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WELCOME TO THE PLEASURE DOME

Andy Sawyer

It's going to be hard.

It is hard. As I write, Joseph is organising his final issue of Paperback Inferno and I'm making plans for my debut. It's difficult to know how much to say on what I intend to do with the magazine because I am still in the midst of making contact with people. By the time you read this, I will be able to say more.

Of all the BSFA publications, Paperback Inferno has been under the control of its present editor the longest, and Joseph has quite naturally stamped his individuality on the magazine. Should this matter to an incoming editor? Maybe not, but a lot of Joseph's innovations -- the introduction of a more incisive critical approach, the occasional "overview" articles, his own passionate concern with aspects of our "real" future as well as the fictional futures we read about -- are facets of Paperback Inferno that I have been entirely in sympathy with and will do my best to maintain. There is, then, a standard to meet. Joseph Nicholas will be a hard act to follow.

But I'm already working on some ideas. I would like to institute a wider coverage of the SF paperback scene, so that I can bring to BSFA members information about as great a proportion of new SF and SF-related paperbacks as possible,

within as short a time as possible of their publication. I am currently writing to publishers who do not send us material (partly because their "conventional" SF list is minimal or non-existent) and trying to drum up support for the magazine. This will mean a change of emphasis within Inferno, towards shorter reviews of more books, but I would like to balance this by keeping longer features on various aspects of the SF book scene.

What am I looking for in the way of content for future issues? Do I have a "line" on things? It would be easy to say "no" to that last question; easy, but untrue. I believe in the importance of literature and criticism. That sounds portentious enough, but it's no more than a way of saying that if we engage in an activity we must take it seriously. I don't think it enough to let inferior work go by without a mention, although we can get too bogged down in long hatchet jobs on some substandard potboiler. It's harder, but perhaps more rewarding, to recreate the excitement of reading something which thoroughly engages our emotions; even harder, I think, to really establish why some relatively ordinary but excellently-crafted genre novel can move us. SF has a lot of these last. Perhaps that's really a condemnation of the genre, that SF may claim to be a literature of far-reaching vision but, when it comes down to it, it provides superb material for filling in long train journeys? But there's more to it than that, I think, and again I'll defer discussion for the future, pausing only to point out that our choice of what we do read on these long train journeys is more important than I may seem to have suggested.

Some people would question the very idea of a magazine devoted to paperbacks. After all, the difference between a paperback edition and a hardcover one is one of form: the content remains the same. True, the convention is for books to be first published in hardback, and paperbacks are often affordable editions of what people have already read (from libraries) or have heard about from reviews. But, equally true, this has never been a reliable convention in SF, and it is frequently the case that a paperback edition is the first. Perhaps the point is what I said two sentences ago: paperbacks are affordable (though no longer cheap!) and for most people the paperback edition is the one which they are going to buy. I want, therefore, to cover as thoroughly as possible both new editions and reprints, and to try to cover the field critically. As well as books coming into print, there are books going out of print and books which deserve to be reprinted. Perhaps we could have some opinions on this? I have...I'll share them with you later.

By this time, I hope to have contacted all the present reviewers (although the state of my desk at the moment makes me wonder if I'll ever get it cleared!). If I haven't contacted you, write and complain. But, right now, can I ask for anyone who wants to join the Paperback Inferno team to drop me a line, preferably with a sample review (around 300 words) of a recent SF paperback. I'll then let you know more about the kind of format I'm considering for the magazine. I am also looking for people who are able to contribute irregular columns on current trends in the SF paperback scene.

There's little more that I can usefully say at this point. I have very firm ideas about what I would like to achieve with Paperback Inferno, but these need to ferment for a while. For the interim, let me thank Joseph for the help and advice that he is currently giving me in handling with the transition; it would be going far less smoothly were it not for him. See you in August!

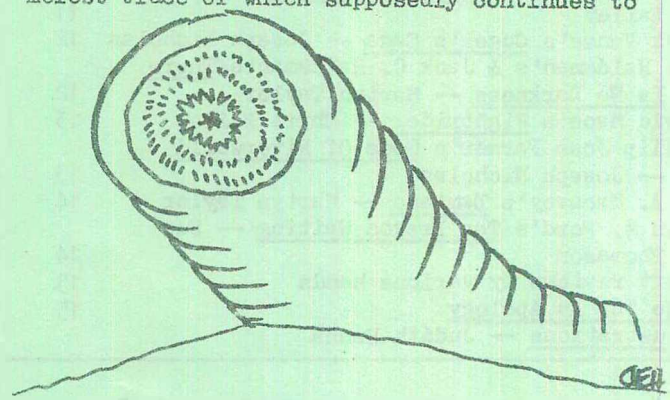
REVIEWS

Frank Herbert — HERETICS OF DUNE (New English Library, 508pp, £2·95)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

And on, and on; when will the "Dune" series ever reach its (un?)natural conclusion? Heretics Of Dune is the fifth; Chapter House Dune was recently published in hardback; and a seventh novel is even now in the works — although someone who's read it tells me that Chapter House Dune contains sufficient clues to indicate that the seventh will be the last (and in which gholas of just about everyone will feature, to boot). And about bloody time, since the whole thing is so self-contradictory as to cause one to wonder why it hasn't long ago collapsed beneath the weight of its own inconsistencies. Herbert has stated that he conceived of Dune itself as a warning to people not to follow a charismatic leader or believe in a "Golden Path" along which human destiny could be directed -- yet what has each and every novel concerned itself with but charismatic leaders, Golden Paths and attempts to direct human destiny by rival groups and clans established for just that purpose? Perhaps recognising this contradiction, Herbert has one of the Bene Gesserit Reverend Mothers in Heretics Of Dune caution her order against producing another kwisatz haderach or Tyrant (Leto II, the God-Emperor); but this promptly raises the question of why, if this were so, they would bother both to maintain such scrupulous breeding records and to worry about the "wild genes" of those returning from the Scattering of a few millenia earlier — thus heightening rather than easing the contradiction.

Not that the hardened "Dune" fan is likely to object overmuch to this -- if they can tolerate the hopelessly unworkable manner in which its political, economic and social universe is constructed then they can tolerate anything — but they might begin to wonder what point there is to Heretics Of Dune. Such point as there is comes right at the end, with the destruction of the planet Rakis itself — held to be necessary to destroy the sandworms and thus the last residues of the God-Emperor's consciousness, the merest trace of which supposedly continues to



psychologically oppress humanity — but if that's so then why do we have to wade through five hundred pages of tedious and irrelevant sub-plots about a Duncan Idaho ghola, a girl called Sheeana who can control the worms, and a Scattering-created religious cult called the Honoured Matres (and a good half of which is never graced with a halfway rational explanation)? If the Bene Gesserit wanted to destroy Rakis, why didn't they just hire someone to do it instead of indulging in vast amounts of time-consuming wheels-within-wheels scheming to drive someone to do it? (Much the same digressions and over-elaborations, you'll recall, filled the 500-odd pages that led up to the assassination of Leto II in God-Emperor Of Dune — another supposedly necessary move, which sparked the Scattering and thus the irrevocable deviation of humanity from the Golden Path and any attempts to reimpose one.) Is it that Herbert knows that his basic theme is in itself insufficient for a full-length novel and that it therefore has to be padded out by every means avilable to make it seem more substantial than it is? It certainly reads that way. (Would someone other than Frank Herbert be allowed to get away with it? I doubt it.) Stripped of its subplots and its endless philosophical digressions, Heretics Of Dune probably wouldn't even make a decent short story. And if its theology were to take more than a paragraph to sum up...

It's the manufactured appearance of depth with which the "Dune" series is clogged that really irritates — acres and acres of pseudo-philocophical guff that strives to invest the characters' every little jerk and twitch with the most portentous possible meaning yet which ends up transforming everything into a farce. (Indeed, the suspicion with which everyone views everyone else causes one to wonder — so paranoid are they — how they can ever summon up the courage to get out of bed in the morning.) The exaggerated stresses, the meaningless insights, the interminable religious quotations...pah. It might be intended as a meditation on the meaning of power, but is in truth little better than confusion and incomprehensibility.

Just like the writing. Herbert's biggest flaw, one that recurs in book after book and which he seems not even to be aware of, is his failure to pick a consistent viewpoint character for each scene and then stick to that character throughout the scene. Instead, his viewpoint leaps about, switching not only between paragraphs but even in the middle of paragraphs, presenting the reader with such a jumble of thoughts and feelings that at some points it's impossible to work out what's going on. (Come to that, I'm half convinced that Herbert can't actually visualise his scenes, and is subconsciously driven to employ all the viewpoint switches he does in order to get some kind of fix on what he's writing about.) This confusion is not helped by the constant — and usually unsignalled — flashbacks in which everyone indulges at every other moment, and often in an attempt to avoid having to describe something as it happens — Herbert's attempt, I don't doubt, since you can't engage in philosophical analysis of someone's actions except in retrospect (and no matter that it would be easier just to describe the action and let the analysis suggest itself from the tone and approach of the descriptions). In other words: most of the action tends to occur offstage and is talked about afterwards; and Heretics Of Dune is in consequence terribly static. And hence terribly boring.

Maybe the seventh novel will be the last, and the "Dune" series will at last stumble to a close. At least, it had better, because I can't see the "Dune" fans putting up with the increasing tedium of the series for much longer.

James Branch Cabell — JURGEN (Unicorn, 288pp, £2·95)
R. A. MacAvoy — RAPHAEL (Bantam, 230pp, $2·75)
Tanith Lee — THE CASTLE OF DARK (Unicorn, 180pp, £2·95)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

I began by thinking it unfair in the extreme to judge two modern, averagely-good fantasists by the standard of James Branch Cabell. Using a sledgehammer, as it were, to crack a couple of old (or, rather, new) chestnuts. Then someone to whom I had strongly recommended Jurgen — actually, I shook him warmly by the throat and commanded "read this!" — took a look at the first page and muttered something to the effect of "I don't like this same old mock-mediaeval style". Then I began to think about how bad coinage drives out the good; how stereotyped use of archetypes debases the original; and how the boom in fantasy publishing affects the readers' perceptions.

Jurgen, by the way, begins like this:

> "It is a tale which they narrate in Poictesme, saying: In the old days lived a pawnbroker named Jurgen; but what his wife called him was very often much worse than that. She was a high-spirited woman, with no especial gift for silence. Her name, they say, was Adelais, but people by ordinary called her Dame Lisa."

Well, I thought, maybe. Maybe there is something in that "mock-mediaeval" opinion, although certainly it was never something that occurred to me when I read Cabell before. True, Jurgen is set in the Middle Ages of mythical Poictesme, but... So I read on for a few paragraphs, to where the middle-aged pawnbroker hears a monk cursing the devil, and promptly devises many reasons for not thinking too hasrshly of that personage:

> "Then Jurgen passed the Cistercian Abbey, and was approaching Bellegarde, when he met a black gentleman, who saluted him and said:
> "'Thanks, Jurgen, for your good word.'
> "'Who are you, and why do you thank me?' asks Jurgen.
> "'My name is no great matter. But you have a kind heart, Jurgen. May your life be free from care!'
> "'Save us from hurt and harm, friend, but I am already married.'
> "'Eh, sirs, and a fine clever poet like you!'
> "'Yet it is a long while now since I was a practising poet.'
> "...'This is very sad. I am afraid your wife does not quite understand you, Jurgen.'
> "'Sir,' says Jurgen, astounded, 'do you read people's inmost thoughts?'"

Which may go some way towards showing that, if there is a fake "mock-mediaeval" style, there is also the genuine article. A genuine mock-style?

That's a suitably ironic designation for Jurgen. You either like Cabell's humour greatly, or else it leaves you cold; and I appreciate it rather differently than I did at 17 (when the last widely-available English paperback came out). A "male chauvinist" tone leaps off the page — but then I think of the end of Jurgen, and of Cabell's humour in general. If it is true that he is satiric about women, he is no less satiric about men; more so, perhaps, because he knows them better. I doubt if there is anything in the world which Cabell treats with a becoming and proper solemnity — which is another very good reason for reading him. The "mock-mediaeval" Cabell is a subversive.

And then I though of Jurgen sharing shelf-space with the most recent crop of sub-Tolkien, Dragons & Dimwits series. (I thought of Jurgen next to Filing-Clerks Of Gor, and this is where your critic's mind finally boggled.) How is anyone going to tell the difference?

Certainly not by the Unicorn paperback's cover, which features the standard bare-chested swordsman; and a reclining female, who appears to be doing something that would give the original prosecutor of Jurgen purple apoplexy.

Prosecutor? Ah, yes. Back in the 1920s, when it was first published, Jurgen was prosecuted for obscenity by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. (If that doesn't make them buy it, nothing will...) There is a fair amount of Freudian symbolism in the novel, it's true, and close attention to the prose style will make obvious to what it is that certain metaphors refer. Obscenity being in the morality of the beholder, however, the reader may decide for him- or herself whether Cabell justifiably won his case.

Symbolism and allusion bring me on to another point, which is that I am not nearly erudite enough to discuss Jurgen — though that isn't going to stop me trying. Jurgen is a multi-levelled novel. There is the plain story of what happens to Jurgen when his youth is renewed, and he travels through the kingdoms of the world with the mind of a middle-aged man in a young man's body. And then there are those kingdoms: Cocaigne, Philistia and Pseudopolis, Arthur's Britain, Hell and Heaven, and the domain of Koshchei (who made things as they are), in which Jurgen becomes acquainted with — well, let his godmother say:

> "'There was a Yolande and a Guenevere' — the voice of Mother Serada appeared to read from a memorandum — 'and a Sylvia, who was your own step-grandmother, and a Stella, who was a yogini, whatever that may be; and a Phyllis and a Dolores, who were the queens of Hell and Philistia severally. Moreover, you visited the Queen of Pseudopolis in circumstances which could not but have been unfavourably viewed by her husband...'"

Mythology, literature, religion and poetry; allegory and anagrams, elliptical allusions and concealed verse — I don't claim to understand all the references in Cabell's works, though I see more each time I come back to them. Literature-as-palimpsest can be irritating, literature that has to be decoded can be downright annoying; the advantage of Jurgen is that it can be read as story or as intricate and delightful puzzle, according to individual taste.

Jurgen is a powerful novel — powerful enough that Robert Heinlein found it expedient to rip off characters and plot in his recent Job: A Comedy Of Justice, without bothering to acknowledge Cabell — but I still wonder how a bookshelf browser would pick it out. The old standby of reading the first few pages, I suppose. One can try something similar with the other two authors here.

MacAvoy's Raphael begins like this:

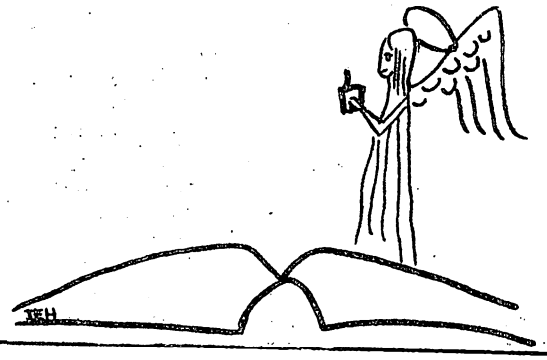
> "Two young people sat quite comfortably on the grassy bank of a stream, leaning against a willow whose ancient body seemed designed for leaning. Plangent water reflected the little green leaves of the willow, including even the tiny round crystals of dew which hung from the leaves, with only artistic distortion, while below the line of the water cool fish brooded, wearing coats of bright enamelwork."

Apart from a slight case of adjectivitis, and a doubt in my mind about whether plangent water can give a reflection (depends how plangent, I suppose), that's competent writing. A static picture, but there are reasons for that: firstly, the scene is Heaven, and secondly, it features two dead heroes from the previous novels in the trilogy, one of whom used to be a lute-player and the other a dog.

It's that deadpan presentation of the unusual that gives Raphael its quirky charm. Scenes are as likely to be set in Hell or Heaven as in the fourteenth century Italy of the main narrative. Raphael is the loose end of a trilogy: Damiano and Damiano's Lute dealt with a young lute-playing male witch, whose guardian angel Raphael gave him music lessons. Raphael has the angel trapped in a mortal body, amnesiac, among the slavers of North Africa and Moorish Spain, while Damiano's erstwhile girlfriend Saara, a sorceress, tries to rescue him.

Raphael is very nearly a good novel, as MacAvoy's earlier Tea With The Black Dragon was very nearly a good novel, and it's the same thing that handicaps both of them: a kind of disney-sanitisation. It affects the historical setting, which would like to aspire to the cesspits and Black Death variety but never quite makes it. More subtly, it affects the characters, who are human and fallible and just that little bit too small.

Moving on: Tanith Lee writes in a wide variety of modes, and The Castle Of Dark isn't



the best example of her fantasy. What doesn't come off here does splendidly in, say, Companions On The Road. The Castle Of Dark is part-Celtic, part-Gothic, and wholly conventional. The Dark heroine lives nocturnally in a gormenghastly castle; the Fair hero is a minstrel with a harp of bone...

As an introduction to Fantasy for the unfamiliar reader, The Castle Of Dark could be quite useful; others will have heard this story ad infinitum over the past ten or fifteen years. (And could we please have a moratorium on the use of the word "dark" in fantasy titles?) This is how the story starts:

> "Half an hour before, the sun had set, and the iron bell had rung in the bell-tower. Now, the girl who only got up at dusk, walked into the Hall of the Castle.
>
> "She was slight, but not tall. Her dark hair was so long it fell over her body like a sooty mantle. Eventually it reached the floor and spread out there, so that it swept up the dust behind her as she walked. She was extremely pale; though her eyes were very green."

Read that carefully: "though" her eyes were very green? Is there a precise correlation between skin and eye colour; can pale people not have green eyes? (Remember to look at the next one you meet.) Okay, so I'm picking small nits. What the sentence intends, I think, is contrast between pallor of skin and definite colour of eyes — but that is not what the sentence does. It's a cloud no larger than a man's hand, indicating a Gothic storm of sloppy construction.

Readers familiar with the Celtic and Gothic modes may be irritated by The Castle Of Dark, primarily because there is nothing new here. But we're talking about fantasy — can there be new archetypes? Is that not a contradiction in terms?

Consider fiction as a whole. I have paid such close attention to the text here because language is thought. There are only words on a page. In one sense, there is no transparent prose: the reader can't see "beyond" the language to the story. There is only text. We cannot conceptualise (or so the structuralists would have us believe) except in language — and numbers, I suppose, if one is a mathematician.

In another sense, everything is "beyond" words: to reproduce accurately, in words, the experience of living is impossible. It's on the interface of these two impossibilities that fiction works.

Fantasy has an advantage here. What cannot be put in words can't be thought — but that doesn't mean it can't be felt. Symbol and archetype are the ways in which fantasy can represent non-verbal experience. All text is in some ways a "translation" from a language that cannot be spoken, only experienced. Which brings me to the paradox of "new archetypes".

Familiarity diminishes archetypes, to a greater or lesser degree. Because individuals' experience differs, because the experience of cultures differs over a period of time, then all literature is being continually rewritten. To borrow a term from Chomsky's studies of grammar, writers must reinterpret the "deep structure" of human archetypes in new forms of "surface structure", i.e. fictions.

Things being what they are, I'm inclined to believe that the deep structure of the psyche changes too — much more slowly, but perceptibly.

By such a rule of thumb definition (which you may or may not find useful), cliches and stereotypes are those surface-representations of archetypes with which we are over-familiar. I don't think The Castle Of Dark does more than shuffle familiar shapes in familiar configurations. Raphael does more; Jurgen does much more.

And someone out there is now saying to him- or herself, But shouldn't one look on these fantasies as entertainment, for Chrissakes? True, and I do: entertainment being directly proportional to the text's — what? Meaning, perhaps; though not morality, archetypes are amoral. Depth? Maybe just the possession of some kind of a "deep structure".

Raphael has one. Something to do with Divine Providence, and also human friendship. I don't mean an "author's message"; as Sam Goldwyn said, If you want to send a message, use Western Union. But there should be some good reason for a book's existing, other than to fill a gap in someone's publishing schedule.

And Cabell? What is within Jurgen is bitter and beautiful and deep, because Jurgen is trying on all the fictions by which man maintains his life -- chivalry and courage, romantic love, religion, lust, nostalgia and compromise.

"'For you and I are going a queer way, in search of justice, over the grave of a dream and through the malice of time,'" as the Centaur says. It may seem strange that satire should strike that chill, melancholy note. To say that there are only illusions, necessary illusions to combat the meaninglessness of existence would, I suppose, be a valid (if adolescent) kind of nihilism. Cabell refines it a stage further. The cream of the jest — to appropriate another title — is that even these beautiful illusions are, not unattainable, but when attained so thoroughly unsatisfactory. And most men, as Jurgen finds, do not in the least want justice, but that other thing that phraseology sometimes couples with it; and there's none to be had.

What will the lovers of feudal aristocracy, sanitised mediaeval slums and Disneyfied picaresque make of Caebll's bleak vision, which is the blackest of all black humour? Maybe the paperback should feature one of those "In The Great Tradition Of..." blurbs — I can see it now:

"If You Loved Gulliver's Travels And A Modest Proposal, You'll Love This..."

Richard Ford — MELVAIG'S VISION (Granada, 446pp, £2·50)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This will be a long review of a novel I didn't like much. People who are reading the review in order to find out whether the novel is worth buying can stop here: no. However, it's a good example of something I very much want to talk about.

The argument. Here are four excerpts from other people's writing: two from fantasy novels, and two from critical essays on fantasy. People who like doing their own "compare and contrast" thinking can read the excerpts and draw their own conclusions.

"High up on a hill, behind the twisted trunk of an ancient oak, stood Melvaig. The tree pro-

tected him from the full heat of the sun and he was grateful for the cool shadows it threw upon the ground. Around him the purple heather and the rough mountain grasses baked in the merciless glare and he could smell the bare peaty earth as it roasted and cracked in the heat. He stretched out his hand to lean against the sheer rock face at his side, spreading his fingers so that they gripped the little crevices reassuringly, but after a few seconds it became too hot and he snatched it away.

"Suddenly a joyful shout shattered the intense stillness. He looked down through the shimmering haze into the valley beneath him and saw Morven, her long hair tumbling about her shoulders as she chased Bracca along the banks of a stream. It had been his little boy who had shouted and now Morven looked up anxiously to where Melvaig stood. He raised his hand to signal that everything was clear and as she waved back he could imagine her sigh of relief. They should not really have been this far from the village, but unlike the others they yearned for privacy and the joys of their own company."

(Richard Ford, Melvaig's Vision)

"The light grew clearer as they went forward. Suddenly they came out of the trees and found themselves in a wide circular space. There was sky above them, blue and clear to their surprise, for down under the Forest-roof they had not been able to see the rising morning and the lifting of the mist. The sun was not, however, high enough yet to shine down into the clearing, though its light was on the tree-tops. The leaves were all thicker and greener about the edges of the glade, enclosing it with an almost solid wall. No tree grew there, only rough grass and many tall plants: stalky and faded hemlocks and wood-parsley, fire-weed seeding into fluffy ashes, and rampant nettles and thistles. A dreary place: but it seemed a charming and cheerful garden after the close Forest."

(J. R. R. Tolkien, The Fellowship Of The Ring)

"Most epics are in straightforward language, whether prose or verse. They retain the directness of their oral forebears. Homer's metaphors may be extended, but they are neither static nor ornate. The Song Of Roland has four thousand lines, containing one simile and no metaphors. The Mabinogion and the Norse sagas are as plain-spoken as they could well be. Clarity and simplicity are permanent virtues in a narrative. Nothing highfalutin is needed. A plain language is the noblest of all.

"It is also the most difficult.

"Tolkien writes a plain, clear English. Its outstanding virtue is its flexibility, its variety. It ranges easily from the commonplace to the stately, and can slide into metrical poetry, as in the Tom Bombadil episode, without the careless reader's even noticing. Tolkien's vocabulary is not striking; he has no ichor; everything is direct, concrete, and simple.

"Now the kind of writing I am attacking, the Poughkeepsie style of fantasy, is also written in a plain and apparently direct prose. Does that make it equal to Tolkien's Alas, no. It is a fake plainness. It is not really simple, but flat. It is not really clear, but inexact. Its directness is specious. Its sensory cues -- extremely important in imaginative writing -- are vague and generalised; the rocks, the wind, the trees are not there, and not felt; the scenery is cardboard, or plastic. The tone as a whole is profoundly inappropriate to the subject.

"To what then is it appropriate? To journalism. It is journalistic prose. In journalism, the suppression of the author's personality and sensibility is deliberate. The goal is an impression of objectivity. The whole thing is meant to be written fast, and read faster. This technique is right for a newspaper. It is wrong for a novel, and dead wrong for a fantasy. A language intended to express the immediate and the trivial is applied to the remote and the elemental. The result, of course, is a mess.

(...)

"Many readers, many critics, and most editors speak of style as if it were an ingredient of a book, like sugar in a cake, or something added onto the book, like the frosting on the cake. The style, of course, is the book. If you remove the cake, all you have left is a recipe. If you remove the style, all you have left is a synopsis of the plot.

"This is partly true of history; largely true of fiction, and absolutely true of fantasy."

(Ursula LeGuin, "From Elfland To Poughkeepsie", in The Language Of The Night)

"My position is this: The Lord Of The Rings is a magnificent performance, full of charm, excitement and affection, but it is not -- at least as I am here using the term -- literature.

"...Consider simple description. For most purposes Tolkien's prose is brilliantly adequate, straightforward, just starched enough to have body, resilient enough to catch the echoes of speech, not a supercharged instrument, nor one with great range, but very competent.

"...But other sorts of description strain Tolkien's powers. When Bilbo disappears, 'he jumped over a low place in the hedge at the bottom, and took to the meadows, passing into the night like a rustle of wind in the grass'. Bilbo is to disappear quickly, the language is apt. But is it anything more than that? There is, first of all, virtually no sense impression of the hedge; it is generalised, as is the 'low place' through which Bilbo jumps. But more important, to have Bilbo 'passing into the night

like a rustle of wind in the grass' is to write something perilously close to stereotyped prose. In context this is not a cliche, nor is it notable for anything more than the bare transmission of information: Bilbo left, fast, quietly. I would argue that the language of literature must do more than this, must transmit information as well as sense impression of some sort, and to effect this the language must be both more deeply felt and more deeply worked.

"...Tolkien's nature descriptions are frequently somewhat overwrought... It is as though Tolkien in person, not Tolkien as author, feels both more than he can express and things which are irrelevant to his tale. 'In the morning Frodo woke refreshed. He was lying in a bower made by a living tree with branches laced and drooping to the ground; his bed was of fern and grass, deep and soft and strangely fragrant. The sun was shining through the fluttering leaves, which were still green upon the tree. He jumped up and went out.' Frodo has been with elves the night before; the elves are wood people; when Frodo wakes he quite properly wakes 'refreshed' -- the word is totally generalised, a state, an idea, rather than a specifically felt and explored sensory reality -- and he quite properly wakes in bright woody greenness. This is however two-dimensional surface description: whatever Tolkien may have imagined he was conveying by 'fluttering leaves', for example, it seems plain that he in fact conveys nothing more than that the leaves were in motion. There is no further depth to the words."

(Burton Raffel, The Lord Of The Rings As Literature)

So what can I say about Melvaig's Vision? That I found it unreadable? That I hate slamming books just for the sake of it but honestly couldn't think of anything nice to say about it? I feel very guilty about this. Melvaig's Vision may be uninteresting hackwork, but for all I know the author may have put his heart and soul into it.

The earlier quote from the novel was of its opening two paragraphs. My first impression was that the language had no flow, and that the description was un-attention-grabbing and inconsistent. But is the style really so much worse than that of Tolkien, who is held up as a model of stylistic excellence by no less an authority than Ursula LeGuin? The quote from Tolkien which follows is a representative sample of his writing (I picked the first passage I could find in which someone was standing under a tree) to compare with the Melvaig's Vision paragraphs. Looking at the two side-by-side, Melvaig's Vision seems less bad than I had thought, but still awkward.

So why did I hate it so? Perhaps it was not a fault of the style, but of the plotting, the incident. An interesting plot can carry me quite cheerfully through reams of awkward prose. Well; there's this bloke Melvaig, and his wife and kid. His wife is kidnapped by raiders from Xtlan (any suggestions as to how this is supposed to be pronounced will be most gratefully received) who destroy his village and kill or kidnap most of his friends. A village elder entrusts him with the care of The Book, rumoured to contain plans for the Good Life. Alas that no one in the village can read. With his young son, Melvaig sets off to rescue his wife. He seems a very incompetent sort of hero, having little idea of how to prepare for travel through uninhabited, hostile country. Also, I can't help feeling that if I'd been going off to rescue my spouse, I wouldn't have taken a child of about four with me.

Melvaig and son are captured by baddies, who have also captured a reader to take to Xtlan, described as a pointlessly and nonspecifically ultimately evil place and/or person. (Oh no, not an Allegory?) The reader reads The Book, which turns out to be Richard Ford's previous bestseller, Quest For The Faradawn. At this point (about page 113) I gave up in disgust.

But why am I disgusted by Ford's action in plugging his previous novel when I'm not at all disgusted by Tolkien's creation of a literature within a literature? Because Tolkien's world is more self-consistent? Because Tolkien didn't have any possible commercial motive for doing so? Because Tolkien's work strikes me as more like real Great Literature, more worthy to be used as a model by his subcreated culture?

And I feel that I ought to at least approve of Ford's philosophy. He portrays himself as a member of the Nature-Loving (flowering redcurrant bush) school of writing. But I still disapprove...

There are two differences between Tolkien and Ford that I can identify fairly easily, leaving aside the problem of style. (You can make up your own minds about that one, having read LeGuin on how good Tolkien is and Raffel on how bad he is.) Firstly, Tolkien has a high moral tone. A Tolkien character would not leave the elders of his village to die because he wanted to go off and rescue his wife. A Tolkien character would not willingly take a young child off to an unknown destination on an arduous and certainly dangerous, possibly fruitless journey. A Tolkien hero would resist evil at all costs, at almost any personal price. I am forced to conclude that I don't like my heroes wet, I don't like my fantasy realistic. I want to be given an ideal to live up to, and ideals are just that: ideal. They don't suffer from ordinary, average human frailty.

Secondly, there is the completely unproveable conviction I have about the amount of creative imagination that has gone into each book, what someone (Sir Philip Sidney, I think?) called "the foreconceit". Tolkien actually sees the trees, the grass, the sky, as precious; the amount of value he has invested Middle-Earth with is enormous. People notice things: what kind of wildflowers are growing in the grass, the sound of water, the scent on the wind.

I find myself completely unable to visualise the scene at the beginning of Melvaig's Vision. The ground is simultaneously bare and peaty and covered with grass and heather. Melvaig is standing in the shade of a tree, yet without moving he touches a sheer rock face too hot for comfort. He is standing behind the tree, but has a clear view of his wife and child in the valley below, and can obviously be seen by them. Also, this is not too unpleasant a desert, barren land if it has oak trees and grass and heather; it sounds rather like British upland on a hot summer day, but it isn't supposed to, surely?

So my unproveable conviction is that Melvaig's Vision is not richly imagined. That, in fact, the author hasn't spent much time in Melvaig's world, hasn't tried to immerse himself in it, has only noticed the bare minimum of detail necessary to hang the plot on. That he

doesn't love it, in fact, as one can tell that the world of (say) Golden Witchbreed has been discovered through love. I may be reading Richard Ford completely wrongly about this. He may be completely earnest and merely unable to write convincingly about his vision (at least as far as I'm concerned).

I do dislike disliking novels as much as I disliked this one. What more is there to say? I'd be most interested to hear my views refuted; is there anyone out there who really liked Melvaig's Vision and could write and tell me why?

John Varley — MILLENIUM (Sphere, 216pp, £1·95)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

As an archetypal hero figure for our times, the air crash investigator takes a lot of beating. He is an expert, and experts deserve our respect, but his field of expertise presents him with the less attractive side of human life — specifically, demolished bodies and shattered aircraft (the aircraft being the quintessential symbol of our era). He lives under pressure, a pressure which alienates him from his fellow human beings and from the bureaucracy he serves because, as we all know, each and every air crash is the direct result of bureaucratic bungling. Like the old sea captain or transcontinental railroad builder (or whatever), he's a hard-drinking, hard-working sonofabitch who has graduated summa cum laude from the University of Hard Knocks and takes no shit from no one, no sir. In the film he's played by Clint Eastwood. Back in the days of our youth the hero might have been an astronaut, but now we know that not even the rightest of right stuff can get the presidential seal out of the astronaut's pack in a straight race with Goofy we settle for a cynical, world-damaged garbage man.

As a hero, Bill Smith is a photofit of men we've met before rather than a real live person, but he passes muster as a literary confection, serving his purpose in a story which almost runs on the long-established rails of the genre, and until Varley takes us outside the standard thriller tropes Millenium functions well. The early descriptions of the crash and the preparations for the investigation are, at worst, adequately presented and are as finely paced as we can expect from such a work. Had he gone on to explain everything in a "realistic" manner I guess the novel would have turned out a perfectly acceptable example of the contemporary technological thriller. But of course Varley is one of the new school of SF authors, whose novels have added sex, loving violence and no expletives deleted. His novels must have a central core of imaginative invention.

Millenium has just such a core. Our diseased descendants are using a time machine to come backwards and purloin those of us who would die in air crashes which are 100 percent fatal before we do actually die. As an imaginative invention, this is not so dusty, and while Varley manages to integrate into the story of the investigation the leaving of a future artefact at the scene of one such rescue and the subsequent recovery missions what he never does explain is just why they should go to all the trouble. What possible use can thousands of ordinary twentieth century souls be to creatures at the end of time?

To say that the ending of Millenium is unsatisfactory is to put it at its mildest, and the disappointment is all the deeper because the evidence of the rest of the novel is more than sufficient to suggest that Varley could have done a lot better with just a bit more effort. The sign of a really good SF author is that when the concepts become more opaque the writing becomes more lucid. Just when the reader needs Varley to be writing at his best, he is slapdash and hurried. Pain and misery, violence and suffering seem to interest him; the dawn of a new day for humanity is something to be thrown away, unregarded.

As I say, this is by no means an entirely bad novel. In many ways it is strongly written and at least as gripping as anything else in its line. I did, however, become rather annoyed with the far future heroine who expresses herself in perfect 1983 American hip. Fashion, especially verbal fashion, is the most fragile of edifices, and an author who doesn't realise this either doesn't know their job or is being lazy. I am, however, almost prepared to forgive Varley this for just one sentence. The heroine (whose insides are so rotted she cannot even make love without a cigarette, a pastiche of the post-coital fag beloved of so many TV shows as well as echoing very clearly Woody Allen's Sleeper), out to impress the hero, has purloined a Ferrari from outside a restaurant. She cannot drive, but: "I scanned the controls. They seemed simple and straightforward, though I thought radar might have been helpful". If I believed this to be an example of Varley's conscious humour, I might think better of this novel.

You could — and probably will — read many novels worse than this, but there is an air of failure about Millenium. The elements of the different genres do not cohere, and I am positive John Varley can do very much better.

Piers Anthony — CREWEL LYE (Orbit, 309pp, £2·50)

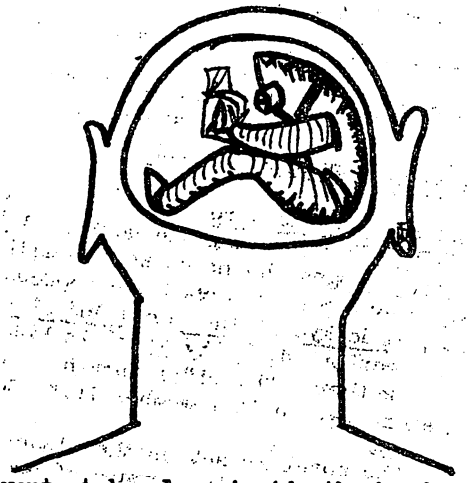
Isaac Asimov — THE ROBOTS OF DAWN (Granada, 477pp, £2·50)

Reviewed by Edward James

These two novels do have some things in common. To start with, both are selling an enormous number of copies, both here and in the USA. The April 1985 issue of Locus had Crewel Lye top of all three of its different best-selling US paperback lists. Despite this, or partly because of it, both will be condemned by all right- (or wrong-) minded critics. Anthony knows it: talking about the "Xanth" series (of which this is volume 8) is an author's note at the back of the novel he says: "Xanth has been quite successful as a series, making all the bestseller lists. It seems that ninety-nine percent of its readers love it; the other one percent review it, accusing me of things like revelling in sexism and execrable puns. However, Patchin Review did say: 'Hostility from serious reviewers to Anthony is out of all proportion; perhaps it stems more from jealousy than lit crit'". I can't find in what context Patchin Review, alias Charles Platt, actually said that, but I rather agree. Some early Piers Anthony was highly imaginative, and I thought the "Kirlian Quest" series much more interesting

and important than most critics seem to have done.

In this case, however, maybe the critics are right. It struck me, while reading them in the same week, that what both the Anthony and the Asimov have in common is what Asimov calls the "cerebral" approach to writing. He will probably have more to say about this in a future issue of Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine, which will feature his article "The Little Tin God Of Characterisation". If SF is the literature of ideas, then why not approach it as a set of ideas? Why bother with realism, characterisation, plausibility, even (in Asimov's case) action or suspense? Both these novels read, in their very different ways, as "cerebral" novels.



The events take place inside the heads of the authors; the novels never at any point give the impression that the authors are describing events that are real to them, events that might conceivably have happened or be about to happen in some other corner of the universe. Anthony's characters live primarily for the puns, most of which are fairly excruciating, some of which are very funny, and one or two of which were too obscure for me. (I confess that I had to look up "crewel" and "lye" in the dictionary. The OED says that lye is "alkalised water made by the lixiviation of vegetable ashes," if you're interested. So now you know. And worth it for "lixiviation", a marvellous word.) There is also problem-solving in the Anthony novel, which probably appeals considerably to that odd breed of fantasy gamers. The problem-solving in the Asimov is rather more conventional. The Robots Of Dawn is of course the sequel to The Caves Of Steel (1954) and The Naked Sun (1957) -- in my opinion still the best of Asimov's novels -- and like them it is in the form of a whodunnit. (A form in which reality and characterisation never played a large role.) Asimov's characteres live largely for the sake of illuminating yet another facet of the Three Laws of Robotics, and for plugging yet another gap in Asimov's oeuvre between the universe of Lije Baley and Daneel Olivaw and that of Hari Seldon. (At one point Daneel Olivaw even starts discussing the legendary Susan Calvin.) And both the authors, of course, are writing this way in part because of their fans -- in his author's note, Anthony even lists the fans who offered him puns. Both of these works are in that hallowed SF tradition of works written in collaboration with fans; works that give fans what they want. Should they be condemned for that? Particularly if it contributes to their enormous sales?

Taken on their own terms, then, what should we make of these novels? The young teenagers whom Anthony admits to be a major component of the audience for his "Xanth" series will no doubt be entertained and amused by Crewel Lye, although those who haven't met the series before are unlikely to be interested. Those who have will know what to expect, though they are to be warned that it certainly doesn't have the freshness of the first couple. And those who were disappointed by Foundation's Edge should not be put off The Robots of Dawn; it is much more interesting than the recent "Foundation" novel -- just as the original Baley/Olivaw novels were more interesting than the "Foundation" fix-ups -- if only because of the whodunnit form. But it has the same endless stilted dialogue. And the addition of things unknown in the mid-50s' -- female masturbation (p. 161), sex with robots (p. 172), incest (p. 257), and a great deal about going to the toilet (passim) -- doesn't make up for the fact that it is slower than the two original robot novels. What was fresh and exciting in the 1950s -- and seems so even when re-read today -- somehow doesn't have the same impact when it is all laboriously resurrected in the 1980s. The moral? Perhaps that writing sequels makes money, but loses friends.

Ben Bova -- THE WINDS OF ALTAIR and TEST OF FIRE (Methuen, 317pp and 319pp respectively, £1·95 each)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Both of these novels belong to the "Okay, but so what?" category, although The Winds Of Altair is -- just about -- better than Test Of Fire. (The two books are quite well-produced, in themselves, with striking cover illustrations by Chris Moore.) Ben Bova is never anything less than a competent writer, but he often gives the impression of being a lazy writer -- taking the easy way out, using stock characters, ignoring awkward problems.

The Winds Of Altair is the expanded version (with sexy bits) of a 1973 juvenile novel first published in the USA by E. P. Dutton. It is based on two aged SF cliches: (a) the remote, telepathic control of alien beasts, and (b) terraforming. A religious cult, the Church of Nirvan, has purchased colonisation rights to the planet Altair VI, which turns out to be a methane-ammonia hellhole. (Question: why was Altair VI chosen as a prospective colony site in the first place?) Jeff Holman, who is telepathically linked to a wolfcat named Crown, comes to realise that his mind-partner is sapient, or at least pre-sapient. The problem is "resolved" by the building of L5 colonies around the planet. (Question: why didn't someone think of this "solution" to the colonisation problem years before?)

Test Of Fire is another rewrite job; it was first published in the USA in 1973 by Walker & Co. under the title When The Sky Burned. A freak solar flare lays waste to Earth's eastern hemisphere and the Soviet Union immediately launches an all-out nuclear strike against the Western world. (Paranoid lot, these Russians!) Meanwhile, on the Moon...I've started, but I'd rather not finish. Harry Harrison, in the back cover blurb, calls Test Of Fire "a hard, dark book, the story of mankind after the fall...compulsive reading". Be that as it may, I still

prefer the original version of this unremarkable novel, which made the same simplistic points in a much more straightforward manner.

I can well understand why Bova should want to write -- and rewrite -- novels such as these (in a word: "money"), but there seems to me little reason why anyone would want to read them. They are "clockwork" novels: all form and very little substance. Bova's style is grammatical, for the most part, but it does not convey emotions -- effectively, at any rate. For example, the opening sentence of The Winds Of Altair is a dull, over-obvious narrative hook: "He knew he was going to die".

But a closing note to the publishers with respect to their front-cover declaration that Ben Bova is the "Hugo Award-Winning Author Of Colony": Bova has won six Hugos, but they were all for his editing of Analog magazine; Colony was never even nominated for the Award. As if they didn't know...

Bob Shaw -- ORBITSVILLE DEPARTURE (Granada, 192pp, £1·95)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Dependable, craftsmanlike, thorough, humane... these are the kind of adjectives that are habitually used about Bob Shaw. One reads his novels not to experience one of the great literary highs of this or any other century but to be -- in all senses of the word -- entertained; not to be smothered with an auctorial message but to appreciate Shaw's quiet insights into the essentials of human life; to be, although not profoundly moved, at least roundly satisfied.

It rather grieves me to say, therefore, that Orbitsville Departure -- in particular its ending, which provides the the rationale for all that's gone before -- does not satisfy. The plot is too complex for its own good; the pace of events too rushed; and what promises to be a climactic revelation instead turns out to be a damp squib.

The first half of the novel is actually quite good, centred mainly around the kind of small-scale human drama against a backdrop of larger cosmic events at which Shaw excels -- in this case, the hunt by protagonist Garry Dallen for the man who reduced his wife and son to zombies, backed up by reports of strange occurrences on Orbitsville itself and some bizarre cosmological theorising by the leading light of an intelligentsia with which Dallen becomes involved. It is in fact these theories which -- relegating the crime-hunt to an increasingly inferior position -- come to provide the key to most of the action, and certainly to the climax... although the climax is pure cliche, featuring extra-dimensional aliens lecturing everyone telepathically in italics about "the Ethic" and the grand cosmic cycle. This might have been halfway acceptable, had we been adequately set up for it; but, as I said earlier, the pace of events in Orbitsville Departure is too rushed. We leap from crime-hunt to cosmological theorising to domestic problems to investigations of apparent changes in Orbitsville's structure to questions about the survival of the soul after death to extra-marital affairs and back again; there is, simply, too much to keep track of and too little time devoted to each. The novel, in consequence, is somewhat less than the sum of its parts.

All this aside, Orbitsville Departure not unexpectedly provides an explanation of who built Orbitsville and why -- and, in addition to implicitly rewriting the conclusion of Orbitsville in order to do so, grossly devalues the original. Orbitsville was an enigma, something that transcended possible explanation and defeated all attempts at understanding; but this sequel reduces that wonderful enigma to the status of a space operatic plot device.

There's a clear hint in the very last sentence of Orbitsville Departure that a second sequel, to complete the notional trilogy, may be in the offing. I hope for Orbitsville's and our sakes that Shaw doesn't write it.

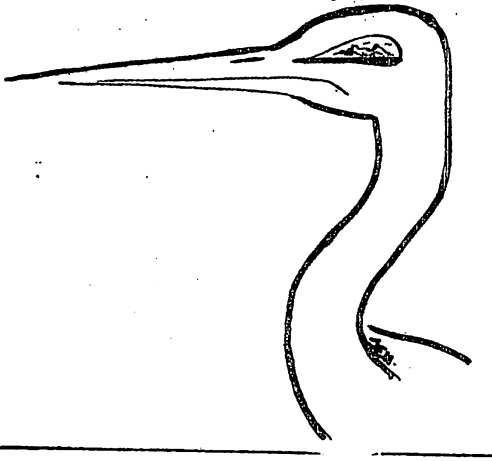
Ursula K. LeGuin -- THE EYE OF THE HERON (Bantam, 179pp, $2·95)

Reviewed by Helen McNabb

The Eye Of The Heron must rank as one of Ursula LeGuin's less memorable works. After ten or twelve pages the names were sounding terribly familar, so I searched the bookcase and discovered The Eye Of The Heron And Other Stories, a collection edited by Virginia Kidd and published by Panther. "Help!" I thought, "I've read it before but don't remember it." So I read it again.

The novel is set on the planet Victoria, where there are two groups of humans. One group lives in the City; they are all descendants of people originally from Brasil-America, with Spanish-sounding names, and have a rigidly structured society controlled by a small number of aristocrats. The other group lives in Shantih, or Shantytown, are descendants of the People of Peace, have a wide variety of names and backgrounds, and have an egalitarian, agricultural community. The two groups have been exiled to Victoria, a penal colony, and for sixty years have managed to co-operate well enough to avoid trouble; but the desire of the Shantytowners to found a new community in the north is seen by the Bosses, the City dwellers, as a direct threat to their authority and something which must be stopped. So the scene is set for a serious conflict between the two groups.

Being LeGuin, that is not sufficient in itself; the conflict is thus not merely one of interests but also one of ideologies. The City folk are autocratic, with most of the worst traits of an aristocracy, and except for the character Falce are almost all thugs and bullies. The Shantytowners, though, are where



LeGuin's main interest lies and it is their beliefs that she explores in depth. They are pacifists, followers of the principles laid down by Gandhi and King in the uses of non-violent protest, exiled to Victoria because of a world-wide march of peace which started in Russia and ended in Can-America and so threatened the governments of Earth that the leaders were sent into space. On Victoria, they are farmers and provide against the constant famine which threatened the City before their arrival; they have no need of the City and the real power could be theirs if they were prepared to use violence to enforce their supremacy. Instead, they give obedience to the Bosses not because (as the Bosses think) of fear and ignorance but because to do otherwise is itself a form of violence. The nature of violence, and the ease with which even the well-meaning can resort to violence is the main theme of the novel. The arguments LeGuin produces are cogent and provocative and include examples of cases in which non-violence has been either very successful or an absolute failure; so although her sympathies are never in doubt both she and the reader are in doubt about the effectiveness of such an ideology in a world full of bullies and thugs.

The other main theme is feminism. The City is a male-dominated society: women exist through men, through men's perceptions of them; they are to bear babies, keep house, to be treated with all respect or with none depending on their station in life, but they are not significant individuals. Luz Marina is the daughter of one of the Bosses and it is through her that we mostly see Victoria. She is a strong character with a will to rebel reinforced by the egalitarian example of the Shantytowners, and is driven into open revolt when she overhears her father planning an attack on Shantih. By warning the Shantytowners, she puts herself into the other camp where all her preconceptions about herself, her place in society, the nature of the two societies and the nature of their world are questioned considered and discussed; thus she develops and grows into a fully rounded person.

It is very much a LeGuin novel in both style and content. Although it is a slighter novel than many, she has gone to the effort of giving Victoria an ecology of its own whose animals are symbolic as well as adding richness to the story. The characters, particularly Luz Marina and her father, are well drawn; the writing is fluent and eminently readable and I think I did the story less than justice when I first read it. It isn't in the same class as The Dispossessed but it does have some things to say which are worth saying and are said well; the themes are both essential and a comment on our own society. While it is a low-key novel (which may be why I'd forgotten it almost completely), I enjoyed it and would recommend it (but look for the Panther edition, if that's still around; the cover's not as pretty but the other stories are worth reading too).

Gwyneth Jones — DIVINE ENDURANCE (Unicorn, 233pp, £2.95)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

"Prehistory or postholocaust?" is one of the first questions the reader asks about the world of Divine Endurance. If this question is eventually shown to be irrelevant — the world of Divine Endurance is one "old as time, always new" — the fact of having asked it does continue to nag the reader as the narrative progresses.

The opening scenes are set firmly in ground circumscribed by the new critical buzz-phrase "magical realism", and they create a marvellous sense of an archetypal prehistory and of "learning the world" as the girl Cho and the brown cat Divine Endurance travel a raw, elemental landscape, diligently practising their eating and their sleeping as they go. Such innocence — both theirs and the reader's — cannot last, of course, and as they enter the human world hints and clues are dropped as to their true natures. Cho is wayang legong — but to explain that would be to reveal too much. As for the cat, Divine Endurance, Lord knows.

The novel's conclusion, in which the struggle between the human and the implacable elements of the divine is resolved and in which we discover whether or not mankind "changes into a new kind of animal", is as thoroughly satisfying as the opening. It is the bit in the middle, in which the rather fey couple collide with a recognisably real, or "postholocaust", world, which worries me, and not because it is unduly ill-conceived. Put simply, Gwyneth Jones attempts to pack too much into one small book.

To start with, there is the matriarchy which orders the society of the Peninsula (the story is set in a past/future/archetypal Malaya). One gathers from the scanty evidence that this is a fair and balanced representation of such a social ordering; while the matriarchy restores a sense of balance to humanity, cancelling out some of the destructive male impulses, it is not above vengefulness and cruelty. I longed to know more about the reclusive and mysterious "Dapur", but had to rely on wry aside: "He was dismayed to find how little he like the sacred tasks of women: it depressed him to have hard dirty hands, and his hair never dressed properly".

And then there is the political ordering. Add to the matriarchy a loose confederation of states, some ambitious princes, a deposed royal house, a few anarchists, the obscurely motivated meddlings of the girl and the cat, and the tongue-in-cheek science-fictional "Rulers" who hold all the technological cards, along with their shadowy henchmen the Koperasi — and what chiefly emerges from the confusion is a handful of crushing insights: "She noted with amusement

Handai's desire for sweeping changes, so long as everything stayed exactly the same".

And there is the economy which supports this lot (folk tend to be down to their last shirt-button before resorting to the use of "cash"); and there are suggestions of a realisable higher state of being (nirvana, escape from the Wheel) and intimations of a limited gestalt mental facility amongst humans.

At times I was almost sure of having grasped the novel as a splendid whole; then it slipped away again. Its cohesion is not assisted by the author's elliptical approach to narrative. While the ways of the gods are not necessarily immediately apprehensible to man, turns and episodes in the story left me in a state of entertained bafflement. For example, I enjoyed a dam-busting raid by a charming feminist-terrorist dance collective, then was left to draw my own conclusions from the incident (plumping for "this sort of action will get you nowhere") as the perpetrators turned to other concerns -- often their own elusively-expressed relationships with each other. For, when all is said and done, we are down to character and motive. Cho and Divine Endurance remain invariably interesting and are augmented powerfully by Derveet, the last royal Garuda, but there are several other, paler figures -- Atoon, Handai, Leilah, Cendana -- on whom the narrative leans too heavily.

Divine Endurance has been reviewed in Vector 124/125, but the duplication be damned. The misgivings I have expressed relate to faults of structure which themselves arise from the conceptual attempt to reconcile myth and reality, the divine and the human. A tall order for a first novel, yet Jones comes commendably close; and so I have little hesitation in suggesting that you try out the book for yourself.

Jack Vance -- CUGEL'S SAGA (Baen Books, 334pp, $3.50; Granada, 367pp, £1·95)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Vance is as Vance does; read three or four of his books and you've damn near read them all. Style, characters, plot (usually perfunctory and inconclusive), the leisurely pace of his narratives: all remain the same no matter what the work. The only variable is the (usually) libertarian political message that may or may not also be present.

Thus Cugel's Saga, which elaborates no distinct philosophy, is replete with all manner of particular societies and unusual customs, is by turns ironic, inventive and pedantic, and seeks merely to assist in the whiling away of an otherwise tedious few hours in an acceptably diverting and entertaining manner. A sequel to The Eyes Of The Overworld, it picks up exactly where its predecessor left off and is, like it, less a novel than a sequence of events: a collection of shorter pieces chronicling its eponymous protagonist's journey south to Almery from involuntary exile far to the north on Shanglestone Strand to do in Iucounu the Laughing Magician. Thus it more or less repeats the events of The Eyes Of The Overworld, by a different route and at twice the length -- a repetition lazy enough in itself, and which is compounded by the fact that two of the stories in Cugel's Saga share as near the same plot as makes no difference. This stuff may be intended to divert, but does Vance think his readers are asleep?

Eventually, things go on too long, and even the author begins to feel tired. Towards the end, events (and non-events) that would earlier have meandered across several pages are instead compressed into a few brief paragraphs. Unusually for Vance's baroque, mannered prose style, there develops a sense that the book is actually rushing towards its conclusion -- a conclusion which, when it comes, proves rather an anti-climax. And, because neither it nor the last third of the book quite hold the reader's attention, we're inevitably moved to reflect on what we've been reading in a highly critical light. How can it be, for example, that a long journey south of the kind with which the book is taken up does not move its protagonist from an extreme of cold to an extreme of heat (and perhaps even back again)? The clear impression is that the climate remains the same throughout, as though the whole thing were taking place on an early spring day in southern California. Nor is there any real sense of place -- hills and deserts, rivers and seas, forests and towns come and go, but apart from their names and a few ambiguous adjectives attached thereto are virtually indistinguishable; hence Cugel's journey might just as well be taking place in a void. And are Vance's descriptive powers as "vivid" as is often claimed? No: he just uses a lot of colour words.

Yet I suppose all that really counts as far as a book like this is concerned is how well it diverts the reader. Provided one doesn't think too hard about it, Cugel's Saga achieves this end; but is it sufficient for a book merely to succeed within this very narrow set of parameters?

Joe Haldeman & Jack C. Haldeman III -- THERE IS NO DARKNESS (Orbit, 245pp, £2·25)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

When I pick up a book for review I want to like it. My desire is to derive the enjoyment from the work that the author has laboured to provide. One of the eternally redeeming characteristics of SF is that any book usually has something to recommend it. The writing may be one step on from "Janet and John take up brain surgery" but there are ideas and concepts which intrigue; or the ideas may be as old as the Appalachians but are conveyed with verve and style. There Is No Darkness is the first of the twenty-odd books I have reviewed for Paperback Inferno which has bored me almost to sleep.

The facts of it are that it is a very formulaic fix-up of novellas previously seen in Isaac Asimov's concerning a schoolship and the adventures of some of its pupils. On Earth, the "hero" gets involved in a series of violent conflicts which are so lacking in rhyme and reason I can only conclude that the Haldemans get their jollies out of soft-core porn violence. The "hero" then goes on to Hell, where he is saved from death by a plot device of such awesome arbitrariness and contradiction that I stood amazed for all of thirty seconds. For 180 pages no one has so much as mentioned "in loco parentis" on this schoolship, but I suppose needs must

when the writer has got himself into a corner.

These episodes are arranged in strictly bite-sized chunks — you know, like The A Team — and written in a vocabulary of about 1500 words (and L. Ron Hubbard thought he was being prophetic in his epitaph to Battlefield Earth...). I realise that the Haldemans know they are writing for juveniles who donna speak da English too good, but if they think my son deserves no better than this then I've got news for them.

Then, in the last 50 pages, they introduce an element which could have carried the entire book, and a good deal more besides: an alien construct in which species live and get to know more about each other. Not original, I know, but still the stuff which any halfway competent SF pro could weave into a web of wonder and delight. Not the Haldemans. The final episode is as leaden and boring as the rest.

Anyone who buys this book has more money than sense, and if a friend gives it to you then cross a name off your list of friends. This is worthless junk, to be burnt before reading.

David Mace — NIGHTRIDER (Granada, 304pp, £1·95)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

Page two, and Mace has signalled clearly his attitude towards human beings: "They were components waiting for use, mission functions like the lander and the fusion boosters..." They are on the spaceship Nightrider and heading for Hades, Sol's dark companion far beyond Pluto, there to fight and kill some other components. On their way they consume prodigious numbers of pages in discussing course corrections and, once there, as many pages discussing tactical manoeuvres. Thoughts and feelings are given pretty short shrift, and so the reader never becomes involved which turns out to be to the reader's advantage, as many of the components meet obscenely violent and graphically described deaths. There is a token bit at the end about little sparks of life in the vast cruel cosmos, etc. etc., but the overwhelming impression has to be that David Mace does not like people. Mind you, he might have justification, working from the human track record to date. Perhaps all this is valid, perhaps all this is an intelligent imagining of space warfare and the components who will practice it; but if this is so then I am glad that I will not be involved.

Having examined the components, I turned for consolation to the plot, and found that it relied on a device so hackneyed in science fiction that the narrative was knackered pretty much from the outset. (Note that I still have the grace not to reveal it.) So finally to the writing, the last refuge:

> "The soft machine design aimed at complete harmony in a completely cohesive sexual economy, which then served to represent and thus reinforce the interactive psychological-functional status of the interdependent group."

I suppose that might make some sort of sense, but unravelling three hundred pages of it tried me sorely. (Three hundred pages! Fifty and the storyline would have room to stretch itself.) People, plot, prose; nowhere does Nightrider score.

Message to all components: if while in a bookshop you find yourself on an intercept predict with this volume, you are recommended to impose a lateral acceleration in order to effect an avoidance manoeuvre. Over and out.

Pamela Sargent — THE ALIEN UPSTAIRS (Bantam, 165pp, $2·75)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Sarah and Gerard are a young American couple, fighting to survive in a near-future America of the Depression. A Mysterious Stranger comes to live in the apartment upstairs. He has a Mysteriously Massive Income, announces to all and sundry at a party that he's an alien, and he's able to make both Sarah and the gay bloke in the apartment downstairs wonder if they've really made love to him, or if it was all a dream...

I guess the plot tension is supposed to hang on whether the alien is or isn't alien. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get very interested in him as a person, though he seemed very cardboardy and desperately trying to be Mysterious, magicking people's memories away, magicking them back again, magicking people to his Space Base in a shiny ship, and generally behaving like something out of a 50s' film.

I feel I must have missed something. The blurb makes it all sound much more exciting than this, but somehow it isn't...

Philip Jose Farmer — GODS OF RIVERWORLD (Berkley, 331pp, $3·50)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Remember the time when Philip Jose Farmer was one of the more daring and innovative of SF writers? Remember the time when Philip Jose Farmer wrote novels that were worth reading, with serious subjects seriously considered? And do you remember the time when you picked up a Philip Jose Farmer novel and found that instead of being rewarded with what you thought was his usual high standard you were insulted by a piece of hackwork he'd knocked out in an afternoon or so?

I can't remember when it happened to me, but To Your Scattered Bodies Go might have had something to do with it; a magnificent idea, replete with all manner of theological complexities, reduced to the level of a game of hide-and-seek. And when we finally did get the religion, shoehorned into The Magic Labyrinth in such a fashion that it completely changed the direction in which the Riverworld series had been going, it proved to be a shallow and silly thing invented for the occasion, full of tedious bullshit about artificial souls and alien resurrections and sounding about as sensible as scientology.

Now here's Gods Of Riverworld, fifth in the series, in which the roles of the eponymous gods are taken by the characters left over from the end of the previous volume, whose only way of coping with the power and responsibility is to retreat into endless games and parties. Fully sixty percent of the novel, in fact, is padding: the actual plot occupies only the first eighty and the last sixty pages, being relegated to an auctorial limbo for the intervening 190, which in lieu of anything else is spun out with biographies of Farmer's favourite historical personages, witless conversation and a re-run

the main findings of Stephen Knight's Jack The Ripper: The Final Solution (jammed in because Farmer had probably just finished reading it, but so blatant a rip-off that I think Knight should sue).

Leaving aside the padding, however, brings one up against the structure of the plot. All the action takes place in the giant tower that stands at Riverworld's north pole; more space is devoted to descriptions of the rooms, furniture and clothing than to the characters; there are periodic fights with a variety of malign robots and androids; and the characters' main preoccupation is to locate and destroy the hidden intelligence that controls the tower and its inhabitants. Does this sound too familiar to be lightly dismissed?

Gods Of Riverworld is indeed nothing more nor less than a transplanted Dungeons & Dragons game.

R. A. Macavoy -- DAMIANO (Bantam, 243pp, £1·95)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

There will be a number of readers who will be deterred from reading this novel by the fulsome puffs on the covers from the denizens of the Lady Writers' Saccharine Fantasy Set. The sorority's all there -- Norton, McCaffrey, Yarbro, Lynn -- and while the intended readership is undoubtedly the consumers of their cod-mediaeval farragos it would be a pity if the rest of us avoided Macavoy on those grounds. You see, R. A. Macavoy can actually write. Her characterisation is brief, evocative and strong; she handles our language with (mostly) the love and attention so often signally missing these days; she tells her story with a minimum of distractions -- displays of erudition, extravagant poesy, lectures on Life, etc. etc. -- and a muscularity of plot and description. The echo which resounds is not that of the endless retreads of Avalon, but Michael Moorcock and his excellent The Warhound And The World's Pain. Damiano is not saccharine fantasy, whatever Bantam would have us believe.

The eponymous hero is a witch being taught the lute by Raphael, the angel not the artist. His town is overrun by General Pardo's mob of freelance soldiers -- one of the many such small bands of mercenaries which plagued Europe during the golden years of the Middle Ages, bands always living off the backs of the citizenry, whether officially or unofficially -- and the townspeople take to the hills, leaving Damiano behind tending to a pot of cough mixture. Damiano refuses Pardo's offer of work and also takes to the hills, causing the death by witchcraft of fifty of Pardo's soldiers. Appalled to his heart, he seeks a way of bringing lasting peace to his city, first asking Satan, then the greatest witch in Italy, and then Satan again. His love gets her to a nunnery, his dog is killed in his contest with the witch, and his lute gets stood upon, all of which leaves him feeling utterly wretched and damned into the bargain. If everyone doesn't live happily ever after at least the soil is tilled for the sequels.

As may be seen from the above summary, Damiano is a somewhat naive young witch -- his first resort is to the Father of Lies when he has an archangel for a mentor! -- and he is brimming with the self-pity of disappointed youth; but he's a likeable fellow for all that, if you accept the normality of a witch being coached by an angel. And it is in making such a proposition appear absolutely normal that Macavoy is strongest. Her depiction of life more or less as it probably was (tedious, nasty brutal and short though leavened by love and manic jollity) is strong and affecting. Where it falls down, however, is in the depictions of magic, for there is no magic in her writing. Whether Damiano is talking to Satan, contesting with Saara, or drawing a cow to be slaughtered there is nothing to raise the passages above the level of the surrounding prose. Making the fact of magic mundane is one thing; making the act of magic mundane is another.

R. A. Macavoy's writing is at times exquisite and she has all the equipment to entertain us for a long time to come, although I would doubt whether her strength lies in fantasy. She can write most of the purveyors of Saccharine Fantasy into insignificance but, on the evidence of Damiano, her fantasy lacks the zing of outrageousness which is so much a necessary requirement. As a fantasy, Damiano falls a little flat, but as an indication of serious literary intent it posts an interesting marker for the future.

John M. Ford -- THE DRAGON WAITING (Avon, 383pp, $3·50; Corgi, 347pp, £3·50)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

If you like alternate-historical fantasy, you must read this novel, subtitled "A Masque Of History". It's a novel which reflects the age it portrays; full of depth and colour that is somehow slightly more vivid than "real life", full of brilliance and fire, with the tragedy of a fatal flaw. There's a crackingly-paced plot, full of swordplay, wizardry, vampirism, political intrigue and passion as the four main characters -- Hywel Peredur the wizard, Dimitrios Ducas the mercenary, Cynthia Ricci the physician and Gregory von Bayern the engineer (and vampire) strive to secure the throne of England for good King Richard III. Action and incident aplenty make The Dragon Waiting at the very least a splendid adventure story.

So, the plot is good. So is the characterisation. The four protagonists are all intelligent and deeply feeling people, from very different backgrounds, with very different goals and personalities. They are fascinating and

compelling people in themselves, and they mingle with the great of their age, whose every action is somehow larger than life — than our kind of life, that is. It will take me a long time to forget the portrait of Lorenzo the Magnificent that Ford draws, or the truth about the Best Knight in England (I won't spoil the suspense by telling you who he is).

But the thing that really hooked me was what you might call the tone, the overall viewpoint, the morality. Which is that what people do is suffer. What thinking, feeling people do is suffer with awareness, so that it hurts more. Somewhere in or behind this novel is a very sensitive and perceptive observer who has been very badly hurt. This doesn't lead to a destructive cynicism, but to a healing astringency, a terrible detached compassion, the clear eye that can look on an atrocity and record it dispassionately and accurately, because accurate observation is necessary to understand the evil, and it is necessary to understand the evil before it can be negated, at least in part. There is a great deal of sentiment, but no sentimentality, in this novel, and under cover of the realism there is a great deal of hope.

Flaw? The final set-piece scene doesn't come off at all well, which could be said to result in a weak ending. But the novel doesn't need it anyway. And you can't have everything. You should definitely read The Dragon Waiting; it's challenging, it has body and depth, it's a very fine piece of work.

Robert Silverberg — TO OPEN THE SKY (Bantam, 222pp, $2.75)

Reviewed by Edward James

"An awe-filled epic of man's struggle for the stars by the author of Valentine Pontifex", proclaims the cover. The fact that it is a reprint of a book first published in 1967 is surreptitiously hidden behind the title page, and nowhere does it mention that in 1967 it was a fix-up of stories published earlier that decade. It's a fairly standard combination of various themes from the 1950s anyway: colonisation of Venus and Mars, emergence of a science-based religion as a cloak for scientific advance, growth of a psi society (presented, as so often, as a kind of utopia), immortality, etc. etc.. It's slickly written, with some interesting variations on the themes. Vintage Silverberg only in terms of its age, but I rather enjoyed it.

Neil Gaiman & Kim Newman (eds.) — GHASTLY BEYOND BELIEF

(Arrow, 344pp, £2.50)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

"The science fiction and fantasy book of quotations" blurbs the front cover, and indeed Ghastly Beyond Belief is the only example of its kind; an idea so obvious that one wonders why it wasn't done long ago. (Either that or it's an idea whose time has come, and everybody will soon be doing one.) The main problem with it, however, is that its contents rather militate against its structure (or vice versa): clearly a book to be dipped into at random whenever the mood strikes, it's actually designed to be read straight through from beginning to end, as though it were a novel, and in that form wholly indigestible. In addition, altogether too many of the quotes are taken from too narrow a range of sources — but this, apparently, is the fault of the publishers rather than the editors, who turned in something that was much longer and to a certain extent much more serious but were forced to throw vast chunks of it away; thus we get lots and lots of Lionel Fanthorpe and The Night Of The Crabs and not nearly enough Frank Herbert and Barry Bongyear. (Or even Stephen Donaldson, who appears but twice, with one quote attributed to Dave Langford and Knave which I'm damn sure Dave got from me in the first place, poot poot, fame eludes me once again...) But you pays your money and you takes your choice, and if this volume does well enough then perhaps there'll be a second, featuring all the material that was cut from this one.

Russell M. Griffin — THE TIMESERVERS (Avon, 238pp, $3.50)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

Rookie diplomat from Earth embassy on hick planet fortuitously becomes acting ambassador and finds himself entangled in galactic intrigue. Are the planet's natives the descendants of a long-lost expedition of human clones? Are the embassy staff themselves clones? Is the hero a clone? Does anybody care? Author attempts to leaven this leaden dough with humour, but novel fails to rise. Author finds malfunctioning robots especially hilarious. Among all the clanking servibots, sentribots and medibots, look out for a solid gold Griffin original — canapebots!

A poor novel, even by potboiler standards.

PAGE 16: AN APOLOGY — due to an embarrassing shortage of material, there is no page 16 in this issue of Paperback Inferno; an omission for which the editor would like to apologise...but unfortunately cannot find it in his heart to do so. This of course means that you, the ordinary BSFA-member-in-the-street, have been wantonly short-changed on your annual subscription.

LETTERS

There aren't any. Apart, that is, from a few short notes thanking me for all my efforts over the past six years — which I naturally appreciate! — but no one wrote in to pursue any of the matters raised in the previous issue's letter column, or even responded to the issue at all. (Although I did get one letter from someone desperate to locate a copy of The Dumarest Companion, thus demonstrating that he wasn't reading it as closely as he should have done; and maybe the rest of you are still trying to work it all out, what?) This means, of course, that Andy Sawyer has to publish his first issue with the looming prospect that no one will write in to him either; so I hereby urge you to get your fingers out and do the necessary. (Give Generously — This Letter Column Needs Help, etc. etc.. Write now to Andy Sawyer, 45 Greenbank Road, Birkenhead, Merseyside L42 7JT.) Why, now that I am free of the editorial shackles, I have no doubt that in future I'll be penning one or two letters myself...