamal, but he fails to develop this, although he later uses it to create a use for Wheeler's technology. Zero becomes a stereotypical Mad Scientist who is consumed by his own invention, but he is ignored until the plot needs him for further development. The links between science and philosophical thinking remain undeveloped as Nylund develops a book that relies on theoretical physics and mathematics for its motivation.

*A Signal Shattered* lacks the richness of ideas and characters that made *Signal to Noise* such a rich novel. Overwritten passages have replaced the intricate relationships and scientific thinking replaces character or solid plot development. This is a pale shadow of the first novel and, as such, is highly disappointing.

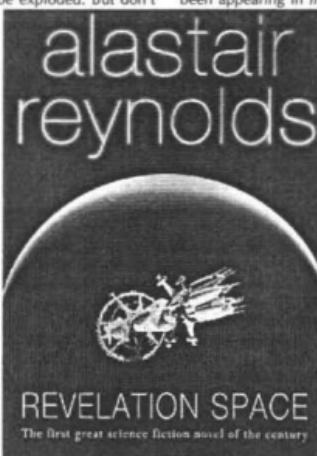
### Alastair Reynolds – *Revelation Space*

Gollancz, 2000, 473pp., £10.99 ISBN 0-575-06876-0

Reviewed by Paul Billinger

On first appearances this appears to be routine space opera with another 'big dumb object' just waiting to be exploded. But don't be fooled, or put off, this is much, much more – complex, intriguing, always gripping – and one of the best sf novels I have read for years.

The story starts out traditionally enough, with an archaeological dig on an obscure planet uncovering possible evidence to explain the extinction of the original inhabitants, but opens out, in both time and space, towards a long-silent threat and an explanation for the structure of the Universe. Many characters and civilisations are rapidly and skilfully introduced, however the focus soon narrows to three. Sylvete is the leader of the archaeological excavation, with a troubled history including his return, alive and sane, from the mysterious alien 'Shroud'. Volyova, one of the Triumvir of radically altered cosmonauts commanding the 'Nostalgia for Infinity', is desperately searching for a solution to the condition affecting the Captain, held at near absolute zero to prevent a biological entity taking over the ship. Khouri, an ex-soldier, is now a professional assassin hunting down willing targets in a fatal game. Add to this other even more bizarre characters and situations circling around them, and a classic tale coalesces towards a frightening conclusion.



This is Reynolds's first novel, although his short stories have been appearing in *Interzone* on a fairly regular basis since 1990, and to have produced such a mature, well-paced novel shows great promise for the future. Common errors with this type of fiction are skilfully avoided; it is only when you have finished that you realise that there is no info-dumping – so easy to fall into when world building – but the future society is still fully realised and communicated to the reader. The book, although high in page count, also never feels long, with words used sparingly, a great joy when the publishing industry is forever favouring longer books. If anything it's too short; satisfying though the ending is, it could have benefited from an additional twenty or so pages. Characterisation is similarly strong and even though the most sympathetic character is a professional killer you still come to believe in and care about them. Occasional sentences stand out as being awkward and slightly clumsy, but this is indeed a minor flaw.

Dan Simmons's *Hyperion* was the last novel of this genre, one in the finest tradition of sf, I remember enjoying so much. That *Revelation Space* can stand up to comparisons such as this is praise indeed. An excellent example of the storyteller's art and a book I can whole-heartedly recommend. I can only hope that Reynolds will be returning to this Universe very soon.

### Keith Roberts – *Drek Yarman*

Spectrum Publishing, 2000, 138pp., £3.99 ISBN 1-86205-390-3

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

This is not an article of faith, it is, as far as I am concerned, a statement of fact: even when not firing on all cylinders, Keith Roberts can knock the spots off most other science fiction writers.

*Drek Yarman* is clearly not an example of Roberts at his very best, but it is still an enthralling companion piece to *Kiteworld*, which makes surprising not to say shocking that it is only now, and in the

pages of such a risky venture as a small science fiction magazine, that this short novel is seeing the light of day.

Drek Yarman recounts the moment that *Kiteworld's* Realm fell apart. Typically, Roberts pays very little attention to the big picture: the rise of the fundamentalist Ultra or the reasons for their sudden violent revolt do not matter anywhere near so much as the personal experience of one man caught up in the violence, and in his own history of failures, betrayals and misunderstandings that are highlighted by this experience.

Roberts is a curiosity among science fiction writers in that he does not invent vast new technologies or astoundingly different worlds. Characters in the Realm wear leather skirts and jeans, while Roberts, as he has done before, betrays an enormous curiosity about the workings of small, everyday, old machines, from the steam trains in Pavane, the system of cables and pulleys that control the kites in Kiteworld, and here the workings of small boats. Something of the same fascination with the old and the ordinary spills over into Roberts' characterisation. During one night, interrupted by fires, explosions and gunfire from the catastrophe going on around him, Drek Yarman sits in a room nursing a wound and a bottle of wine, and recalls the story of his life. And he tells that story in the rough working class demotic, abrupt and impatient, that Roberts first used as far back as *The Furies*. We learn a lot about Yarman, not just from what he tells us but from the way he says it, and not all of it is pleasant: he is a violent man never really capable of forming a proper relationship with others. He has a working class chip on his shoulder, resentful of his lack of education, his lack of opportunity, always able to find a fault in others to excuse his own failings. Yet Roberts makes Yarman vividly real, convinces us to see his life through his eyes, so we are caught up, at least for a while, in ideas of classless nobility, in resentment at the authorities that keep natural ability down; until we begin to recognise the brutality, the blindness, the

wilfulness that turns this into a tale of personal tragedy rather than the right-wing libertarianism some commentators have identified in his work.

The tragedy carries over to the women whose influence brackets Yarman's life. The first is Stel, his sister, who uses prostitution as a way out of their poverty, gives Yarman his first sexual experience, provokes his first major act of violence, and precipitates his own flight from home. The second is Sinki, another prostitute and Yarman's personal demon who enters his life devastatingly at the end. Both are identical to all the women who have frequented Roberts' work since Pete in *The Furies*. They are slim, boyish, with a taste for short skirts or tight jeans, and they are self-reliant. Are the two identical child-women the same? I doubt it, though we are very carefully not told the fate of either of them, but they are certainly both re-incarnations of Kaeti and Grainne and Roberts' other multi-girls.

Drek Yarman, then, is a work that explores the same themes and manners Roberts has done throughout his career. It does so with all the narrative power that Roberts has at his disposal; it is a good, gripping read. If the story feels a little more like a retrenchment than it does an advance, that is hardly surprising. Roberts was already ill when he completed the story in the early 1990s, he is now unable to write, which makes this almost certainly his last work. Given that this is at least as good as many another sf novel seeing print these days, and given Roberts's undoubtedly importance in the genre, this publication in *Spectrum SF* must be applauded. But how much louder must we lament the failure of any other publisher to bring this work into print before now.

Part 1 of Drek Yarman is being published in *Spectrum SF1* (February 2000) Available for £3.99 from Spectrum Publishing, PO Box 10308, Aberdeen, AB11 6ZR. For more details see [www.spectrumpublishing.com](http://www.spectrumpublishing.com)

## Fred Saberhagen – *Shiva in Steel*

Tor, 1999, 318pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-812-57112-6

Reviewed by Stephen Deas

Coruscating beams of energy! Anyone familiar with the works of E.E. 'Doc' Smith is going to feel at home in Saberhagen's Berserker series. Psychotic machines bent on the destruction of all organic life run rampant through the galaxy, with only plucky humanity to oppose them; assorted weird and wonderful bits of technology thrown in with a complete lack of reason or rhythm. Subtle it ain't, and there can be little doubt as to who, by the end, will triumph.

So, to the plot: Fleeing a Berserker invasion of the Omnicron sector (wince), Harry Silver arrives at what he thought was a weather station (hyperspace has weather – live with it), only to find it's a little more than that, and he and his ship become embroiled in a crusade to defeat the Berserker intelligence responsible for humanity's recent setbacks. Er... and that's it, really.

*Shiva in Steel* is part of an ongoing series, none of which I've read, so this review is from the point of view of a newcomer,

unfamiliar with the Berserker universe. And I have a strong suspicion this doesn't matter, that anyone who's visited before already knows exactly what to expect; one of Saberhagen's strengths (albeit on the basis of one book) appears to be consistency of style. I also have a suspicion that it falls a bit flat; there simply isn't enough going on (although the mad, suicidal, self-proclaimed emperor of the galaxy does provide quite an entertaining lateral shift for a while).

For the newcomer then: Saberhagen may not generate the furious pace and the vast sense of scale present in the archetypes of Space Opera, he can certainly generate clipped, lean prose and never lack a sense of purpose. And don't be put off at the thought of arriving in the middle of something – as a glimpse into both Silver's obviously varied life and the universe itself, there's enough mystery revealed for comfort and enough withheld to stay interesting. Thoughtful: no. Fast and understanding: definitely. But if that's all you want, the Lensman books did it much better.

## Melissa Scott – *The Shapes of Their Hearts*

Tor, 1999, 301 pp, \$14.95, ISBN 0-312-87247-X

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

On an otherwise unremarkable colony planet lives a religious minority, "nominally Christian, but... overlaid with a Revelation". The Revelation made clear that DNA was the jewel in the crown of God's creation; thereby any alteration of it defies God. To this group, transgenic robots are inhuman and therefore subhuman (elsewhere in the universe, they reluctantly been allowed into the clique of humanity); cloning is against God's will; and the transport system of the future, travel through FTL Gates, is too likely to change bodies and genes to be acceptable. This is evangelism, sf-style. It also, of course, provides ethical dilemmas for the present, Revelations aside: what is our personal Turing

Test? Do we support cloning and how do we class the results? And would we want a form of travel which involves taking apart every cell of your body and putting them back together at the other end?

A memory box containing the memories and dreams of the long-dead prophet's Revelations (the Memoriant) was retained by his community and is now effectively an AI. Its intelligence, artificial or not, may not be entirely sane. But it is exceptionally powerful and could be of a great deal of use – a great deal of competitive advantage – to non-believers if a viable copy could be made. And that's the basic plot of this novel, enhanced both by

the interactions between a series of rather lonely characters and by the virtual world it depicts. The personal relationships in this book are all about the strains in friendship, especially the testing of friendship which you may not be sure really exists; amidst all this, one character is also trying to understand the Memorant from inside. Melissa Scott's vision of cyberspace gets close to the minds of Als and computer programs in an environment in which they are physical rather than merely virtual or cerebral, making them passageways, barriers, tools and weapons.

The world outside is also vividly depicted, with a vigorous port community in which power attaches to music and rhythm, a

futuristic lighthouse keeper whose closest friend is a reporter in orbit around the blockaded colony, and two public servants whose third partner just got religion. While we discover these two worlds and puzzle out the relationships of the characters who inhabit them, there are points when the overall plot with its ostensible urgency – to rescue the captured trader and capture in turn the AI who's he's currently getting to know – seems lost; this novel only gradually unfolds all of the twists and linkages the protagonists need to achieve their aims. It's a little too steady to seize the imagination, but it's more than solid enough to engage interest.

### Kristine Smith – *Code Of Conduct*

Avon, 1999, 346pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-380-80783-1

reviewed by Mat Coward.

Jani Kilian, a former documents examiner and army captain, is living under an assumed name, in hiding from Commonwealth authorities. Eighteen years earlier, she'd been part of a diplomatic mission to an alien race, the idomeni, where she had felt herself obliged to commit an act of mutiny when her commanding officer took sides in a civil war. She was assumed dead, but in fact has a new face and identity, as well as a body illegally (and dangerously) 'augmented' by idomeni technology. She has been tracked down by a former lover, now the Commonwealth's Interior Minister, who wants her to investigate his wife's murder. Back on Earth, she must keep her secret in order to survive, while negotiating her way through the deadly convolutions of Commonwealth politics.

Throughout this debut novel, I kept feeling that at any moment I would start enjoying it as much as I thought I ought to. But I never quite did, and I'm not entirely sure why. Smith is a good writer, no doubt about that. Her dialogue is lively, and often witty, she is adept at finding telling details to bring her scenes to life

without burying readers in an avalanche of description, and her characters are fully-drawn. And heaven knows there's enough of interest in the sophisticated plot to satisfy serious sf readers.

And yet, somehow, the more I read, the more there seemed to be still to read. Although *Code of Conduct* doesn't lack in either action or invention, its pacing is curiously leisurely. There are an awful lot of long conversations which, though well-written within themselves, tend to drag on a bit and get a little repetitive. I also had trouble with the uncompromising style of Smith's world-building – she just drops you into the novel, and leaves you to find your own way around. I could have done with a more gentle approach.

Inevitably, mood affects book reviewing – ideally, it shouldn't, but it's unavoidable. I am left with the suspicion that if I'd read this book in a different week, I'd have got on with it better – and that a lot of people are going to love it. I'll certainly be looking out for Kristine Smith's next novel.

### Colin Thompson – *Future Eden*

Simon & Schuster, 2000, 232pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-689-82774-1

Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

Writing good humorous fiction is hard; writing good humorous science fiction still harder, as even a cursory inspection of the sf section of your local bookshop will reveal. By releasing Colin Thompson's *Future Eden* in C-format paperback his publishers, Simon & Schuster, obviously believe that their author has the talent to join the elite ranks occupied by the likes of Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett. On the evidence of this book, however, those hopes are sadly misplaced.

As Adams and Pratchett showed, merely being zany and surreal just isn't enough to make any novel, whatever its genre, automatically funny. You also need to demonstrate a knowledge and love of the material you're trying to parody or subvert, in addition to the usual literary skills of convincing plotting, characterisation, etc. After reading only a few chapters of *Future Eden* it soon becomes clear that Thompson hasn't taken to heart the examples of the authors he's trying so hard to emulate.

Set two centuries hence with humanity on the brink of extinction, the novel tells the story of Jay, a twenty-something

loser, who discovers his destiny, to be the saviour of the planet, after being taken under the wing of his pet chicken, Ethel. As seems obligatory in this kind of romp Ethel is not actually a domesticated fowl, but is in reality an all-powerful alien being from the end of time (no marks for originality here). Like one of Jay's companions, Douglas, who's cobbled together Frankenstein-style by Ethel from a mixture of frozen human body parts, the muddled plot is a stale mish-mash of tired jokes and ideas likely to test the patience of all but the most generous or undemanding fan.

Unforgivably, for what clearly aspires to be a satire on contemporary life, *Future Eden* is guilty of failing to provoke the wryest of grins, let alone a full belly laugh. Even the genre elements seem calculated, merely tacked on to a plot and characters that repeatedly fail to hold the interest of the reader. In future perhaps Colin Thompson should stick to writing children's books (of which he's had twenty-two published), as humorous sf for an adult audience is clearly not his forte.

### Jeff Vandemeer – *The Hoegbotten Guide to the Early History of Ambergris* by Duncan Shriek

Newtopian Press, 1999, 84pp, £7.99

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

This is utterly splendid. *The Hoegbotten Guide* came out of seeming nowhere to become one of Brian Stableford's Books of the Year (see last issue). I've not read anything quite like it. The mock scholarly games of Borges, Lem or Eco probably come close.

The *Guide* is a history and sort of Baedeker the city of Ambergris, founded by pirate Cappan John Manzikert on top of a fabulous city of sweeping curves, populated (until Manzikert's arrival) by inhabitants dubbed (for their curious felt hats)

'mushroom people' or 'grey caps'.

Karl Baedeker (1801-59), though, would probably have been less rude to his readers and sources, and less trying of his readers' patience with footnotes that take up half of each page and, indeed, as our splendidly acerbic historian, Shriek, observes, are in fact the main point of the text, or at least all the interesting bits. Even these footnotes (there are three in the first line) have been truncated for brevity (many were as long as the finished essay) and much of their content moved to a 24 page Glossary/Index of the

major figures, events and organisations of the early years of Ambergris.

The early history of Ambergris seems astonishingly ill-fated. Founded on a massacre of the grey caps following the discovery of a sacrilegiously shaped fungus on a wall, the first Cappan Manzikert disappears, together with the Truffidian monk Samuel Tonsure, beneath the city in pursuit of a mocking grey cap. Manikert reappears days later, his eyes plucked cleanly from his head. Tonsure is never seen again, although a rambling, incoherent journal, discovered some years later on an altar, together with two preserved eyeballs, purports to be his.

Manzikert's descent and fate will be recapitulated years later by the bastard son of his heir, Manzikert II, Aquelus, who presides over one of the most mysterious events in the whole history of this spectacularly ill-fated city. Aquelus takes 5,000 men and women and 100 ships to hunt the freshwater squid to stock the city with food against a threatened siege. They would be gone two weeks.

They return to an empty, deserted city. 25,000 inhabitants, including Aquelus' wife, are gone and never seen again. The period is known ever after as the Silence, and those left behind refer to themselves thereafter, in quiet, frightened tones, as the Dispossessed.

It is Aquelus who discovers the returned journal and the once blocked underground entrance wide open. He announces his intention to search below and disappears, leaving his wife, Irene

(newly returned from a two-day mushroom picking expedition), to quell a threatened rebellion and an imminent invasion by Haragck forces.

Three days later Aquelus reappears, his hair white and his eyes plucked from his head. Like Manzikert I, he never speaks of what he has seen, and for the next 30 years tries to regain the love of his subjects by increasingly desperate acts of largesse. *The Early History of Ambergris*, after the end of Aquelus' cappancy, then passes on to the fate and contents (and the many problems of authenticity and provenance which surround it) of the mysterious journal. In the end we are left, perhaps, little the wiser. (Shriek, who takes a more background role (page 56 has no footnotes at all), seems to be hedging his bets here, as well as carrying on several obscure academic feuds.)

What remains, of course, is the puzzle of Jeff Vandemeer's place in all of this. Paul Di Filippo, in his generous letter to the publisher reproduced on the back cover, derides those who perversely believe that Vandemeer has invented Shriek rather than the other way around, although wonders why Shriek felt this necessary in the first place. Perhaps the mystery is best left to the reader, who is urged to contact the publishers themselves (65 South St., Westborough MA 01581-1628, [www.necropolitanpress.com](http://www.necropolitanpress.com) or [necropolitan@msn.com](mailto:necropolitan@msn.com)) for their own copy, where they will find much to ponder on (as well as the full and recently recovered recipe for Oliphant's Delight).

### James White – Double Contact

Tor, 1999, 300pp, £24.95 ISBN 0-312-87041-8

Reviewed by John Newsinger

This is the late James White's twelfth 'Sector General' novel, the last in a series justly admired for its cleverness, but also one suspects for its low-key idealism. There are, I suspect, very few BSFA members who have not picked up a 'Sector General' volume at some time or another. Once the reader swallows the highly implausible premise that pathogens evolved on one world are not able to infect creatures from another (if this were true then H.G. Wells's Martians would still be ruling the Earth!), what he or she finds are carefully crafted stories detailing the diagnosis and treatment of unfamiliar aliens. White presents his readers with diagnostic puzzles that have to be solved under difficult, often dangerous conditions by a mixed-species medical team selflessly dedicated to preserving life. His stories are always an entertaining read, if somewhat bland, and Double Contact is no exception.

On this occasion, Senior Physician Prilicia and its colleagues have to win the trust of seriously injured aliens and avoid a war with other aliens, who object to their presence on their world. Inevitably, the patience and commitment to peace of the medical team pay off but not

without considerable difficulty and misunderstanding. All this takes place in a completely different universe from that inhabited by the likes of Larry Niven and co.

One point worth noticing is that White's view of medicine seems remarkably utopian. Here medical resources are actually adequate to cope with emergencies. There are no patients having their cancer left untreated until it is too late, no patients left on trolleys in hospital corridors, no patients getting privileged treatment by going private. Of course, when White started writing the series back in 1962 such conditions would have been unthinkable in a rich advanced country, but times change. Today, if he were starting out he would have to connect with contemporary priorities. How about a series titled *Millennium Dome*?

Business aside, for readers already familiar with White's Sector General series, this is a welcome addition. For those who have not yet encountered the series this is not a bad place to start and work back from. Incidentally, there is a useful bibliography of White's work in the December 1999 *Interzone*. He will be missed.

### Michael White – Superscience

Ben Bova & Byron Preiss (eds.) – *Are We Alone In The Cosmos?*

Earthlight, 1999, £6.99, pp 253, ISBN 0 671 02277 6

iBooks, 1999, £9.99, pp 300, ISBN 0 671 03892 3

Reviewed by F. Christian

They say that first impressions count; if that's the case, and if I'd had the choice of only one of these books, *Superscience* would have been left firmly on the shelf. After all, what contest can there possibly be between the sequel to *The Science of the X-Files*, dealing with alien abductions, ley lines and alchemy and written by a former member of the Thompson Twins, and *Are We Alone In The Cosmos?*, a serious collection of scholarly essays dealing with all aspects of the Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI), from writers including Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Ben Bova, and a multitude of NASA and SETI Institute radio

astronomers?

Actually reading *Superscience* surprised me; quite apart from anything else, it was interesting and fun. Although the author is a sceptic, he was only rarely dismissively so, and seems to be genuinely keen on reducing public ignorance and hostility towards science. Although occasional oversimplifications would be irritating to someone who knows the background to the subjects, this is generally unintrusive and only done when necessary. The individual chapters provide a solid and, most importantly, non-technical description of the phenomena

involved, including the best way to make a zombie and the scientific basis for astrology.

In contrast, *Cosmos* is very technical in places, and often assumes at least some prior knowledge of SETI. It also contains sometimes frequent lengthy duplication of ideas and concepts. Because this is a collection of essays, such duplication is to be expected and often provides different viewpoints on issues such as the location of extra-solar planets and the best ways to find other intelligent life; it is also slightly varying, particularly on the fourth or fifth iteration. At the other end of this scale, some subjects are never well described, even when mentioned a number of times.

Despite these gripes, *Cosmos* is an interesting read, particularly the chapters on life in the universe, SETI through the ages, where to look, and the process of first contact. The dolphin is used well, by Diana Reiss, as an example of the difficulty of identifying a non-technological intelligence, and David Brin discusses some of the reasons why contact has not yet occurred. A number of professional radio astronomers discuss the best way to

find signals from ETI, and Philip Morrison ends the book with an excellent look at the problems of getting the scientific community – and humanity as a whole – to work together.

*Cosmos* is a reprint of a work published as *First Contact*; with that in mind, it seems that some of the essays have undergone substantial editing, (particularly Hal Clement's discussion of alternative life designs), and others have been added or fleshed out in order to provide a more thorough explanation of the subject (such as the extensive introduction). Given that this is a reprint, there are a number of basic errors which have not been noticed, such as the practice of not referring to diagrams in the text, and occasionally referring to diagrams which are not in the book.

Whilst I would certainly recommend *Supercience* to anyone who is even slightly scared or confused by science books and overly-complex explanations, or who wants a good read about Fortean phenomena, I would only recommend *Cosmos* to someone who is really interested in SETI, and particularly in the radio astronomy side of it.



THESE ARE SOME OF THE OTHER BOOKS WE HAVE SEEN RECENTLY. A MENTION HERE DOES NOT NECESSARILY PRECLUDE A REVIEW IN A LATER ISSUE OF VECTOR

#### Isaac Asimov – *Buy Jupiter*

Millennium, 2000, 255pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-941-4

#### Isaac Asimov – *The Gods Themselves*

Millennium, 2000, 288pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-934-1  
Two more classic reprints from Millennium. The *Gods Themselves* a winner of both Hugo and Nebula Awards for Best Novel, possibly his finest work according to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. *Buy Jupiter* is a collection of stories spanning 23 years, including 'Darwinian Pool Room' the earliest here, 1950) to the 1973 revisit of his spoof scientific paper 'The Endochronic Properties of Resublimated Thiotimoline', in 'Thiotimoline To the Stars'.

#### David Brin – *Foundation's Triumph*

Orbit, 2000, 440pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-84149-000-8  
Third part of the 'fill-in' Second Foundation Trilogy from the three B's, respectively Benford, Bear and Brin. (One wonders, along with Barnes and Baxter, whether a 'B' name is now becoming obligatory for a hard sf writer, or whether these three authors were chosen for their proximity to Asimov on the bookshelves, and, indeed, whether Barnes and Baxter were considered for the project). This, reviewed along with Bear's *Foundation and Chaos*, was reviewed by Gary Wilkinson in V208, and takes place just before Hari Seldon's death, as he is setting up the Time Vault at Terminus to carry on the great project of psychotopy embodied in the Seldon Plan after his death.

#### Steve Erikson – *Gardens of the Moon*

Bantam, 2000, 728pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-553-81217-3  
Erikson caused something of a stir in the mainstream press for an unusual and highly lucrative publishing deal, following huge critical acclaim for this first book, which parcels out a £675,000 nine-book deal as a quarterly salary over 9 years – something of a jump from

£180/week as a Toyota data clerk. Subtitled *A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen*, this is a huge, dense fantasy, with an equally huge and disparate cast, that, as reviewer Vicki Lee (who also rated this as a Book of the Year) observed in V205, "is one of those rare fantasy books that not only attempts to be huge in scope, but actually succeeds in being so." (Note this is not the same sf author Steve Erickson (with a 'c') of *Days Between Stations*, *Arc d'X* and *Amnesiascope*.)

#### David Gemmell – *Midnight Falcon*

Corgi, 2000, 545pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-552-14257-3  
A sequel, some years on, to Gemmell's *Sword in the Storm*, Book One of the Rigante. This takes up the story of Rigante warlord Connovar's bastard son, Bane, who has less than filial feelings for his father, named the Demonblade. "Gemmell has been writing good, solid, action-packed fantasies for years now, and it is hard to read a book of his without the feeling he just gets better and better." Reviewed in hardback by Vicki Lee in V207.

#### Robin Hobb – *The Mad Ship*

Voyager, 2000, 906pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-649886-8  
Books one and two of 'The Liveship Traders' were reviewed by Lesley Hatch in V206 (Book 3, *Ship of Destiny*, has just come out in hardback). *The Mad Ship* is the second book in the series, here in mass paperback. The magical liveships of the Bington Trader families are made of wizardwood, a hugely expensive material that leaves the families in perpetual debt, and by tradition, three generations must die on deck for a liveship to be 'quickened'. The 'mad ship' is Paragon, reputedly insane and killer of its crew, chained and blinded outside Bington harbour, but Amber has plans to relaunch it.

#### J.V. Jones – *A Cavern of Black Ice*

Orbit, 2000, 804pp, £7.99 ISBN 1-85723-743-9  
Book one of the 'Sword of Shadows', and reviewed in hardback by Lynne Bispham in V205. Raif is a hunter and warrior, Ash is a founding and foster daughter to the Surlord of the City of Spine Vanis. Their path cross when Raif is displaced by a new clanleader and Ash, afraid of her foster father, flees the city and is rescued by Raif. Ash, they discover, is a 'Reach' with a dangerous and unstable magical talent that can only be discharged in one place (but you're ahead of me...). Lynne Bispham thought this a highly readable and intricate plotted fantasy coming to a satisfying conclusion that promised well for the series.

#### Katherine Kerr – *The Black Raven*

Voyager, 2000, 391pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-648260-0  
The second of a new cycle of Kerr's Deverry books, and a sequel to *The Red Wyvern*, although reviewer Cherith Baldry (writing in V208) certainly recommends reading this or other of the Deverry books first. The distinctive cyclic nature of the Deverry books comes out "in the way that Kerr presents her characters as dying and being reborn to live many different lives. As individuals they know nothing of this, but certain characters are bound together by fate so that repeat the same patterns over successive incarnations". Here, two interwoven stories concern Niffa, a recently widowed young woman, and Lilli, caught up in the civil war of an earlier period of Deverry history.

#### K.J. Parker – *The Belly of the Bow*

Orbit, 2000, 521pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85723-960-1  
Another second volume, this of 'The Fencer Trilogy' and a sequel to Parker's *Colours in the Steel* (reviewed by Vicki Lee in V205), now in

mass market paperback. Opinions seem divided whether Parker's sometimes obsessive detail about the manufacture of weaponry is fascinating or "downright tedious".

#### Keith Topping – *Slayer: The Totally Cool Unofficial Guide to Buffy*

Virgin, 1999, 280pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-7535-0475-8  
Overpriced, compared to Peter Mann's *The Slayer Files* (Pocket Essentials) but far more entertaining, and wisely condenses much of Mann's leaden plot synopses and lists of cast, crew, best boy and catering executives for each episode to concentrate more fully on the brevity of Cordelia's outfits, tangled romantic subplots, frequent plot lacunae and some of the best lines from the various episodes. (Although missing Buffy's creepingly funny "getting in touch with his inner halibut" from *Go Fish* (Series 2, Episode 32)). If this had an index it would be invaluable as well as fun.

#### Kim Stanley Robinson – *The Martians*

Voyager, 2000, 457pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-649702-0  
A companion collection of pieces to KSR's "Mars" trilogy that is either intriguing or horribly misconceived – opinions divide sharply. Previously reviewed by Paul Kincaid in V206, who was firmly of the latter camp.

#### Vernor Vinge – *A Fire Upon the Deep*

Millennium, 2000, 579pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-127-8

#### Vernor Vinge – *Across Realtime*

Millennium, 2000, 534, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-147-2  
*Across Realtime* collects two tales, *The Peace War* (1984) and *Marooned in Realtime* (1986), originally published as independent novels and later combined under the title *Across Realtime* (1986). Of *A Fire Upon the Deep* little needs to be said. It's a stunning bravura exercise in wide-screen space opera at its grandest and wittiest outside of anyone except perhaps Iain Banks' Culture novels. A deserved award winner, already a classic, and deserves a place in every serious sf collection.

#### Vernor Vinge – *A Deepness in the Sky*

Tor, 2000, 774pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-812-53635-5  
A-format paperback reissue (with a truly atrocious cover) of Vinge's excellent, witty and thrilling space opera, set some 30,000 years before the award-winning *A Fire Upon the Deep*, as ships from two rival cultures arrive simultaneously above the planet Arachna, circling a curious periodic star. Previously reviewed in hardback by Steve Jeffery in V207.

#### James White – *The First Protector*

Ebury Press, 2000, 284pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-09-187263-4  
Tor, 2000, 315pp, \$13.95 ISBN 0-312-87409-X  
Two paperback reprints of James White's final novel, and something of a surprise in that this was both a TV series tie-in (for Roddenberry's *Earth: Final Conflict*) and told almost as a straight fantasy set in 300AD. "Strange, I know, but it works" wrote Vicki Lee (a fan of the TV series), giving this a high recommendation in V209.

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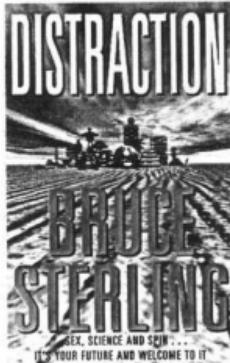


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*Voyager £17.99*



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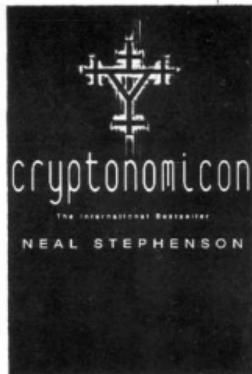
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