newsletter isfa

The Bulletin of The Irish Science Fiction Association

DECEMBER 1978/JANUARY 1979 NUMBER 20

STARGATE MAKES SALE!

Stargate, well-known Journal of the ISFA, has finally succeeded in making a sale of part of its work to a foreign SF magazine. The first honours in the international market go to ISFA Member Chris O'Connell, whose poem "The Music of the Universe" has been bought by Brudte Graenser ("Broken Limits") magazine. This publication comes from Denmark; the publisher picked up a copy of Stargate Vol 2, No. 1 (Yellow Cover) at the Convention in Dun Laoghaire last June. The value of the sale is expected to be negligible; nevertheless, we are hopeful that Chris's achievement will mark the beginning of a new trend for ISFA writers of all types.

PENNY RETURNING

ISFA Member and Alchemist's Head proprietress Penny Cambell is scheduled to return to Dublin on 1 December after a long absence caused by ill health. She has now recovered sufficiently to grace the Essex Street premises once again; there is to be a welcome-back informal reception at Smitty's Restaurent (by the Customs House) on Sunday, 3 December 1978 at 8 PM. It is doubted that this Newsletter will be out in time to let everyone know in advance, but it was announced at the meeting on 26 November. A good many of the people who attended indicated that they will go to welcome Penny back.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

Sunday, 10 December 1978

The ISFA will be putting on a play version of Ray Bradbury's story the Veldt. The cast will consist of volunteer ISFA members, and the direction will be handled by Robert Lane. It is recommended that people try to get to the Parliament Inn a bit earlier than they usually do, as we will try to start on time in order to ensure enough time to complete the play. The scheduled time for the meeting is, as usual, at 7:30 PM. MC: John Mahon.

Sunday, 28 January 1979

We are scheduled to have a talk by author and ISFA patron Anne McCaffrey. This talk will be on topic(s) of her choice; in the past they have proved to be both entertaining and popular. This meeting is also scheduled at the Parliament Inn, at 7:30 PM. Meeting Coordinator: Moira Harrison.

NOTICE: THE WRITER'S WORKSHOP SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING SCHEDULED FOR 3 DECEMBER HAS BEEN POSTPONED TO A LATER DATE BECAUSE OF THE RECEPTION FOR PENNY CAMBELL.

October Meeting

(Transcript of the talk given to the October meeting of the ISFA by author and patron JAMES WHITE)

THE SECRET HISTORY OF SECTOR GENERAL

Ladies and gentlemen, I shall call you that until I have had the opportunity of working out your physiological classifications in detail, I must begin by explaining why I am reading this speech instead of talking off the top of my head. There are three reasons for this.

One is that I do not have a mouth on the top of my head. The second reason is that I am a writer and not a talker, and spontaneous witticisms need a lot of time to think up, and write down. The third reason is my astigmatism, which you may have already noticed. Astigmatism is a nice, scientific way of saying that I'm as blind as a bat. Even when sober. However, this might be a slight exaggeration, because my eyes are perfectly capable of seeing as far as my spectacles, which in turn enable me to see 'way out to the magnifying glass, and the fact that my fifth eye is square is simply the result of watching too much television. You could say that I have become a second-stage lensman.

This talk is entitled The Secret History of Sector General. It is going to be a behind-the-scenes look at the Sector General series of medical science fiction stories, warts and all. Warts are unsightly things, and you all know to what lengths people will go to be cured of them, including doing all sorts of things to them in graveyards at midnight. So the things extraterrestials do to be rid of their warts just don't bear thinking about.

For a series which began twenty years ago, and has so far run to a quarter of a million words, the Sector General series got off to a very shaky start. In fact, had the then editor of NEW WORLDS, Ted Carnell, not been desperate to fill a 17,000-word hole which had opened up in his November 1957 issue --- a disconcerting thing to happen to any editor --- the first story would not have been accepted without a complete rewrite.

The birth of the Sector General idea was a natural if perhaps a premature occurrance. I had been writing professionally for over four years, but even in those early apprenticeship days I had a strong preference for medicos or extraterrestials as the chief characters in my stories, and gradually both types began appearing in the same story. For example, To Kill or Cure (NEW WORLDS 58, April 1957 and the collection The Aliens Among Us) recorded the fumbling attempts of a naval doctor from a rescue helicopter to give medical assistance to the extraterrestial survivor of a crashed spaceship. It was only natural that a story which dealt with the problems of human beings treating large numbers of aliens in hospital conditions, and of extraterrestials treating humans, would evolve.

The novelette Sector General, however, had flaws. Ted Carnell said that it lacked a coherent plot, that Doctor Conway simply drifted into and out of situations without resolving his main problem, which was the ethical conflict in his mind between the militaristic Monitor Corps which maintained the hospital, and the intesnely pacifist medical staff, and in his opinion the whole thing resembled an interstellar "Emergency Ward 10" --- this was a corny TV hospital series of the time, and comparing my story to it was surely the unkindest surgical incision of all! He also said that I had spelled "efficient" two different ways in the manuscript, both of which were wrong, and would I kindly stop doing that.

Ted did like the idea of an interstellar hospital and said that I should use it again, if only occasionally. He also said that Harry Harrison had called into the office and was somewhat irritated with me for beating him to the punch with the interstellar hospital idea. Apparently Harry had been planning a series of four or five shorts with just such a background, reckoning that it was a new idea. Harry still intended doing the stories, Ted said, but his enthusiasm had been blunted.

This last piece of news scared hell out of me.

At the time I had not met Harry Harrison, but I had heard quite a lot

about him. I knew that since reading Rockdiver he had been one of my favourite authors, that he spoke rather loudly to people even when he wasn't mad at them, and that he was probably Deathworld on two feet. And there I was, a professional and fan writer still wet behind the ears, who had not done something simple like kicking over his beer at a fan party --- no, I'd had the temerity to go and blunt his enthusiasm!

Ted had not given Mr. Harrison my address, and Harry was living in Denmark at the time and neither of us were on the phone, but he said I would probably be hearing from him. But Harry must be a forgiving soul, or his enthusiasm is self-sharpening, because in the event nothing catastrophic happened to me.

At least, not yet.

All the same, there must be a probability world somewhere in which Harry got in first with the idea and my enthusiasm was blunted, and the SF shelves in the bookshops carry a series about an interstellar hospital by Harry Harrison. If someone would invent a transverse time machine, I would like to borrow it for a few hours to buy some of those books.

The second story in the series was the novelette Trouble With Emily, and Ted was happier with that one. It had Doctor Conway, carrying a pint-sized alien with psionic powers on his shoulder instead of an out-s zed chip, and a party of Monitor Corpsmen cooperating in the treatment of a brontosaurus-like patient called, inevitably, Emily, by the Corpsmen. They had thought of nicknaming it "Bronty" until they discovered it was female, and Emily Bronty had a nice ring to it...

But the function of the Monitor Corps, which was the law enforcement and executive arm of the Galactic Federation whose sixty-odd --- sometimes very odd --- races were represented on the medical staff of the hospital, was something which required clarification, I thought. The result was a very long novelette, 21,000 words, which became the Sector General story that never was.

Essentially the Monitor Corps was a police force on an interstellar scale but I did not want them to be the usual ruthless, routine-oriented, basically stupid organisation which is handy to have around when an idealistic hero-type needs a bit of conflict. Conway was a Good Guy and I wanted the Monitor Corps to be Good Guys, too --- but with different ideas on the type of activity which produced the greater good. They were in the business of practicing large-scale preventive medicine, if you like.

Their duties included interstellar survey and cultural contact work as well as maintaining the Federation's peace --- a job which, if they were unable to act in time, could involve a police action which was indistinguishable from an act of war. But the Monitor Corps much preferred to wage psychological warfare aimed at discouraging planetary or interplanetary violence and when, in spite of their efforts, a war broke out, then they kept a very tight control over it, and over the beings waging it.

These warlike beings belonged to a sick psychological rather than a sick physiological classification, and the story was called Classification: Warrior. It told of the efforts of the Corps to stop a war, and Conway and Sector General came into it when things went catastrophically wrong and large numbers of human and extraterrestial casualties had to be treated in the field.

However, Ted Carnell insisted that it was a much too serious story to be tied into the Sector General series. So he had me cut out all references to the Monitor Corps (rechristening them the Stellar Guard), the Federation, the Sector General hospital, and Doctor Conway. The story was retitled Occupation: Warrior, and it appeared in SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES No. 7, February 1959, and in the collection The Aliens Among Us, which also contained a proper Sector General story called Countercharm. Naturally, the two stories pretended to have nothing to do with each other.

With the next story, Visitor at Large, the series was back firmly on the rails. Appearing for the first time in the hospital was the insectile, incredibly fragile and emotion-sensitive Doctor Prilicla, who turned out to be the most popular character in the series. The patient Prilicla and Conway were treating was a life-form which was physically incapable of taking sick --- although it was subject to psychological disturbances. This patient, who possess-

ed an extremely high level of physical adaptability, had the ability to extrude any limbs, sensory organs or protective tegument required for any given situation. It reproduced by fission and inherited at the time of its 'birth' all of the experiences and knowledge of its parent, and of its parent's parent, right back to the beginning of its evolution.

The patient's problem was that it had withdrawn mentally from all outside contact and was slowly dissolving into water. Those of you who have some knowledge of extraterrestial neuroses will already have realised that it had suffered a severe emotional disturbance, which had caused it to regress into the pre-natal stage. Which meant, in this particular species, going back to the primeval saline solution from which it had evolved, and that it was suffering from a clear case of water on the brain!

Don Wolheim, the then publisher of Ace Books, showed some interest in the first three novelettes of the series --- together they came to about 45,000 words, which was the right length for an Ace Double. But in the event this did not pan out.

In the next story there was a jump backwards in time to the building of the hospital, and the central character was O'Mara, who was later to become Sector General's Chief Psychologist. This was followed by a story which introduced the character of the silver-furred, caterpillar-like Kelgian nurse, Naydrad. These were entitled O'Mara's Orphan and Outpatient, and the Hospital Station collection published by Ballantine and Corgi contained all the five of the Sector General stories written at that time, but with the O'Mara's Orphan title changed to Medic.

At about this time the 100th issue of NEW WORLDS was coming up and Ted Carnell had been writing around his authors asking them to produce something special for it. I submitted a 14,000 word novelette called The Apprentice, which he stuck in No. 99 because, he said, there was only a 7,000 word hole left in No. 100. He wondered if I could fill it with a short Sector General story, within three weeks.

I badly wanted to get into that 100th issue, but I didn't have a single alien ailment in my head. In desperation I tried to build a story around an Earth-human disease which might have an extraterrestial equivalent, an ailment which I had first-hand experience, diabetes.

Now, there is no problem in pushing a hypodermic needle through the tegument and subcutaneous tissue of an Earth-human diabetic and injecting a measured dose of insulin --- except sometimes I go "Ouch!" But suppose the diabetic patient was a crab-like life-form, with its limbs and body covered by an exoskeletal shell? Obviously the same procedure would not be suitable. Unless, of course, one used a sophisticated Black and Decker power drill, but this in time would lead to grave weakening of the exoskeletal structure. Solving this problem, with the help of his friends and a beautifully proportioned senior nurse and later e-t pathologist called Murchison, was the plot line for the story Countercharm, which dropped into Ted's 7,000 word hole with an audible plop.

The next story in the series came about, I feel sure, because of my second or third reading of Hal Clement's Needle. A very important extra-terrestial had had a disagreement with its private medic and had been admitted to Sector General, but it was only much later in the story that Conway discovered this fact, and that the personal medic in question was an intelligent organised virus-like colony which actually lived inside its patient. The story was called, inevitably, Resident Physician, and it was an introductory novelette to the first, and at the moment only, Sector General novel, Field Hospital.

Resident Physician and Field Hospital were later published together by Ballantine and Corgi as Star Surgeon.

There is not enough time to go into the plot details of Field Hospital/Star Surgeon, but one should be mentioned. Earlier I mentioned the long novelette Occupation: Warrior which should have been the fourth Sector General story Classification: Warrior. Well, the leading character was a tactician called Dermod, and the same character was the Monitor Corps Fleet Commander who defended the hospital in Star Surgeon, and Ted Carnell didn't catch it.

I doubt if anybody else did, either. Or realise that the Dermod charac-

ter turned up again much later in the Major Operation collection. But a very tenuous connection had been made between the series and the Sector General story which had been deliberately de-Sector Generalised, and the White honour was satisfied.

There was a four-year gap before the next stories in the series were written. These were five novelettes which were planned from the beginning to build progressively into a novel. They were Invader, Vertigo, Blood Brother, Meatball, and Major Operation (NEW WRITINGS IN SF No's. 7, 12, 14, 16, and 18, and rewritten with some linking material added and published as the book Major Operation in the US only, by Ballantine.)

Invader set the stage for the Major Operation collection by introducing to the hospital a thought-controlled tool which caused havoc until Conway discovered its true nature and realised how valuable more such devices would be to surgeons who fully understood them.

During further investigations of the planet on which the tool originated the Monitor Corps rescued a doughnut shaped alien who had to roll all the time to stay alive because it did not have a heart as such, but depended on a gravity feed system for blood circulation. This story was called Vertigo and the alien was a present of Bob Shaw, who called them Drambons also, to see how long it would take some of the science fiction buffs to spot that a certain extraterrestial had cropped up, or rolled up, in the work of two different authors. But up until now the widely travelled denizens of Drambo have gone unspotted.

The next story was from an original idea by the well-known fan of the time, Ken Cheslin. Ella Parker, Ken Cheslin, and myself had escaped for an afternoon from the first Bristol convention --- the film to be shown that afternoon was terrible, and it hadn't arrived anyway --- and we were in the middle of the Severn Brdige. No, we weren't going to commit suicide because o the convention programme, we were just driving to Chepstow Castle for a spot of sightseeing. Anyway, Ken's rather elderly car had just been overtaken by an E-type farm tractor when he said suddenly, "James, you know how doctors used to be called leeches. Why don't you write about a doctor who really is a leech?"

The result was an ET whose method of treatment was to withdraw the patient's blood --- very disconcerting for the being concerned --- and remove the offending micro-organisms or toxins before returning the blood as good as new. The story was called Blood Brother, and thank you Ken Cheslin.

Regarding Meatball and the climactic Major Operation, there is nothing I can say except that the living planet idea derived from the Grosni life-form which featured in my first novel, Tourist Planet in NEW WORLDS and The Secret Visitors in book form. Which brings me to the last story in the series to be published, Spacebird in NEW WRITINGS IN SF No. 22.

The organic spaceship idea had been in my notebook for a long time, but could not use it until I could find some means of boosting the organism to escape velocity. Then at one of the conventions I mentioned my problem to Jack Cohen. Jack is a very helpful person and a stickler for xenobiological verisimilitude. He is familiar with strange and alien life-forms --- I mean, othe than the members of the Birmingham SF group. He immediately suggested the bombardier beetle, a small European insect which, when threatened with natura enemies, expells and ignites gas from its rear end so violently that it lands several feet away.

When the story came to be written, the launch was from a Mesklin-type planet with high centrifugal force and low gravity at its equator, and with billions of outsized bombardier beetles forming the multi-staging sequences --- all blasting away in turn and heaving the bird into space. Surely this was an idea to arouse one's sense of wonder.

Think of the technological achievement of a race completely without metals, think of the timing and control involved, think of the smell...!

Thank you Jack Cohen!

To date the Sector General series has run to one novel, twelve novelettes and one short story. I am reluctant to say too much about future stories the series because some of them have not been written, much less accepted. At the moment I am working on ideas which are built around a new aspect of the work of Sector General, so much so that the plot would read better as a singl

book rather than four or five connected novelettes. However, like I said, I'm superstitious where future history is concerned, but with luck the fourth Sector General collection might be ready for launching next year.

If I can find enough bombardier beetles...

(After the talk, Mr. WHITE held a question and answer period which proved to be quite enthusiastic. This transcript was contained in lieu of the scheduled one from the 2nd Annual World Science Fiction Writers' Convention because of its topicality and because of a desire to get the content promptly to those ISFA members who were unable to attend. Please watch later issues for the Convention transcripts.)

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Emphasis for the 1980's

By Pearse Mooney

A new era in Space Transportation is due to begin about the end of 1979. Rockwell Space System's Space Shuttle team seem confident of achieving a launch by this time. The first Space Shuttle into space has been delayed by main engine development problems between May 1977 and May 1978. However, these problems seem now to have been overcome. A single Space Shuttle main engine has recently successfully completed five (5) consecutive burns at 100% power, each lasting 520 seconds and equivalent to one actual launch. Rocketdyne engineers now have much more confidence in the latest SSME, which incorporates modifications to the liquid oxygen/liquid hydrogen high pressure turbopumps. The successful engine accumulated 5,000 seconds firing time between August 12 and September 18, 1978, of which 4,700 seconds were at 100% power.

The failure of the earlier turbopumps was due mainly to metal fatigue in the turbine blades and the turbine bearings. After fractographic analyses of the turbine blades and bearings, subsequent modifications were made to these components, although the materials themselves were not changed.

Difficulties with the manufacture of the insulation tiles which will protect the Orbiter's aluminum skin from excessive heat during re-entry, have been solved, and the first set of flight-rated tiles is being attached to Orbiter 102. This vehicle will be delivered to Kennedy Space Center early in 1979. The flight of the first Space Shuttle should now take place sometime between September and December 1979.

NASA originally intended to fly six or seven Orbital Flight Test (OFT) missions before declaring the vehicles fit for operations. The OFT flights carrying development flight instrumentation (DFI) were to have been carried out over a period of 12 to 14 months. NASA now plans that DFI will gradually be offloaded in the course of the tests to make room for more payload. Also, NASA hopes to qualify the Shuttle in 4 or 5 flights. In this way they hope to make up the 6-to-9 month slippage that has built up so far.

Payloads will be carried from the second mission onwards. The first flight will be called Space Shuttle (1) with subsequent flights designated SS2, SS3 and so on. The first four flights will land at NASA's Dryden research center in California.

The runway here, at 4.6 km x 91 m, offers more room than the runway now being completed at the Kennedy Space Center. The ejector seats carried by Orbiter 102 are to be removed after the fourth flight. Rockwell is confident that the Orbiter vehicle is good for more than a hundred missions. The thermal insulation tiles and the fuel cells will be replaced as necessary. The Orbiter's main engines are expected to be good for at least 55 missions into space. On the possible use of composites, Rockwell says that new lightweight materials will figure significantly on future shuttles. Both Orbiter 103 and the fourth flight vehicle 104 will have to fly high performance missions from Vandenberg Air Force Base. To do this, each will have to lose 2700 kg of gross liftoff weight. On Orbiter 102, Rockwell has saved 500 kg of weight by using a graphite/epoxy compound instead of aluminum for the cargo bay doors. NASA expects to reduce the weight of the external tank (ET) and the Solid Rocket Boosters (SRB) in a similar effort designed to meet new Defense Department requirements. The question of a fifth Orbiter has still to be settled. Congress has provided enough money in this year's budget to keep the option open, though President Carter is against the idea.

Next issue --- I'M NASA --- FLY ME!

November's Highlights

Our November meeting was held as scheduled in the Parliament Inn. Guest speaker and ISFA patron Harry Harrison gave us an informal talk about the current state of the world's SF market, as exemplified by his own wrok.

SF marketing is expanding rapidly after the boom started with Star Wars, et al. Publications are springing up all over the place; novels are getting printed at a fantastic rate. In particular, 3000 SF titles were released in the US in 1977. This was roughly 70% of the paperback or pocketbook market, at least in the U.S.

Harry told us that he thinks this new boom will be for the good of SF in the long run, even if a great many of the new readers are unaware of the various SF conventions (literary, that is) and may not be adequately prepared to appreciate good SF. Face it, a good many new titles just aren't class SF. But the money is there and Harry believes that the top quality stuff will continue getting even better. Unfortunately, this money is not really going into short stories.

It should be mentioned that a lot of the books now available are reprints. All 23 of Harry's novels are in print either in the U.S. or the U.K.

In the non-english speaking world, the markets are also booming. Iron curtain countries, in particular, are expanding their output (but not their remuneration, which usually is in nonconvertible currency or nonexistant). On the other hand, Japan has increased its SF title consumption enormously. Harry's books have been translated into 19 languages ("including english").

Non-traditional media are also moving into SF. A profusely illustrated book by Harry called Planet Story is due out in April --- it will be an attempt to blend SF art with SF writing in a reasonable continuity. Also, there is a fairly good chance that RTE will be doing a one-hour show about Ireland, based on some of Harry's work; should this come off, he expects to be closely involved with the production.

This can't really do justice to Harry's presentation, which was handled in his usual entertainingly anecdotal style. There was a question and answer period afterwards.

One last point of interest to those who attended: approved space heaters are to be installed before the next meeting. This will be a great relief to those who had three day old ice in their drinks.

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Book Reviews

The Hermes Fall by John Baxter (London; Granada Publishing, 95 p. + VAT; 271 pg.

This is an absolutely appalling book! The cover reads "Will you survive... the Hermes Fall?" The answer, if you try to read it, is an unqualified "NO!" If you happen to enjoy good SF, well written books, technically proficient stories, well-researched settings --- then give this dog a wide miss.

The characters are amazingly wooden --- we get no sympathy for the victims, no feeling for internal stresses, nothing.

The story concernes the impact of the asteroid Hermes with the Earth in 1980. It hits. People die, floods scour all the land bordering the Atlantic. Whoopie. NASA tries to blow it up by sending two astronauts with a nuclear warhead to it. Twice. The first one, inexplicably mounted on a minuteman launched from the Dakotas, doesn't make it and takes out a small town in Pennsylvania. The second one crashes on Hermes, but they lose the bomb and ride the asteroid to Earth, and one man survives. It's just awful, I tell you!

There are some amazingly glaring flaws, considering that the book was copyrighted in 1978. The USAF uniforms are not described either in American terms or correctly; BOAC is still flying, with 747's yet; sliderules have replaced the pocket calculator as handy figuring devices.

Why was this book written? To answer this question, you have to realise that Baxter is an Australian. Yet the novel is set almost entirely in the U.S. with American viewpoint characters. This is clearly designed to take advantage of the U.S. market --- but as I implied above, the slang and research into the U.S. is haphazard and often faulty.

You get the idea. There is only one more frightening point --- the short

biography in the front says that Baxter is actually an SF writer. Well, he fooled me --- this is "Best-seller" trash, the work of someone who apperas to have large gambling debts and/or psychiatric bills to pay. My only suggestion for prospective readers is that you go drown yourselves before you get a chance to pick it up.

Reviewed by John McCarthy
Commissioned by P.J. Goode

The Mote in God's Eye by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle (New York; Pan, 1977. £1.37½)

Despite the fact that it took me quite a while to read, I found this novel enjoyable and interesting. It was easy to read, the interest was maintained to the end of the book, and I thought the passages where the human world was seen through the aliens' eyes were thought-provoking. The central character of the novel is Commander Roderick Harold, Lord Blaine, Imperial Space Navy. The book is concerned with the examination of an alien world and its inhabitants by human beings. MacArthur and Lenin, two space ships making up a task force under the command of Vice Admiral Lavrenti Kutuzov, are sent to the Mote, a G2 type star in close proximity to Murchison's Eye, a very large red Giant. These two stars are the only ones between New Caledonia, the star of the nearest human settlements, and the Coal Sack Nebula. Soon after the novel starts, Blaine's ship, MacArthur, of which he has become commanding officer, makes contact with a manned Motie probe approaching New Caledonia; this is the first-ever contact between earth-humans and another intelligent species.

The two ships are ordered to go to the Mote, and charges them to find out enough knowledge about the alien beings to decide whether they are hostile or friendly. Aboard MacArthur is a large group of scientists who try to learn all they can about the Motie's behavior. Likewise, the Moties examine the crew of the spaceship, and one alien is assigned to each oftheimportant crewmembers and passengers. The novel deals with the voyage to the Mote, the contact with the aliens, and the return of Lenin to the empire with three Motie ambassadors along. These three must negotiate with an Imperial Commission about the conditions under which they will be permitted to join the Empire, which of course is both curious and suspicious of them.

The only criticisms I have against the book are that Captain Blaine, the central character, seems to drift into the background when his ship is evacuated. There was also a period --- during the Commission's meeting --- when the pressure characteristic of such an event was missing. There wasalso hardly any suspense during the period between the arrival of the aliens on New Scotland to the end of thenegotiations. However, the novel still held my interest. Gradually the two races understand each other sufficiently, but during the negotiations, the Moties are forced to admit the existance of a Warrior caste, bred for generations to make war. Finally, the Commissioners have to decide whether to let the aliens join the Empire (now that they know of the warriors) or to blast the aliens' planet and inhabited Trojan asteroids to burning slag. A difficult choice...I will leave it to the reader to find out how the problem is resolved and the choice made.

Reviewed by Sean Moraghan

Eloise and Eye of the Zodiac (Dumarest Saga No's. 12 & 13) by. E.C. Tubb (London; Arrow Books, 1978; 88 p. each)

Well, two more books of Tubb's Saga have now been released. In fact, both these books show somewhat increased craftsmanship --- the story lines are more believable, certainly, and the telling smoother than in the previous 11 or so books in the series.

Eloise concerns the arrival of Earl Dumarest into a small, isolated community on an essentially ice-covered world. The community is run by a computer which rather quickly takes a dislike to Our Hero. In a gout of flame, he escapes, nowhere nearer his goal of reattaining Earth. But it us a reasonably good story.

Eye of the Zodiac takes place on a couple of worlds. It concerns Earl's near capture and escape from the Cyclans, and the pursuit to a remote cultural

outpost where he is cornered. He escapes at the end, with a set of ancient coordinates for Earth.

There is actually nothing spectacularly brilliant about these two books. But they are worth reading for devotees of Dumarest as well as more general SF readers.

Reviewed by John McCarthy
Commissioned by P.J. Goode

Vermillion Sands and Low-Flying Aircraft by J.G. Ballard (Panther, St. Albans 1975, 66p. & Triad Panther, St. Albans 1978, 82½p. respectively)

In these days of the cheap (?) paperback book, produced and distributed in amounts that were a half a century ago something of a pleasant but unattainable fantasy of the publishing world, it has become more, and not as might be expected, less difficult to assess a writer's worth. For the ratio of people who engage in what very broadly could be called the study of literature to those who read casually (a distinction I'm not satisfied is very clear-cut, but serves the present argument very well) has been altered radically, and quite possibly entirely reversed. This means that the continuous and contemporary assessment of a writer and his works, and their impact on the rest of the field and on culture in general, was at least possible fifty years ago, even if it didn't always happen.

Nowadays, however, we have a situation where both groups have not only changed their relative, but also their absolute volumes. It has become wellnigh impossible to judge the influence of a writer or a book on the hordes of "casual" readers, but worse than that, it is no longer possible for all those people who read critically (and I do not hesitate to include SF fandom --- in the word's nonperjorative sense --- in this second category) to communicate with all, or at least a majority of his or her fellows. The field of literature has become divided in various compartments which too often are entirely shut off from each other, each with its own writers, magazines/reviews, critics, and sometimes even publishers. SF is just one example. This makes assessment of those writers who don't fit in particular compartment more difficult than it should be.

And now we introduce that man you have all been waiting for. Here he is, and give him a big hand: JIMMY BALLARD!!

Which breaks the pattern of this review.

Anyway, let's get down to business. For reasons outlined above, it is difficult to say just exactly what his readership's image of Ballard is. Most, however, would agree with Brain Ash when he writes (in that helpful but incomplete book of his, Who's Who in Science Fiction)"He is not regarded as an optimist." I think that this view is at least partially wrong, and there is a great deal of evidence in both collections under review here to support my opinion.

The earlier, Vermillion Sands, was originally published in 1973, and should still be available in its Panther edition. If not, it will probably be re-issuef by Triad Panther in the foreseeable future.

It is Ballard's most coherent story collection to date (as usual, I leave The Atrocity Exhibition out of consideration, because I'm not quite sure whether it is a novel, a collection of short stories, or something else). The nine stories, written over a number of years, some of them very early in Ballard's career (there are no acknowledgements or a source list in this collection, but three stroies have been collected in earlier volumes, including "Prima Belladona", which was his very first story to be published --- in Science Fantasy, the sister magazine of New Worlds, in 1956), are closely related, especially in the setting. Some of them are so alike that a less scrupulous writer or publisher would offer the collection as a "novel" (e.g. Tom Disch's 334). The final story, "The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista", reinforces the "novel"-impression.

The physical setting of the stories is in an almost no-time/no-place desert resort area which carries the name of Vermillion Sands, and the incidents described here happen during and shortly after a timeless, though temporally limited (10 years), period of high summer, with its attendant dangers of boredom and beach fatigue. Fortunately there was some excitement

as well, as related in these stories.

All are very readable, humourous (not belly-shaking, but certainly worth a smile here and a gniffle there) and inventive constructions. There are some delightful gadgets, such as singing statues, bio-fabrics (i.e. living clothes), and "psychotropic" houses, which all form a pattern of animation, which finds its opposite in "Studio 5, the Stars", where poetry has become automatic process, where poets are the operators of an IBM machine. Furthermore, Ballard excells at creating one of his favourite landscapes, the interminable beach, intensified here by the sand's red colouration, a landscape peopled with some pretty wierd characters. In a way the book is a restatement of his novel, The Drought.

This collection, however, is marred by one basic flaw, which makes the stories less interesting than they could have been. And that is this: certain stories have too much in common.

"The Screen Game", the third story, sets the pattern. It concerns a mysterious, secluded, priestess-like woman whose re-enactment of a dark tragedy some years in the past is witnessed by an outsider, who is the narrator. So far so good; but then, two stories on, we read what is essentially the same story: "Cry Hope, Cry Fury". Certainly, it is a retelling of "The Screen Game" in different terms, but plot and characters are difficult to distinguish from those of the earlier story. By the time I finished "Say Goodbye to the Wind", I couldn't help but feel some irritation at yet another variation on the theme, which feeling was reinforced by the appearance of several characters, e.g. the priestess and the Dutchman (not that I've got anything against Dutchmen), in some other stories, including the very first and otherwise excellent "The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D". The same plot, or at least a close variant, is used in the finale, "The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista", but this story has so much else going for it (it is bizarre and funny, melancholy, nostalgic, and dramatic) that I think it virtually saves the entire collection from failure. On its own, "...Stellavista" is one of the best Ballard short stories I've ever read.

There are some very good ones in Low-Flying Aircraft as well. This book was originally published in 1976, and has recently become available as a paperback. It is an interesting collection for various reasons, but perhaps most importantly because it gives us an insight in where Ballard is heading now that he is entering the third decade of his writing career. This is hindered somewhat by the fact that while the sources for the previously published stories are given, no dates are mentioned. Nevertheless, "The Ultimate City", an 80 page novella, and the short story "The Life and Death of God", are originals, so that some speculation is possible.

"The Ultimate City", which opens the book, can perhaps be described as a piece of future nostalgia. It is set in another of Ballard's favourite situations, a depopulated Earth. It is a magnificent description of various reactions to the demise of high-powered technology which we know today in the western world. The last surviving technocrat builds cathedrals of TV sets and radiator grilles, his daughter plants fields of flowers in the city's deserted avenues. The last traffic casualty, a young man called Oldsmobile, dreams of reviving powered air traffic. But the most ambitious of all, Halloway, an escapee from the sedate solar and wind and tide powered farming settlement outside the city, sets out to revive the metropolis itself. His success is partial and short-lived. But he finds new hope in the dream of powered flight. It is a beautiful story.

"The Ultimate City" is followed by eight shorter stories, most of which are light in tone. With the exception of "The Dead Astronaut", "My Dream of Flying to Wake Island" and "A Place and a Time to Die", they are light-hearted, often humourous, but never unBallardian snapshots of the world. All, with the exception of the "Beach Murders", are what I would not hesitate to call high-quality stroies.

Low Flying Aircraft is a varied collection. It contains three stories which one would associate with the pre-Atrocity Exhibition Ballard. Another five seem to be the product of a "new" Ballard, who is becoming increasingly optimistic (cf. Preface to Vermillion Sands). And the last story (?), the "Beach Murders", is a hangover from the Atrocity Exhibition. It is worth-

while noting that one story in this collection can hardly be considered to be SF, i.e. "My Dream of Flying...".

This means that the book is part recapitulation of Ballard's past career, part result of some sort of evolution which may well point to much more optimistic, but hopefully still uniquely Ballardian work. I'm looking foward to his next novel. One thing is certain: it won't be another Atrocity Exhibition, because by now it is obvious that Ballard considers that experimental style to be a failure. I would agree with him, and would add that this is no reason for sadness, rather the opposite. For no matter the outcome of the experiment, the result is positive; after all, the only way of finding out whether something works is doing it. Ballard did it, and so did a few others (e.g. M. John Harrison). And it worked insofar as that it does seem possible to tell a story, or more basically, convey information, in this fragmented, plotless style. The only problem was that many readers, including myself, hadn't the faintest clue what was going on. Apparently we're not yet ready for this kind of narration.

Reviewed by Jacob Struben

All My Sins Remembered by Joe Haldeman (London; Orbit, 1978; 93½ p.)

This is Joe Haldeman's fifth novel. This might come as a surprise to most readers, but I have recently acquired one called War Year, which was apparently his first. It is not SF, but a story of a combat engineer in Viet-Nam. In a way, it in some ways forshadows All My Sins Remembered, though, as much as do all his other earlier works. All My Sins... is, I think, his best and most scathing attack on the Establishment to date; but he has gradually come to reflect a more meritocratic outlook. Not that I mind...

The major character is a man called Otto McGavin, but to say this is rather misleading. The book is the story of his career as a Prime Operator for an ultra-secret organisation, the Terran Buredu of Investigation and Interference. In the course of his duties, he masquerades as very important people (with the help of surgery and Personality Overlays) in difficult places and situations, to enforce the terms of the Confederacion's Charter. Very interestingly, he does not always know who he really is, due to the strength of the PO, and even when he does he finds it difficult to avoid the mannerisms of tye impersonee (to the extent of committing rape, for instance).

Eventually, he is sold out and he retires. But the cumulative effects of the POs and the experiences they forced him to undergo continue to play on his mind; quite naturally, he is disturbed by his career's details.

The story is well constructed; the writing is well up to Haldeman's usual standard. Unfortunately, I have read some reviews of the book from the U.S. which have not been highly complementary. This I cannot in all honesty understand. True, I don't think that this book is as good as Mindbridge or the Forever War overall. But the critical part, the whole point of the book, is much better presented, and in an enjoyable manner. I can only say that I must believe that, like myself, the other reviewers were eagerly waiting for a new magnum opus. It certainly isn't that, I agree. But it is still one of the better books I have read this year.

Reviewed by John McCarthy

Yesterday's Children by David Gerrold (New York; Dell, 1972, 95¢)

This is a pre-Forever War attempt at downbeat military SF, by the author who collaborated with Larry Niven on the Flying Sorcerers. Unlike Haldeman's book, Yesterday's Children deals primarily with the naval aspect of interstellar conflict.

To a certain extent, the book is a startlingly accurate portrayal of what war at sea (or in space) can be like, and how the cramped, degrading life on a vessel on patrol can fragment any semblence of military propriety. While this book leans heavily on its technical backing for the plot, the personalities are, of course, the important part. But with two minor exceptions, the realism is fautless.

The background of the war in which the ship, the United Systems Starship

Roger Burlingame is participating is scantily described, and rightly so. It is a fact that persons fighting in mammoth campaigns for several years seldom worry about the morality or even the strategic considerations once they have decided that it is a war which they believe in fighting. We do know that the Roger Burlingame was a shoddy, nearly useless hulk before the exingencies of war forced her planned scrapping to be delayed. Off camera, as it were, we realise that it is mostly through the efforts of the First Officer (and usual viewpoint character) Jon Korie that the ship was restored to a vaguely operational status. When the story opens, it is 21½ months later. The ship has been patrolling in an isolated area where the enemy (never named or described) are seldom encountered.

One day before the start of the story, a bogie is detected and pursuit begins. The story actually starts when serious mechanical problems on board the Burlingame force it to drop the chase. But at this point, the fleeing enemy disappears, meaning it has gone sublight as well. In other words, it stopped running.

As I say, the technical details are all important, but both necessary and worth reading. The tensions are more increased by the inner conflicts of the crew than by the impending battle, and frankly, this is probably hard for most people to accept as realistic. For better or worse, I can assure you that in fact this viewpoint is highly accurate as well as being incisively presented: the ship's doctor says to Korie, "We never see the enemy, we never even get close to him. It's all done by buttons; all we see is a shimmer on the screen...we've denatured the war. We've taken all the horror out of it. All we have left is the killing, sterile and clean and quick...It's no wonder they hate you, Jon --- they've nobody else left to."

Another brief passage should give you an adequate idea of the crew's morale:

> "Hey, aren't you the guy who, when they start insulting your ship in bars, you start nodding and agreeing with them?"
> "Yeah, well --- I don't like to argue with my own shipmates."

The actual climax of the book is both perfectly expectable and completely unexpected. It really doesn't hang on a punch line, though...but you are struck by its rightness, nevertheless.

One other thing: the book is written in the present tense, which gives it a slightly cinematic tone. But it quite effective.

Oh, yeah --- the two weaknesses: the chain of command and the trappings of the military are only rudimentarily presented. More detail is needed, at least to someone like myself. In any case, the book is well recommended as it stands.

Reviewed by John McCarthy

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LIBRARY NEWS

P.J. Goode has asked me to tell you that all requests for books should be mailed to the Secretary until further notice. Also, the following additions should be made to your booklists:

ASIMOV (Isaac)	Tomorrow's Children
ANDERSON (Poul)	Satan's World
BESTER (Alfred)	Dark Side of Earth
DELANY (S. R.)	Tower of Toron
FARMER (P.J.)	Night of Light
HARRISON (Harry)	Skyfall
KUTTNER (Henry)	Fury
Amazing	May 1971
Astounding	May 1960
Analog/Astounding	September 1960

(Donated by P. O'Connell)↑

BAXTER (J)	Hermes Fall
TUBB (E.C.)	Eloise
	Eye of the Zodiac